

## Listening to the *Iliad* while Raking Leaves

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Homer versing through my iPod tempts me to impute  
 Great heroic virtue to my conquered oak leaf foes,  
 The spoils my rake has won in its rhythmic march across the lawn.  
 Thoreau himself claimed Hector as his vanquished enemy,  
 Reincarnate and masquerading as some prideful weed  
 Intent on butchering his civilized Grecian beans. That would make  
 Thoreau Achilles, though, and neither he nor I would want  
 Achilles' glory with its fated rage and death: He never  
 Made it home but fumed in Hades, longing bitterly  
 For news of his son and aging father. He earned this punishment,  
 Felled by the chronic flaw of heroes who insist on thinking  
 That glorious death is better than a quiet life at home.  
 So Thoreau, worried he too might fall, moved to Walden,  
 Spurned the glories for which his neighbors spent their lives, enjoyed  
 Each necessity of life with great deliberation.  
 Yet he likened his work, as do I, to that of Homer's epic  
 Heroes: our repetitive slaughter with hoe and rake become  
 Endless spear thrusts, sharp sword slashes, shield parries, boulder  
 Tossings (effortless for Hector, though each boulder, Homer  
 Tells me, weighs much more than any modern man could ever  
 Lift) so that we harvest honor from death after death after death.  
 Do Thoreau and I simply inscribe the mundane with Homer's  
 Meaning and in the act of writing succumb to the lure of glory?  
 It is hard, Achilles found, to turn away from pride,  
 But I at least will not exalt my labors by a funeral  
 Pyre: a burn ban dooms my leaves to rest in quiet state,  
 Where a slower heat transmutes them into garden compost.  
 And while my foes are numerous, their small, irenic bodies  
 Give me little cause to claim divine support, though Homer  
 Doubtless would insist that gods alone could make his words  
 Speak in my ears three thousand years away, and Thoreau would ask  
 Whether I thought my iPod came from God or Devils, and if  
 This gadget were essential to my life? No, I would  
 Admit, but these old words may be if they help discern  
 What is. And like these piled corpses of leaves, they feed the roots  
 That are essential to a healthy life. For in our work  
 Of killing leaves and weeds we cultivate what great Achilles  
 Never gained and what Odysseus regained only  
 After many years of toil, the goal that Thoreau knew  
 Ought to be our being's greatest task: to make it home.