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A PASSAGE FROM
ERIC LARSEN'S
[HOMER FOR REAL:
A READING OF THE ILIAD](#)

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The only source of meaning, then, and the only source of *creating* meaning, is through human action. If you wish, you could use the phrase “human decision” instead.

When we get to Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot*, in the 1940s AD, we’ll take a peek Beckett’s contemporary, Jean Paul Sartre, suggesting this very same thing when he says that “we are now on the plane where there are only men.”¹ Homer knew that to be true also, and knew it well, all the way back in the 7th or 6th century BC. To my own way of thinking, this Homeric knowledge—or this Homeric way of *seeing*—is the single most durable and the single most important idea-fact, or fact-idea, in all of Western art. Speaking only of Western literature out of all the arts, I would argue that this idea-fact has managed by one way or another to survive—most of the time at very great peril—all the way from its Homeric origins down to “the pupil age of this present twelve o’clock at midnight.”² The story of Western literature from Homer through Samuel Beckett is, among many other things, the story of this fact-idea or idea-fact disappearing, re-appearing, surviving in extraordinary and unexpected places, only to be lost again—and yet, I pray, at last found once more.

There are hundreds of ways to study literature. Over the past forty years or so, my own main way—both as reader and as writer—has come to consist of following this particular idea-fact through literary history from Homer to now. To me, it’s a project of extraordinary, even limitless,

¹ From *Existentialism and Humanism* (1946), translated by Bernard Frechtman; quoted by me from “Choice in a World Without God,” in *The World of Short Fiction*, ed. Robert C. Albrecht (The Free Press, 1969).

² Prince Hal, in *King Henry the Fourth, Part One*, II, iv, 91.

interest. I'm willing, in fact, to go so far as to say that if we—now, today, in the twenty-first century—are able to find literary means to re-capture, re-recognize, and re-achieve Homer's ancient fact-idea—the fact-idea that we ourselves are all we've got, and that we ourselves are all we've got to *rely* on—*then* we may possibly be able to survive as a people, as an assemblage of peoples, or even as a species.

If, however, we're not able to re-achieve, or re-capture that fact-idea—then I suspect it much more probable that we are doomed.

(pp. 141-142)

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