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Recommended Citation
Available at: https://surface.syr.edu/suscholar/vol9/iss2/5

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THE RADIANT CORE: FAMILY, VILLAGE, NEIGHBORHOOD, AND REGION IN LITERATURE

(An Extract from a Longer Essay)

EUGENE PAUL NASSAR

The roots of this essay certainly go back to my own experiences with family, neighborhood, and region, to growing up Lebanese-American in an Italian-American neighborhood in the upstate New York city of Utica. At age fifty-three, I still live in the house in which I was born, walk the same streets, visit many of the same families, observe and feel the rhythms of birth, growth, maturity, decay, and death in the families in the houses, in the gardens outside, and in the neighborhood. I am also a part of a region and study and love its mythologies. I teach literature at the local branch of Syracuse University and feel, when I am researching, teaching, and writing about great works of literature and their social contexts, as if I am a citizen of the world, part of an international community of sympathetic, sensitive souls who think and feel as I do. I am also quite aware that, in fact, in that larger intellectual world many, if not most, do not think and feel as I do. This is always a surprising lesson, though one learned every day, if not every hour.

I grew up loving the “stories” told to me by my parents and their generation and by those immigrant Italian neighbors of mine, and at the same time loving some of the major works of Western literature. (I remember especially being totally taken, at age seventeen, by Shakespeare’s King Lear, Dostoevski’s Brothers Karamazov, and Tolstoy’s War and Peace.) I came to the belief that great literature, whether of the folk or of a supreme artist, is the best, the most complete and satisfying re-creation of a precious social context, and also conversely (and more controversially), that the most enduring values expressed in great literature flow from the joys of a given region and its cultures of family, village, and neighborhood. It is this last proposition that might seem dubious to many readers and so the one that I would like to give attention to here.

We are in a time of anarchy and bewilderment concerning values, certainly including the values of familialism and localism. Many of my friends and colleagues in the 1950s and 1960s, largely children of immigrant parents, felt that they would be vulnerable to losing their hard-won status, socially or professionally, if they emphasized their ethnic, family, neighborhood, or local roots, that these were things to be put behind one, things to be vaguely ashamed of. I never accepted such a position, though it probably was the right one for “constructing a career” at that time. And I certainly felt that the literature I loved, both ancient and modern, counseled no such view of life.
The 1970s saw some vigorous attacks on the antifamily and antilocalism positions from various quarters. Robert Nisbet, for example, argued in the concluding chapter of his *Twilight of Authority* for the "recovery" of "pluralism," "kinship," and "localism":

"Family has been more than the nidus of cohesion and of continuity; it has been visibly the source of themes in ethics, literature, and art which have been among the very brightest and most durable in the history of civilization. . . . It should be obvious that family, not the individual, is the real molecule of society, the key link of the social chain of being . . . . Along with the apparent beginnings of a renascence of the kinship tie are those of revival of the sense of locality and neighborhood. There is, of course, close affinity between the two types of social attachment, and there has been ever since the local community came into being. . . ."¹

Michael Novak in an article, "The Family Out of Favor," asserted:

"The role of a father, a mother, and of children with respect to them, is the absolutely critical center of social force. Even when poverty and disorientation strike, as over the generations they so often do, it is family strength that most defends individuals against alienation, latitude, or despair. . . . The family is the primary teacher of moral development. In the struggles and conflicts of marital life, husbands and wives learn the realism and adult practicalities of love. Through the love, stability, discipline, and laughter of parents and siblings, children learn that reality accepts them, welcomes them, invites their willingness to take risks. The family nourishes "basic trust." From this spring creativity, psychic energy, social dynamism. If infants are injured here, not all the institutions of society can put them back together."²

Christopher Lasch, in his *Haven in a Heartless World*, wrote:

"An understanding of the impact of the family on personality, and of the political implications of recent changes . . . makes it impossible any longer to equate defense of the nuclear family with reactionary politics or criticism of it with radicalism. Many radicals in the seventies have rediscovered the importance of family ties."³

I do not intend this essay as a sociological, political, or religious tract—though no one's metacriticism of life is absent from anything one writes—but as a demonstration of the profound strain of familialism and localism in some major literary works (those that I am wont to teach). Where then this might lead the reader is up to the reader.

The roots of Western civilization are in the early Hellenic and Hebraic traditions. So said Matthew Arnold in *Culture and Anarchy,* in which he compared and contrasted the two traditions (the Hellenic clearly more to his liking), an analysis brilliantly carried on and refined by Erich Auerbach in the opening chapter of his *Mimesis.*⁴ A few substantial quotations from *The Odyssey* in the magnificent translation of the late Robert Fitzgerald can serve as paradigmatic for the Homeric sense of family:


Son of Laërtes, versatile Odysseus, after these years with me, you still desire your old home? Even so, I wish you well. If you could see it all, before you go—all the adversity you face at sea—you would stay here, and guard this house, and be immortal—though you wanted her forever, that bride for whom you pine each day. Can I be less desirable than she is? Less interesting? Less beautiful? Can mortals compare with goddesses in grace and form?  

To this the strategist Odysseus answered:

“My lady goddess, here is no cause for anger. My quiet Penelope—how well I know—would seem a shade before your majesty, death and old age being unknown to you, while she must die. Yet, it is true, each day I long for home, long for the sight of home. If any god has marked me out again for shipwreck, my tough heart can undergo it. What hardship have I not long since endured at sea, in battle! Let the trial come.”

Odysseus valued home and wife (and, elsewhere, son, mother, and father) more than the gift of immortal life and youth with the goddess Kalypso. It is an awe-inspiring moment in The Odyssey. Of course, we realize that Homer’s audience has never had such a choice, but the moment speaks eloquently of the values Homer and his listeners wished to project to themselves.

Later Odysseus meets his mother in the Land of the Shades and, in an intensely moving episode, she says to him:

‘your father
is country bound and comes to town no more.
He owns no bedding, rugs, or fleecy mantles,
but lies down, winter nights, among the slaves,
rolled in old cloaks for cover, near the embers.
Or when the heat comes at the end of summer,
the fallen leaves, all round his vineyard plot,
heaped into windrows, make his lowly bed.
He lies now even so, with aching heart,
and longs for your return, while age comes on him.
So I, too, pined away, so doom befall me,
not that the keen-eyed huntress with her shafts
had marked me down and shot to kill me; not
that illness overtook me—no true illness
wasting the body to undo the spirit;
only my loneliness for you, Odysseus,
for your kind heart and counsel, gentle Odysseus,
took my own life away.’
I bit my lip,

rising perplexed, with longing to embrace her,

and tried three times, putting my arms around her,

but she went sifting through my hands, impalpable

as shadows are, and wavering like a dream.

Now this embittered all the pain I bore,

and I cried in the darkness:

‘O my mother,

will you not stay, be still, here in my arms,

may we not, in this place of Death, as well,

hold one another, touch with love, and taste

salt tears’ relief; the twinge of welling tears?’

(11:183–211)

Such longing of parents for children, of children for parents, is reiterated throughout The Odyssey. Here Odysseus reunited with his son Telémakhos:

“I am that father whom your boyhood lacked

and suffered pain for lack of. I am he.”

Held back too long, the tears ran down his cheeks

as he embraced his son.

Telémakhos began to weep. Salt tears

rose from the wells of longing in both men,

(16:187–91, 218–19)

And later, Odysseus reunited with his wife, Penélopē:

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache

of longing mounted, and he wept at last,

his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms,

longed for

as the sunwarmed earth is longed for by a swimmer

spent in rough water where his ship went down

under Poseidon’s blows, gale winds and tons of sea.

(23:230–36)

This longing, clearly inclusive of sexual longing, but encompassing longing also and especially for family, home, and region, is what is understood as “love” by Homer and his audience. These longings, these values, are what I recognize as my longings, my values, and what I find I cannot help but expect (mistakenly) to be everyone’s values. I still remember vividly the bafflement and irritation I felt in my undergraduate years at first reading the opening chapter of C. S. Lewis’s Allegory of Love. I much respected Lewis’s English Literature in the Sixteenth Century and knew of his world reputation, and yet I found him denigrating the power and integrity of “love” in the ancient world:

There can be no mistake about the novelty of romantic love: our only difficulty is to imagine in all its bareness the mental world that existed before its coming. . . . We must conceive a world emptied of that ideal of “happiness”—a happiness grounded on successful romantic love—which still supplies the motive of our popular fiction. In ancient literature love
The chapter reads, I would submit, as coming from one who has a grudge against “love” in any sense of the word except that of Christian love for God. He defined “courtly love” as compounded of “Humility, Courtesy, Adultery, and the Religion of Love,” and he considered these attitudes as both endemic to “romantic love” over the past 1,000 years and largely unhealthy for the soul. Be that as it may, I consider the “Homeric” attitudes toward “love” as both healthy and pervasive over the past 3,000 to 4,000 years in the West (and, one might say, in the East).

Homer’s aim in The Odyssey is not only to tell the tales of the tribe with respect to heroes and monsters (books 9–12), but to affirm a rich context of social values, the “laws and manners of old time,” which include hospitality to “strangers and beggars,” who “come from Zeus” (books 1–8 and 13–24). It has been fashionable to see books 9 through 12 as the true glory of The Odyssey, the opening books as preliminary to them, and the succeeding books as a long trailing off in quality and pertinence. Such a view ignores Homer’s clear intent to dramatize a social ethos. Télémakhos is Homer’s model of the dutiful son: having never seen his father, he tells a friend “I wish at least I had some happy man I as father, growing old in his own house” (1:217–18). Earlier he had come “straight to the door . . . irked with himself I to think a visitor had been kept there waiting” (1:117–18). He respectfully addresses the loyal swineherd Eumaios as “Uncle.” To Penélope, her son Télémakhos is “more sweet to me than sunlight” (17:4–5).

Nestor’s family—the relationships between himself, his spouse, and his sons—is held up by Homer and by Menélaos as an example of “true felicity” (4:207–9). Alkinoós’s wife, Aréte, is a model of an ideal matriarch, bearing little resemblance to C. S. Lewis’s woman of ancient times who would have been “ordered out of the room before the serious conversation about books, or politics, or family affairs began”:

> “When she grew up, Alkinoós married her and holds her dear. No lady in the world, no other mistress of a man’s household, is honored as our mistress is, and loved, by her own children, by Alkinoós, and by the people. When she walks the town they murmur and gaze, as though she were a goddess. No grace or wisdom fails in her; indeed just men in quarrels come to her for equity.”

> (7:63–71)

I see the Lebanese mother and the Italian mother of East Utica in Aréte. I walk the halls of Nestor, or Alkinoós, or Odysseus, with familiarity in my imagination, and wonder what the devil C. S. Lewis was talking about.

**The Old Testament**, as a sacred anthology compiled of many authors and using oral traditions of more than a thousand-year period, is intrinsically more difficult to speak about with respect...
to any limited theme or subject like familialism or localism. The focus of the Old Testament on the worship of and obedience to the one God renders, of course, all other loyalties, loves, and devotions secondary. Thus, Auerbach, in defining the core sense of reality for the Hebrews in *Mimesis*, chooses the scene of Abraham willing to sacrifice his beloved son Isaac to the will of Jehovah. (Arnold had defined Hebraism as a desire for the “will of God” and a “strictness of conscience,” as contrasted to the “unimpeded play of thought” and the “spontaneity of consciousness” of the early Hellenic spirit.) The difficulties are compounded because Old Testament stories are often collages by various narrators from different time periods with differing points of view on crucial issues: the worship of local gods at high places or in sacred groves or of the one God on Mount Zion; the proper relationships with the indigenous Canaanite culture; the desirability of a tribal, national, or international focus. And yet for all of these differences, I have always felt the presence of familialism and localism as values of great force throughout the Old Testament, if only, at times, as mighty competitor to the dominant force of devotion to God only.

We can, for instance, imagine the early Hebrew audience’s deep distress at the Lord’s demand that Abraham sacrifice his son, as that which is dearest to him. The deepest chords are apparently struck in the Hebrew consciousness by King David weeping over the death of his infant son, taken away by God as punishment for the king’s adultery with Bathsheba, and then later by the king’s tears at the news of the death of Absalom, the favored son born out of wedlock, who had led a rebellion against his father. Similarly Joseph, the favored son of Jacob, weeps at the reunion with his half brothers, though they, in their jealousy, had sold him into exile. And then he weeps at the sight of his full brother, the faultless Benjamin: “And Joseph made haste; for his bowels did yearn upon his brother: and he sought where to weep; and he entered into his chamber, and wept there. And he washed his face, and went out, and refrained himself. . . .” (Gen. 43:30-31). Jacob mourns in the manner of King David at the news of the young Joseph’s supposed death:

> And Jacob rent his clothes, and put sackcloth upon his loins, and mourned for his son many days. And all his sons and all his daughters rose up to comfort him; but he refused to be comforted; and he said, For I will go down into the grave unto my son mourning. Thus his father wept for him. . . . (37:34-35)

Jacob laments later when the life of Benjamin is in danger: “and God Almighty give you mercy before the man [Joseph], that he may send away . . . Benjamin. If I be bereaved of my children, I am bereaved” (43:14). The brothers tell Joseph that “the lad cannot leave his father; for if he should leave his father, his father would die” (44:22). The Joseph story makes the brothers’ early treachery a manifestation of God’s will to save his people, and the happy ending is expressed by Joseph in these terms:

> go up to my father, and say unto him, Thus saith thy son Joseph, God hath made me lord of all Egypt: come down unto me, tarry not: and thou shalt dwell in the land of Goshen, and thou shalt be near unto me, thou, and thy children, and thy children’s children. . . . (45:9-10)

This intensity of family feeling is dramatized in the Joseph story of fathers and sons and brothers, but elsewhere it can be seen in the strength of women in the Hebrew family. The following is from the Book of Proverbs:

*Who can find a virtuous woman? for her price is far above rubies.*

The heart of her husband doth safely trust in her. . . .

She considereth a field, and buyeth it: with the fruit of her hands she planteth a vineyard.

She giveth her loins with strength, and strengtheneth her arms.

She perceiveth that her merchandise is good: her candle goeth not out by night. . . .

She stretcheth out her hand to the poor; yea she reacheth forth her hands to the needy. . . .

Strength and honour are her clothing; and she shall rejoice in time to come.

She openeth her mouth with wisdom; and in her tongue is the law of kindness.

She looketh well to the ways of her household, and eateth not the bread of idleness.

Her children arise up, and call her blessed; her husband also, and he praiseth her. . . .

The eye that mocketh at his father, and despiseth to obey his mother,

the ravens of the valley shall pick it out, and the young eagles shall eat it.

(31:10–28, 30:17)

Witness also the relationship of Abraham and Sarah (“And Sarah died . . . and Abraham came to mourn for Sarah, and to weep for her” [23:2]), of Isaac and Rebekah (“And Isaac brought her into his mother Sarah's tent, and took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he loved her: and Isaac was comforted after his mother's death” [24:67]), of Jacob and Rachel (“And Jacob served seven years for Rachel; and they seemed unto him but a few days, for the love he had to her” [29:20]).

Admittedly, however, many of the relationships in the Old Testament that are at times idyllic are at other times stormy, as the various narrators or compilers attempt to telescope, through parable or allegory, centuries of oral tradition concerning tribal movements and mores. The situation is further complicated by the institutions of polygamy and concubinage and by the narrators' or compilers' conflicting attitudes about the "right" sort of marriage. Throughout the Old Testament runs the conflict between those authors for whom marriage between Jew and non-Jew is an abomination in the sight of God and those for whom Jehovah as God of both Jew and Gentile alike will, under proper conditions, condone such marriages. The author of the Book of Ruth accepts a woman of Moab as King David's ancestor, as Ruth accepts unconditionally the family and traditions of her late husband. One presumes that King Solomon, as a supreme politician of empire, knew exactly what he was doing in amassing 700 wives and 300 concubines from all of the ethnic and religious groups of the ancient Near East and in setting up altars to all of the gods of place of his neighbors. But at least one of the compilers of the Solomon stories finds this behavior and Jehovah's displeasure in it to be the root cause of the ultimate fall of the Jewish state. Moses
himself could not keep his people from worshiping the Baal and Astarte figures of the Canaanites; the Books of Judges, Samuel, and Kings are replete with condemnations of the constant falling away of the Hebrew peoples from the worship of one God at Mount Zion to the worship of the various Semitic gods of place at ancient high places or sacred groves throughout Canaan, Judea, Samaria, Philistia, and beyond. The various compilers of Old Testament materials thus bear indirect testimony to the enormous pull of place and of pluralism, as well as familialism, in opposition to the pull of exclusivism and of focus only on God's will, as it is understood at Mount Zion.

The sanctification of place apparently runs deep in the human heart, almost as deep as that of family. Americans make semisacred a mountain in the Catskills by invoking the presence of Rip van Winkle. There is hardly a place in ancient Canaan, Israel, or Philistia that has not been sanctified by the human spirit and its religious imagination. It would seem that we go somewhat against the human grain when we try to take away this sacred feeling for place and presence. It is perhaps as Ezra Pound (admittedly a “difficult individual”) said in various places in his Cantos: “Amm vult nemus”—“the grove needs an altar,” “and all gates are holy,” “each one in the name of his god,” “art is local,” “vigor, quietude are of place,” and “familiality and fraternity are the root . . . of the process.” The intensity of devotion to place, to region, and to familiality is assuredly tearing up the present Near East in the region of the Old Testament. Such intensity can generate the obverse of the feelings that I am advocating and that I feel much great literature illuminates. All good things have their tragic obverse. Can we retain the good and reject the bad? That is the reader’s assignment, and the world’s.)

The Psalms and the Song of Songs beautifully evoke the local landscapes of the Old Testament region. Especially delightful for me are the references to the hills, streams, flowers, gardens, vineyards, and cedar groves of Lebanon, as these are the subjects of the folk poetry that my mother and father and their peers used to sing in our living room. The love poetry of the Songs constitute an anthology typical of ancient Near Eastern secular poetry. Many of the songs of and to the bride are also compliments to family:

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Thou hast ravished my heart, my sister, my spouse;} & \text{ thou hast ravished my heart with one of thine eyes, with one chain of thy neck.} \\
\text{How fair is thy love, my sister, my spouse! how much better is thy love than wine! and the smell of thine ointments than all spices!} \\
\text{Thy lips, O my spouse, drop as the honeycomb: honey and milk are under thy tongue; and the smell of thy garments is like the smell of Lebanon.} \\
\text{A garden inclosed is my sister, my spouse; a spring shut up, a fountain sealed.} \\
\end{align*}\]

(4:9–12)

The figurations are of bride as sister, of the spring not yet flowing as the bride’s virginity, and of marriage as a fenced garden of delights.

\[\begin{align*}
\text{We have a little sister, and she hath no breasts: what shall we do for our sister in the day when she shall be spoken for?} \\
\text{If she be a wall, we will build upon her a palace of silver: and if she be a door, we will inclose her with boards of cedar.} \\
\text{I am a wall, and my breasts like towers: then was I in his eyes as one that found favour.} \\
\end{align*}\]

(8:8–10)

The sister, who will someday be bride, accepts the metaphors of walled garden as virtue and of the open door as looseness, as invitation to the “foxes that spoil the vines.”

The beautiful, virginal Rebekah dutifully brought her pitcher to the well of Ur and hospitably gave water and lodging to the servant of Isaac (Gen. 24). This charming, idyllic moment distills the village dream of the ancient world: the right place, the right circumstances, and the right behavior, as God blesses a marriage bond. Equally charming is the evocation of the sacred village well in book 17 of The Odyssey:

*Down by the stony trail they made their way as far as Clearwater, not far from town—a spring house where the people filled their jars. Ithakos, Nérites, and Polyktör built it, and round it on the humid ground a grove, a circular wood of poplars grew. Ice cold in runnels from a high rock ran the spring, and over it there stood an altar stone to the cool nymphs, where all men going by laid offerings.*

(17:207–16)

Odysseus kisses the ground of his native land when Pallas Athena clears the mist she had thrown about it:

“Now I shall make you see the shape of Ithaka. Here is the cave the sea lord Phorkys owns, there is the olive spreading out her leaves over the inner bay, and there the cavern dusky and lovely, hallowed by the feet of those immortal girls, the Naiadés—the same wide cave under whose vault you came to honor them with hekatombs—and there Mount Neion, with his forest on his back!”

She had dispelled the mist, so all the island stood out clearly. Then indeed Odysseus’ heart stirred with joy. He kissed the earth, and lifting up his hands prayed to the nymphs:

“O slim shy Naiadés, young maids of Zeus, I had not thought to see you ever again!”

(13:341–55)

One sacramentalizes one’s home and local objects, no matter whether the gods or goddesses be there beyond the mists or not, whether the presences be of the place or only of the mind . . .
Figure 1. Map of the nine-county study area in central New York shows ten cities with twelve daily newspapers, their publishing cycle (A.M. or P.M.), and their 1985 circulation, in thousands.