ESSAYS ON HOMER'S *ILIAD*

These essays, prepared by Ian Johnston of Malaspina University-College, Nanaimo, BC (now Vancouver Island University) were first published in *The Ironies of War* (University Press of America, 1988. ISBN 978-0819170293) and later on the internet. This entire document is in the public domain.

TABLE OF CONTENTS'

INTRODUCTORY COMMENT

The essays listed below, which are a restatement of the argument laid out in *The Ironies of War*, all deal with aspects of Homer's *Iliad*. They may be read in any order, although the reader should probably be familiar with the introductory note immediately below and the first essay in order to understand the central thrust of each of the others.

Quotations from Homer's poem in these essays are from the on-line translation by Ian Johnston available through the following link Iliad. And all line numbers refer to that edition (for the reader's convenience I have also, in most cases, included an approximate line reference for the Greek text, which is given in square brackets). A bibliography for all the essays is given later on in this page.

The essays here are a systematic attempt to explore the *Iliad* as a great literary masterpiece, to see what it is holding up to us in modern North America as a vision of experience which can illuminate important aspects of our own lives. Hence, they pay little attention to any contextual matters, like Homer's identity, the facts of Homer's own times, the treatment of Homer by classical Greek traditions, and other historical issues. The assumption here is that this is a vitally important poem for contemporary readers because it speaks directly to their own age, not because it offers some interesting insights into an old, long-forgotten, and irrelevant civilization. Those readers seeking such a historical treatment of the work should look elsewhere.

The central claim coordinating these essays is that Homer's vision is a fatalistic view of war as a condition of life, that the best and worst

human experiences arise out of this condition, and that there is no way this condition will change. The vision is thoroughly ironic, and thus there is no easy way to sum it up with a simple moral judgment. In fact, the power of this poem stems from its ability to challenge our faith in such judgments, in other words, from its power to disturb us, to complicate our understanding, to make us re-examine some of our most cherished beliefs.

This approach to the poem thus seeks to counter both the long tradition in Homer scholarship of treating the poem merely (or primarily) as a historical document and the tendency of much Homer criticism, still very much alive today, of neutralizing the challenge of the *Iliad* by interpreting it to fit the long moral traditions of a providential universe governed by a benevolent deity or reason or progress or some other optimistic hope that the brutalities of life are part of a consoling moral order.

ESSAY ONE
HOMER'S WAR

References to the text of the *Iliad* are to the online translation (by Ian Johnston) available here. The references in square brackets are to the Greek text.]

INTRODUCTION: WAR AS FATE

The most important feature of Homer's *Iliad* is the most obvious: the central issue in this poem is warfare. In fact, the *Iliad* is our oldest, most famous, and most enduring story about men in battle. So one might well begin by exploring certain features of this particular war narrative. How does Homer depict the war so as to emphasize some features rather than others?

Such a question is necessary, because the phrase *war story* does not reveal very much about any particular fiction. After all, warfare, particularly the Trojan War, can be and has been used to develop an astonishingly wide range of the different stories—dramatic adventures, chivalric tales, amusing satires, bitter social commentaries, historical epics, various styles of comedy, romance, and so on, often in combination. For war is a very fecund basis for all sorts of different tales, as one might expect, given that it includes so many narrative possibilities. So we might start by seeing if we can get a sense of some of the more salient features of Homer's treatment of the war.

One of the most initially surprising things about the *Iliad* is how many well-known details of the full Trojan War story Homer leaves out. The poem gives us no detailed sense of how the war started (either the short-term cause of Paris's and Helen's elopement or the long-term causes in the wedding of Thetis and Peleus and the Judgment of Paris), nor are many of the most famous incidents in the opening or closing stages of the war given any attention (for example, the sacrifice of Iphigeneia, the recruitment of Odysseus and Achilles, the abandonment of Philoctetes, the Trojan Horse, and the fall of Troy, among many others). There are many references to the fact that Troy will eventually fall, but no details are provided. First-time readers of the *Iliad* who have some familiarity with details of the famous narrative frequently comment, often with a sense of disappointment, on how few such incidents are included here. One would think that any poet interested in holding his audience's attention with some exciting narrative events would make much

better use of at least some of these. But one searches the *Iliad* in vain for most of one's favourite stories from the Trojan War.

Instead, the *Iliad* focuses on few weeks in the tenth year of the war. The action covers considerably less time than that, of course, because there are some major gaps (e.g., the nine days' plague in Book 1, the twelve-day wait for Zeus, the twelve-day maltreatment of Hector's corpse), and the focus is almost exclusively on what is going on in that relatively short time. There's an interesting double chronology at work. Events move quickly from one battlefield experience to another—there is lots of exciting action. At the same time, while there is little attention paid to a precise chronology, we also get a sense that a lot of time is going by; this war is dragging on and on, without anything changing very much (other than people being killed). We do not experience this war as a complete event, with a beginning, middle, and end, an experience with clearly understood causes and a series of events leading to a definite conclusion. We start the poem in the midst of warfare, and we end the book, several weeks later, in exactly the same place. The only thing we know for sure at the end is that the fighting will continue, as before.

The warfare is also unremitting. One bloody encounter is always followed by another without significant variety in the basic nature of the encounters and without pause. All attempted truces are doomed to failure, other than those the parties make, ironically enough, to collect or celebrate the dead. Even at night, when the fighting has generally stopped, the war dominates people's actions, thoughts, and dreams. There is none of that sense, so prominent in the *Odyssey*, that an evening's meal and sleep bring something to a conclusion, so that when rose-fingered Dawn appears the next day, something new and different is about to begin.

This narrative structure creates a sense that this war is less a particular and unique historical campaign than it is a lasting condition of life. These warriors are doing what they have always been doing and what they will continue to do (a sense that is strongly reinforced, as we shall see, by their memories of the past and their hopes for the future). There has been no clear beginning to all this, and there will be no clear end. Of course, if we bring to the poem a knowledge of the details of the Trojan War, we know that the tradition tells us it does eventually end. But the *Iliad* does not encourage us to think about that in any detail, apart from the references to the fact that

Troy will fall some day, and, if we do, there is little in the poem to suggest that such an event would change anything very much (more about this later).

In addition, the absence of any sense of enterprising romantic adventure in the poem (in spite of the fact that the traditional story of the Trojan War includes all sorts of possibilities for such events) generates a sense that individual resourcefulness in tactics, strategy, or trickery (a common feature of the *Odyssey* and of countless popular war fictions) is out of place here, because this war is larger than the efforts of any one man or small group of men. It is not something which the individual warrior can, through his individual efforts, alter in any significant way. Whatever he and his comrades do today, then tomorrow, if he is still alive, he will have to continue doing. By the end of the *Iliad* we have witnessed some extraordinary human conduct, glorious courage, horrible destruction, and more, none of which has changed the course or the nature of the war in the slightest. Confronted with this situation, the men seem trapped, as Odysseus observes:

> Zeus sees to it that from our youthful days
> to our old age we must grind away
> at wretched war, till, one by one, we die. (14.104) [14.85]

Some readers find this narrative rhythm disconcerting. Where are we going with the story? There is a lot of action, but overall nothing is changing and there is little if any sense of closure. For those who expect other things from a war fiction, it is rather surprising and perhaps disappointing to discover that most of the exciting narratives we associate with this war come from other sources—the *Odyssey*, *Aeneid*, and *Metamorphoses*, for example—where the vision of war is very different from what Homer is developing in the *Iliad*.

I would like to suggest that all these relatively obvious details help to create a sense that this vision of war is thoroughly fatalistic. The war is neither a temporary problem nor a discrete historical event nor a unique adventure. It is, rather, the basic, unchanging, and inescapable condition of life itself. It is man's fate.

Before exploring this point further, we should first clarify precisely what the terms *fate*, *fatalism*, and *fatalistic* mean here, for in these modern, decidedly non-fatalistic times we may not all grasp the

concept clearly. To assert that Homer pictures the war as man's fate is to claim that Homer views it as the essential condition of life into which these men are born. They do not choose to have the world this way, and many of them express their dissatisfaction with this state of affairs and their desire for something different. But there is nothing they can do to change that condition. Whatever started this war and whatever will end it (if it ever does end) are beyond human control.

It is necessary to add here the important point that, understood in this sense, these terms carry no necessary sense of optimism or pessimism. It is possible to be a confirmed fatalist and yet sense that the basic conditions of life are as good as they possibly could be or are arranged for man's benefit (as in, say, a faith in providential Christianity), or, alternatively, to have a decidedly pessimistic sense of the world one is born into. All these terms indicate, as I say, is that life is, so to speak, a game where the rules are made up and controlled by others and where human beings have no ability to change the situation.

The terms *fate* and *fatalistic* also do not mean that human actions are predetermined. This point is crucial to grasp for an understanding of the *Iliad* and almost all classical Greek literature. Human beings may be unable to alter the situation, but in at least one essential sense they are free agents. They are free to choose how to react to these given conditions. In the *Iliad* the men have chosen to be warriors; more than that, most of them are determined, in their freedom, to act as heroically as they can, to live up to a code which insists that they confront this grim fatal reality with a range of human qualities (courage, loyalty, physical strength, and so on). We will be going into this feature of the poem in greater detail in another essay. For the moment it's essential to grasp the point that central to lives of these men is their free assertion of their individuality in the face of a harsh fate which they cannot alter.

This fatalistic quality of the poem emerges also in the way Homer insists upon the universal scope of war. As we read the story, we are always dealing with a particular event involving specific individuals, but we are also aware of a larger picture, for these events are part of a much longer time period. The famous digressions, which have occasioned a certain amount of hostile comment, serve to remind us again and again that warfare is a condition of life itself. Flashbacks to earlier times insist that personal armed combat is what life is about

(e.g., Phoenix's long tale of Meleager, Aeneas's boasts about his ancestors, Andromache's story of her family, the constant reminders of the achievements of Diomedes's father, Tydeus, and so on). The particular events of this battle are always being played out against a historical backdrop of very similar incidents. One of Nestor's important functions in the poem is to remind us all the time, both by his presence and by his reminiscences, that human life has always involved fighting on the battle field:

> "Son of Atreus, yes, indeed, I wish
> I were the man I used to be back then,
> when I cut down lord Ereuthalion.
> But gods don't give men everything at once.
> Then I was young. Now old age follows me.
> But I'll be with my horsemen, advising them,
> giving them their orders, an old man's right.
> Fighting with spears is for the younger men
> born after me, men who rely on strength." (4.373) [4.318]

Similarly, when Hector thinks of his young son's future, the best he can envisage for him is that he will be a great warrior, victorious in battle (6.583), a situation all the more poignant, of course, because many readers bring to the incident a knowledge of how Hector will soon die and how the young infant will be killed when the Achaeans sack Troy. Hector has already acknowledged that he will die fairly soon, and no one in the poem has more to lose from continuing the battles than Hector. Nonetheless, the only future he can imagine and desire for his son is one which has produced the situation he and Andromache now face.

Homer's treatment of the combatants also serves to bring out the universal, fatal condition of this war. The *Iliad* contains hundreds of different names of people from all over the known world. It is virtually impossible to keep track of everyone (and one doesn't really have to, since most of the major actions involve relatively few people), but it is equally impossible to escape the sense that on this canvas we have representatives from all parts of civilization, not simply two separate groups fighting their own private quarrel. And what's even more remarkable, all these combatants are decidedly similar. Most of them speak the same language, worship the same gods, live by the same code of life, share the same rituals in prayers, sacrifices, burials, and so on. Warriors on opposite sides are members of the same extended family, and their forefathers have entertained

each other and fought as allies in the past. Some of those on different sides have the same name (e.g., Agelaus, Antiphus, Adrestus, Medon, Noemon, Orestes, and so on). Such a marked similarity between the two main groups of allies works against any attempt to find a rational cause of this war in some ethnic or religious conflict and thus adds weight to the impression that warfare transcends any geographical or cultural differences between the groups fighting each other.

We need to dwell on this point for a moment. In our Western traditions, we have for a very long time coped with the disturbing aspects of war by subjecting it to moral analysis. We like to see warfare as an army of righteousness against an army of evil, good versus bad, with the forces of goodness prevailing, so that we can justify the inescapable horrors war brings with it. And many critics have extended this tradition to the *Iliad*, seeking to establish some moral basis for the war which would make its atrocities somehow more palatable. I'll have a good deal more to say about this tendency in a later essay. What I want to insist upon here is that Homer appears to go out of his way to make this division between the opponents difficult to sustain. This war has not arisen out of cultural or political or economic conflict. It is something bigger than all such conflicts, and it has the effect of making all the combatants, whatever minor differences one wishes to point to here or there, all equally subject to its force.

After all, why are these men fighting? Or, more importantly, why do they believe they are fighting? The treatment of Helen, the ostensible cause of the war, makes her, for all her importance in the received tradition, relatively insignificant. She is hardly a sufficient explanation for what is going on. If the abduction counts at all, it is a minor pretext for what these men do all the time anyway. The suggestion that the Trojans might debate the issue and give her back (7.402) evaporates almost immediately, and the war continues as before. King Priam expressly indicates that Helen is not to blame (3.175), since the only sensible way to account for this war is to ascribe it to the gods.

Such a view of war is profoundly different from what most of us now believe. We think we have the ability to avoid warfare and that, if we must fight it, then we will do so only when we have a moral imperative to do so (i.e., when we are the "good guys" and our opponents "the bad guys"). And even under such circumstances we

will expect the war to be as short as possible. The notion that war is not a temporary and unwelcome intrusion upon human life but a fatal condition of life is thus potentially disturbing, a challenge to beliefs we particularly cherish. A central thrust of these essays is that such a challenge to our sensibilities is one of the most important things about this poem, because it is a vision of the world which contradicts what we wish to believe about it. Of course, many of us can and do seek to evade that challenge by attempting to convert the grim fatalism into a reassuring moral allegory in line with our traditions, but that, it strikes me, removes from the work its most valuable qualities.

THE IRONIC VISION OF WAR

One does not have to read very far in the *Iliad* before one begins to sense an ironic tension at the heart of Homer's depiction of warfare. On the one hand, the fighting here is a brutal enterprise. Men are killed horribly, and the readers are forced to confront the most visceral details of individual and mass butchery. On the other hand, the fighting often evokes from the combatants an inspiring sense of valuable human qualities—courage, beauty, loyalty, and comradeship—of life lived with a maximum emotional intensity. To seize on only one aspect of this dichotomy—to argue, for example, that the *Iliad* is a passionately anti-war or pro-war poem—is to miss an essential feature of Homer's treatment of battle. For at the heart of this vision of life is an equally poised balance between these two aspects of the central enterprise.

No one can deny that in the *Iliad* battlefield deaths are brutally direct and detailed. There is no attempt here to camouflage what is going on with a language of romantic chivalry or euphemism:

> Death then came to Diores, son of Amarynceus.
> He was hit by a jagged rock on his right shin,
> near the ankle. It was thrown by Peirous,
> son of Imbrasus, captain of the Thracians,
> who'd come from Aenus. The cruel rock crushed both tendons
> and the bone. He fell onto his back down in the dust.
> There he reached out with both hands for his companions.
> His spirit left his body with each gasp he took.
> Peirous, who'd thrown the rock, ran up and speared him in the gut.
> His bowels spilled out onto the ground. Darkness hid his eyes.
> (4.598) [4.518]

That said, he threw his spear. Athena guided it
straight to Pandarus' nose, directly by the eyes.
It smashed through his white teeth. The tireless bronze
sliced through his tongue, at its root, coming out his chin,
right at the tip. Pandarus fell from the chariot,
his brightly shining armour rattling round him. (5.345) [5.290]

But then he was hit by Peneleus,
below his eyebrows, just underneath his eye.
The spear knocked out the eyeball, went in his eye,
drove through his neck, and sliced the tendons at the nape.I
lioneus collapsed, stretching out his arms.
Peneleus drew his sharp sword and struck his neck,
chopping head and helmet, so they hit the ground,
the spear still sticking from the socket of his eye. (14.575) [14.492]

Idomeneus' pitiless bronze then struck Erymas
right in his mouth—the spear forced itself straight through,
below his brain, splitting his white skull apart,
smashing out his teeth. His eyes filled up with blood.
More blood spurted from his nose and open mouth.
Then death's black cloud enveloped Erymas. (16.404) [16.348]

These examples, picked almost at random, make the point sufficiently clear. The descriptions have a clinical precision and an almost cinematic frame-by-frame quality as we see the progress of the weapon through flesh and bone, stage by stage. The poem forces us over and over again to confront what really goes on when soldiers fight.

There are two other features of Homer's style in these killings that significantly reinforce the effect. First of all, almost all the warriors, even the insignificant ones, are introduced to us before they die. Each of them has a name, often a family identity (with parents, wife, and children), a distant homeland. We cannot take refuge here in the anonymity of death (as we can in so many more comforting war fictions, where the identity of the killed is kept at a distance so that we do not have to dwell on the cost of the enterprise—as in the *Odyssey*, for example, where Odysseus loses all his companions but only a few have names and almost none has any family identity). This particular death, Homer reminds us, even among so many, is unique. What has just been destroyed is a specific part of a human family and community.

Secondly, Homer typically concludes a killing with a reminder that what was once, a few moment ago, a gloriously vital human being is now forever gone, transformed into inert material. As he falls, the proud boasts or challenges which began this fight have become a dull "thud" or "rattle" of the armour, reminding us that the armour is now, in a sense, empty. The frequent laconic phrases about darkness veiling the eyes or teeth grinding in the dust or corpses left as carrion for dogs and birds act as a cryptic and harsh litany, insisting on the finality of this death. And we have no sense here that there is a future world, some afterlife where the warrior will be rewarded or punished for his conduct on the battlefield. Even the appearance of the ghost of Patroclus to Achilles confirms this sense, for he conveys to Achilles and to us a sense of the utter meaninglessness of Hades. Hence, the death of the beautiful, brave individual is final, the loss absolute.

On the basis of passages like these, one might very well make the case that the *Iliad* is hardly a poem which will encourage people to admire war. But, of course, that is only part of Homer's picture. For here war also prompts human beings to live up to their most glorious potential, to manifest some of the highest virtues of human experience. The stress of combat challenges a man to stand up courageously in the face of mortal danger, to stare at fate unwaveringly, and to meet it on his own terms. A later essay will be dealing with this point in further detail, but we might note here just how much Homer's warfare creates in men a powerful exultation, a passionate joy, an intense feeling of personal fulfillment and comradeship. It's no accident that Athena, goddess of wisdom, is also a deity who presides over battles, summoning from soldiers the most deeply felt sense of vital life:

> With them strode Athena,
> her eyes glittering, holding up the aegis—
> her priceless, ageless, eternal aegis,
> its hundred golden tassels quivering,
> each finely woven, valued at a hundred oxen.
> With this, she sped on through Achaean ranks,
> like lightning, firing soldiers' hearts for war.
> As she passed, she roused in men that hot desire
> to fight, to kill. At once she made each man feel war
> far sweeter than returning home, finer than sailing
> in the hollow ships back to his dear native land. (2.523) [2.445]

Homer is here acknowledging something which is particularly painful for many modern readers, the deeply pleasurable emotional intensity of warfare. To write this off as some psychopathology may be comforting, but it is also extremely naive, for astute observers have always acknowledged that there is something in warfare that answers to the most deeply felt passions people experience about life (even Immanuel Kant, William James, and Bertrand Russell, hardly militaristic types, paid tribute to the creative powers fostered by warfare and to the fact that many people are much happier in wartime than during peace). Nor is this something which has disappeared from modern warfare, at least to judge from the following description of the war in Vietnam (among many others):

> But once it was actually going on, things were different. You were just like everyone else, you could no more blink than spit. It came back the same way every time, dreaded and welcome, balls and bowels turning over together, your senses working like strobes, free-falling all the way down to the essences and then flying out again in a rush to focus, like the first strong twinge of tripping after an infusion of psilocybin, reaching in at the point of calm and springing all the joy and dread ever known every known by everyone who ever lived, unutterable in its speeding brilliance. Touching all the edges and then passing, as though it had been controlled from outside, by a god or by the moon. (Herr 143)

The ironic tension I have been describing lies at the heart of Homer's vision of warfare. War exalts men and impartially destroys them; it releases joyful passion and extinguishes life forever; it realizes many of the supremely human virtues and leaves them in the dust. War includes Athena the beautiful and Ares the brute, the divine siblings, permanently patrolling the battlefield together.

THE FIRST CLASH OF ARMIES

This paradoxical ironic tension at the heart of Homer's vision of war is particularly apparent in his treatment of the first clash between the rival armies in Book 4. The preparations for combat draw our attention to the passionate individuality of these warriors, who define themselves by their participation in battle. As Agamemnon tours the front lines, he calls attention to a series of great warrior leaders: Idomeneus, Ajax, Oilean Ajax, Nestor, Odysseus, Diomedes, and Sthenelus, each of whom appears before us as a proud, brave, loyal individual, intensely caught up in the test of his own excellence which

this fighting represents. Then the whole mass of armed men gathers together under the irresistible and beautiful force of war:

> Just as thundering ocean surf crashes on the sand,
> wave after wave, driven by the West Wind's power,
> one wave rising at sea, then booming down on shore,
> arching in crests and crashing down among the rocks,
> spewing salt foam, so then Danaan ranks,
> row after row, moved out, spirits firmly set on war.
> Each leader issued his own orders to his men.
> The rest marched on in silence. You'd never think
> such a huge army could move out keeping its voice
> buried in those chests, in silent fear of their commanders.
> As they marched, the polished armour on them glittered.
> (4.494-504) [4.425 ff]

The description evokes the awe-inspiring power and beauty and threat of battle, the paradoxical combination of fascination, loveliness, and danger, conveyed, for example, in the later images of fire and in a word like *glitter*, rich with a sense of attractiveness and threat.

But once the fighting starts the emphasis shifts, as the proud heroic control of the opening gives way to something increasingly desperate. The combatants start "attacking like wolves, man against man," transforming the superb human display to an animal frenzy. The final images of Book 4, ever, thowake us further. We are given the details of the deaths of Diores and the immediate retribution meted out to his killer Peirus. Death for death. At the very end we see the results of the enterprise which began only a few moments ago as a display of glorious heroic splendour:

> And so those two warriors
> lay stretched out in the dirt beside each other—
> one Thracian chief, one captain of bronze-clad Epeians.
> And many other men lay dead around them.
> (4.618-621) [4.536-538]

> For on that day,
> many Trojans and Achaeans lay there side by side,
> stretched out together, face down in the dust.
> (4.626) [4.543-544]

This final image in Book 4 brings this narrative moment to a halt in the mutual anonymity and finality of death, heroic young men, so

vitally alive a short while ago, now stretched out in the dirt together, enemies now united in a common fate.

We see here, too, what emerges consistently throughout the poem. Homer does not load the ironies one way or the other. The pathetic slaughter does not undercut the quality and value of the heroic individual. Nor does the evocation of military glory seek to mitigate the horror of the slaughter. Homer's treatment of war keeps the tone evenly balanced. Warfare is not, in any easy conventional sense, good or bad. It is what it is, an eternally fated contradiction.

ESSAY TWO
HOMER'S SIMILES: NATURE AS CONFLICT

In the *Iliad*, there is little direct and extensive description of the natural scene where the battles take place, nothing to match the attention given to the armour, for example, or the generous treatment of this subject in the *Odyssey* (in the passages describing Calypso's island or the world of Polyphemus, to cite two famous examples). However, what is going on in the battles is constantly linked to natural processes, so that throughout the poem there is a continuing sense that the ironic and fated condition of war is not an isolated phenomenon but intimately linked to nature itself and, beyond that, to the metaphysical order of the cosmos. The human conflict is thus an integral part of an all-inclusive pattern of forceful collisions.

One of the obvious and famous ways in which Homer insists upon this extension of conflict into all aspects of life is the Homeric simile, a long formal trope in which two aspects of experience are brought together for an extensive comparison. Typically, the simile begins by setting down a common natural or domestic experience from the present world of the reader and concludes by linking this phenomenon to the actions of the warriors on the battlefield ("Just as this always happens, that's how those warriors acted then").

> Just as an all-consuming fire burns through huge forests
> on a mountain top, and men far off can see its light,
> so, as soldiers marched out, their glittering bronze
> blazed through the sky to heaven, an amazing sight.
> As many birds in flight—geese, cranes, and long-necked swans—
> in an Asian meadow by the flowing river Caystrios,
> fly here and there, proud of their strong wings, and call,
> as they settle, the meadow resounding with the noise,
> so the many groups of soldiers moved out then,
> from ships and huts onto Scamander's plain.
> Under men's and horses' feet the earth rang ominously.
> Then they stood there, in that flowered meadow,
> by the Scamander, an immense array,
> as numerous as leaves and flowers in springtime.
> Like flies swarming around shepherds' pens in spring,
> when pails fill up with milk, so the Achaeans,
> a huge long-haired host, marched out onto that plain
> against the Trojans, eager to destroy them. (2.534-551) [2.458 ff]

> Just as in late summer rainstorms the dark earth
> is all beaten down, when Zeus pours out his waters

> with utmost violence, when he's enraged with men
> who have provoked him with their crooked judgments,
> corrupting their assemblies and driving justice out,
> not thinking of gods' vengeance, so all the rivers
> crest in flood, their torrents carving many hillsides,
> as they roar down from the mountains in a headlong rush
> toward the purple sea, destroying the works of men—
> that's how, as they sped on, the Trojan horses screamed.
> (16.449-458) [16.385 ff]

Characteristically, the opening half invokes an image of antagonistic forces of nature, especially those of the sea against the shore, fire in the forests or fields, wind on the crops, or beasts of prey attacking domestic livestock or human beings, and in the second half the characteristics of these clashing natural forces are transferred onto the events of the war. In the process, the simile insists upon the fundamental similarity between what is now happening all around us and what those men did in the past. The shift in verb tenses stresses the link between what is now going on in nature (and what has always gone on) and the warfare so many years ago.

In this manner Homer's style is constantly encouraging us to see the conflict at Troy as part of a ceaseless universal strife which has always governed natural events. The warriors are responding with an urge as deeply rooted as the migrating instincts of the birds, as common as the spring growth of leaves on the trees, and as familiar as the feeding of flies around the milk pails. In the timeless rhythms of nature, from the most majestic and powerful birds of the air to the buzzing farmyard pests, war has its place, and its presence here underscores its impersonal omnipotence, its irrefutable natural power. War is thus not a simple moral issue, some human error or sin, but rather an integral part of the irresistible, eternal, and mysterious natural order of things.

But the effect of these similes does not emerge merely from the comparison itself. The structure of the simile permits the details to accumulate and gather momentum without significant pause or interruption, so that the very power being invoked manifests itself in the energy of the lines. The formal introduction to the comparison interrupts the narrative action and holds it up momentarily against a backdrop of universal and timeless nature, and then, the simile gathers increasing momentum and finally delivers the full impact of the uncoiling sentence onto the key words describing the soldiers (as,

for example, that verb *screamed* in the last example). The structure of the simile is the source of much of its poetic power.

But all similes are inherently ironic. For while they insist upon the similarities between two apparently different things, they also implicitly call attention to those differences. The effect of a simile depends upon an appropriate balance between these two contrasting tendencies. If the differences are too extreme ("heterogeneous ideas yoked by violence together," as Dr Johnson says of the Metaphysical poets) the comparison is too strained to work. If, on the other hand, the comparison is too familiar and obvious, the simile has become inert and trite, what we call a cliché. A successful simile retains enough difference to be fresh and enough similarity to be apt and, in the process, pulls the reader in different directions.

Consider, for example, Homer's most famous comparison, the "wine dark sea." At once the metaphor suggests the rich attractiveness of the ocean, the fascination with the hidden emotional powers of nature. For the sea, like wine, benefits a man, tempts him, intoxicates him, and can overpower and kill him. On the other hand, the sea in many ways is not like wine at all. Wine is produced by human skill and has become an essential part of civilized life in homes and temples. It is an important part of those occasions where human beings celebrate among themselves. The sea, by contrast, follows its own whims and cannot be made a permanent and predictable part of anyone's peaceful social existence. Its eternally bitter vintage arises from and works by some mysterious, ambiguous power uncontrolled by human beings. The complex paradox in this apparently simple metaphor simultaneously insists upon the similarity and the difference.

By calling attention to nature in this way, Homer's style creates and sustains throughout the poem a constant ironic tension. While it places the war in a much wider context of universal and timeless natural processes, it also repeatedly reminds the reader that what is happening on the battlefield comes at the expense of some vital human alternatives.

> As two men with measuring rods
> quarrel over survey markers in a common field,
> striving for a fair division in some narrow place,

that's how the parapet kept these troops apart.
(12.465-468) [12.421]

Just as a man tends a flourishing olive shoot,
in some lonely place with a rich source of water,
a lovely vigorous sapling stirred with the motion
of every breeze, so it bursts out in white blossoms—
but then a sudden stormy wind arising rips it
from its trench and lays it out prone on the earth—
that's how Menelaus, son of Atreus, then cut down
Panthous' son, Euphorbus of the fine ash spear.
(17.68-75) [17.52 ff]

Just as at harvest time North Wind quickly dries
well-watered orchards, to the farmer's great delight,
that's how the whole plain then grew dry, as Hephaestus
burned up the dead. (21.416) [21.345]

What's remarkable in such moments is how the comparison works both ways. Yes, the similarities are there, and we get a continuing sense of warfare as part of the fabric of human life and nature. But the differences are loaded with ironic resonance. For surveyors, farmers, and the north wind blowing through an orchard in summer all suggest human possibilities other than warfare, a civilization based on creative productivity, something very different from the world of the front-line warrior. War, in other words, may belong with the rhythms of nature, but it is not all there is to be said. The warriors' ferocious acts may be part of the eternal forces of nature, but they bring little pleasure to gardeners, whose efforts, equally natural, foster other human qualities. Fields of glory can also be cattle pastures, but armies drive cattle from the fields, soak the earth with blood, and bury human beings in the ground. Spears have some obvious similarities with surveyors' measuring rods, but the two implements have fundamentally different purposes.

Sometimes, a particular simile may push this ironic tension to the limit. Here, for example, is a description of the wound Agamemnon receives on the battlefield:

Just as a sharp spasm seizes women giving birth,
a piercing labour pain sent by the Eilithyiae,
Hera's daughters, who control keen pangs of childbirth,
that's how sharp pain sapped Agamemnon's fighting strength.
(11.307-310) [11.269]

Agamemnon has just slaughtered a series of young men, winning great glory for himself, manifesting the highest virtue of his warrior life, so the ironic implications of comparing the pain from his wound to the pain of childbirth is clear enough.

In this way, the double nature of the simile, while insisting that such conflicts are central to nature itself, is always helping us to recognize a world beyond the battlefield, to remind us of other human possibilities which these warriors cannot admit into their vision of experience. These peaceful alternatives are constantly there to remind us of the narrowness of this warrior ethic, the price one pays for the supreme glory of military triumph. This is not, one should add, a critical irony, one that undercuts and disenfranchises the human values manifested in the warrior life. It is much rather an impersonal and constant reminder of what warfare ignores, of the drastic limitations the endeavour places on human experience.

Hence, the Homeric similes and the shorter comparisons bring out war's rightful place in the natural order. It is inextricably part of the world in all its beauty, ferocity, passion, and destructiveness. But at the same time it severely limits other creative human possibilities. In recognizing one, we cannot escape becoming aware of the other, so that the ironic sense of war developed here is complex, something we cannot easily sum up or neutralize with a pithy moral conclusion. All the qualities of war—its glory, beauty, butchery, courage, ugliness, and pain—are inherently part of a world uniting the destroyer and the destroyed. The mysterious powers of nature, the source of life, joy, creativity, and beauty, bring forth all things, including, paradoxically, the forces of human destructiveness.

ESSAY THREE
THE GODS

Warfare in the Iliad is, as we have seen, an integral part of human life and wider nature. But it is more than that, for it is an essential part of the metaphysical order of the cosmos, the divine arrangements according to which everything behaves the way it does. This central insight is first offered to us in the opening invocation:

> Sing, Goddess, sing of the rage of Achilles, son of Peleus—
> that murderous anger which condemned Achaeans
> to countless agonies, threw many warrior souls
> deep into Hades, leaving their dead bodies
> carrion food for dogs and birds—
> all in fulfillment of the will of Zeus. (1.1) [1.1]

These famous lines take us straight to the ironic heart of the poem. Right at the start we are told that this story will focus on the hero's anger, a destructive rage which condemns noble men (warriors) to agony and death, reducing them to lumps of dead flesh for predatory animals. The final line indicates that all this happens according to the will of Zeus. The terrible battlefield deaths are a direct result of divine desire. The structure of the sentence emphasizes the harshness of this claim, for there is no mention of Zeus until that last moment, when the direct connection between him and the carnage appears almost as a casual afterthought. And the abruptness of the link puts immediate pressure on us to wonder about the "justice" of this arrangement, that is, the way in which such an apparently harsh vision might actually work.

A few lines later, the curious question "Which of the gods drove these two men to fight?" begins taking us inside this apparently strange vision of the world. If we recognize, as we should, that beliefs are shaped not so much by the answers they give as by the questions they prompt, then we should see in this initial query the nature of the explanation. For this interrogative implies two things: first, that there are particular gods and, second, that their actions initiate human destructiveness. There is no pause here to explore other possibilities. Given the importance of the event, it must be the case that a god is involved—he or she has pushed events into this confrontation. That being the case, we need to understand why the god might be motivated to do that. We do not have to wait long for an answer:

> That god was Apollo, son of Zeus and Leto.
> Angry with Agamemnon, he cast plague down
> onto the troops—deadly infectious evil.
> For Agamemnon had dishonoured the god's priest. . . .
> (1.10-13) [1.9]

The source of the action is clear—the instant, passionate, and destructive anger of Apollo. We are not asked even to consider if there is some legal or ethical principle involved. There is no hint of deliberation or consultation (as there is in the opening of the *Odyssey*, for example). The god swoops down to wipe out hundreds of animals and soldiers because he is instantly enraged about an insult to him.

Throughout the *Iliad* the gods act as Apollo does here, intervening or refusing to intervene in human affairs on the basis of their own feelings. They are thoroughly unpredictable and do not invoke any particular principles which might justify or at least account for their actions to those seeking some reasonable explanations for what they do. Moreover, they are obviously closely bound up with what is happening on the battlefield. In fact, the conduct of the war is inconceivable to these heroes except in terms of these deities—everyone in this poem sees in the capricious divine wills the origin of all significant events. Hence, if we wish to understand this vision of warfare, we must treat seriously the religious dimensions of the poem.

This last caveat is important to stress, because there is a tradition (now waning) of interpreting the Homeric gods in the *Iliad* as "merely" poetical fictions, a delightful invention without wider significance. I'm never entirely sure what such comments mean, other than telling us that we don't need to take this vision of the gods as a viable system of belief which might challenge our very different traditions. Such advice may well help in neutralizing any discomfort we feel about our own religious feelings (or lack of them) when we confront the Olympian family, but it is surely misguided. For, no matter what we may think, the poem and the characters in it take the gods very seriously indeed (as did the ancient Greeks themselves, of course). Hence, any attempt to understand this vision of experience needs to focus directly on what a faith in these gods reveals about a particular understanding of the world and not simply write the gods off as a pleasant irrelevance.

A good place to start is to recognize the importance of the physical shapes of the gods and their inter-relationships in a huge extended family. Except for their two main attributes, their power and immortality, these deities have a recognizable similarity to human beings in their appearance, feelings, likes and dislikes, and their relationships to each other (unlike, say, Jehovah in the Old Testament). This divine order has an instantly recognizable and precisely delineated symbolic form which makes the metaphysical powers controlling the world emotionally intelligible. Not only are these gods clearly etched anthropomorphic males and females, with all the characteristics of often irritable and unpredictable people, but they exist together in a large extended family and display the familiar actions of human beings in the same situation: they bicker constantly, often for reasons which are obscure, and then unexpectedly make up; they trick each other and then establish alliances; they tease, insult, abuse, and respect each other; they argue about areas of authority, family friends, honour, and all sorts of other things quite familiar to anyone who has any experience of family life. Our very first meeting with this family makes this point emphatically:

> Then Zeus, son of Cronos,
> wishing to irk Hera with a sarcastic speech,
> addressed them in deviously provoking words. . . . (4.4) [4.3]

> Athena and Hera sat together muttering,
> plotting trouble for Trojans. Angry at Zeus,
> her father, Athena sat there silently,
> so enraged she didn't say a word. But Hera,
> unable to contain her anger, burst out. . . . (4.24) [4.20]

The scene has the flavour of a family soap opera. Such a comparison is not wholly trivial. It reminds us that one of the most popular and important symbols in all fiction is the family, especially the family quarrel, for that establishes an immediate link between the world of the story and the world of the audience. Virtually everyone fighting the Trojan War or reading Homer's epic knows something about authoritarian fathers, bickering mothers, rebellious daughters, inter-family alliances and rivalries, and so on. So when, earlier in the poem, Zeus's first response to Thetis's request is a worried concern for what his wife will say (1.578) or when the crippled, gifted son intervenes to save his nagging mother from the bullying father (1.642), we immediately understand. However much we might like our families to remain calm and reasonable, we recognize that strongly personal

and often unpredictable emotions are generally the order of the day. So by offering us a vision of the divine powers of the world as a family which behaves just like the families we are all familiar with, Homer is giving us a very accessible symbol of the passionate irrationality and unpredictability governing the world.

But the development of this extended family achieves a great deal more than illuminating for us how basic passions rule divine conduct and are the motive forces in the world. It also provides an instantly understandable picture of how the ruling powers of the cosmos are related to each other. Families by their very nature contain lines of authority and a hierarchy of power. But these are inherently ambiguous and always changing, especially in the complex emotional world of the extended family. A family, in other words, has a dynamic life of its own, without a firmly established or codified logic which clearly lays out the various rights, duties, areas of special responsibility, and so on for each member. Yes, we may well recognize the father or mother or both as the principal authority to whom we will defer if we have to, but we also recognize how often family members seek to subvert that authority, prompted by any number of irrational motives, from sexual desire to petty jealousies. Hence, the emotional life of a family is fluid, ambiguous, and dramatic. The collection of gods in the *Iliad* always behaves like a family with these familiar characteristics. We see a hierarchy of power, to be sure, with Zeus in charge, but the spheres of influence in earth and heaven, the delineations of power, the extent to which any particular god or goddess can work against Zeus or against the others, remain somewhat blurred, quite acceptably so, because our knowledge of families tells us that is how they operate.

What a faith in this divine family amounts to is a system of belief which accepts that the universe is ruled by passionate uncertainty and unpredictability. There is no simple overarching moral principle (as there is in the *Odyssey*, for example), nor are there any divinely endorsed rules or codes of behaviour (as in the Old Testament). Hence, all inconsistencies in manifestations of divine power are obviously part of the given condition of the world. Some god can hate the Trojans and help the Achaeans, but then he or she can turn around and momentarily reverse that by saving a Trojan warrior. Emotional people behave that way all the time. Hence, this belief system finds nothing odd about sudden changes in the behaviour of a god (indeed, we have no right to expect that the divine powers will

consistently favour anyone). Even Zeus, who we have been given to understand is more or less omnipotent, can be tricked by his wife and later has to abandon his grandson Sarpedon against his will (in Book 16). And when he holds up the scales to determine the outcome of the fight between Achilles and Hector, thus momentarily suggesting that he is subject to some higher authority, there is no sense of any logical difficulty, because this entire divine system is a network of imprecise and shifting relationships between sharply etched personalities, whose authority does not require clear definition or justification. That feature helps to explain the warriors' curiously tough faith. They offer prayers and sacrifices to these gods, hoping to obtain their favour, but when they are disappointed, their faith never wavers. Zeus and his family are capricious gods. We hope that they will be kind to us, but we have no right to expect them to be or to complain about injustice when they are not.

Moreover, this divine family in the *Iliad*, like a large human extended family, has no clearly defined limits to membership. The small family circle of Olympian gods obviously governs the main actions and receives most of the attention, but the extended divine clan includes a host of deities more or less closely related to the main group. Here again, there is little attempt at precision. The divine family is a huge interconnected network, extending from the Olympians down through a host of lesser figures (giants, Titans, nymphs, sea-goddesses, old men of the sea, and so on) and existing everywhere, so that the entire world is full of divine presences. Hence, in dealing with the *Iliad* we cannot talk of nature and the gods as if they are two clearly separate entities (as in the Old Testament, for example). Throughout the poem nature and the divine are fused in a paradoxical but imaginatively vital manner. The gods both exist in nature and are nature. The warriors make no attempt to differentiate. The eagle soaring in the sky may be an ordinary bird, or an omen from Zeus, or the transformed god himself. The Scamander River is clearly a river, a geographical feature, but it is also divine, not just the home or the favourite haunt of a god or a natural shrine to his worship, but the god himself. Poseidon is god of the sea, and he has his palace in the sea, but in an important sense Poseidon also is the sea, just as Hades is the god of the underworld who lives in the underworld and is also the underworld itself. This fusion of the natural and the divine stresses how the conflicts we see among the

gods are intimately linked to the conflicts which govern natural phenomena, and vice versa.

In coping with this feature of the *Iliad*, readers who find imaginative delight in this passionate vision of vital nature may, like William Wordsworth (in "The world is too much with us"), become aware of just how much vital contact with nature we have lost. But we should be careful not to sentimentalize this vision into some nostalgic pantheism. For while the gods in the *Iliad* may be instantly familiar to us as family members and the intense spiritual vitality of nature may strike a welcome note to those frustrated by our traditions of seeing the natural world as an alien and inert resource, these cosmic personalities have deadly powers and no compunction about using them to further their intensely egotistical desires. Like the warriors fighting in this war, we cannot forget that the operating principle of this family and of the nature so closely identified with it is conflict and that such conflict routinely involves the brutal destruction of human life. We have already mentioned the actions of Apollo in the opening to Book 1. The first picture of the family group of gods in Book 4 really underscores the passionate callousness these deities are capable of. Early in this scene, the following exchange between Zeus and Hera takes place:

> "Dear wife, what sort of crimes have Priam
> or Priam's children committed against you,
> that you should be so vehemently keen
> to destroy that well-built city Ilion?
> If you went through its gates or its huge walls,
> you'd gorge on Priam and his children,
> and other Trojans, too, swallow their flesh raw.
> That's what you'd do to slake your anger.
> Do as you wish. We shouldn't make this matter
> something you and I later squabble over,
> a source of major disagreements.
> But I'll tell you this—keep it in mind.
> Whenever I get the urge to wipe out
> some city whose inhabitants you love,
> don't try to thwart me. Let me have my way.
> I'll give in to you freely, though unwillingly.
> For of all towns inhabited by earth's peoples,
> under the sun, beneath the heavenly stars,
> sacred Ilion, with Priam, Priam's folk,
> expert spearmen, stands dearest in my heart.
> My altar there has always shared their feasts,

> with libations and sacrificial smoke,
> offerings we get as honours due to us "

Ox-eyed Hera then said in reply to Zeus:

> "The three cities I love the best by far
> are Argos, Sparta, and Mycenae,
> city of wide streets. Destroy them utterly,
> if you ever hate them in your heart.
> I won't deny you or get in your way. . . ." (4.38) [4.30]

This spontaneous conversation between husband and wife displays no particular benevolence towards human beings. If these remarks represent the way in which the most important of the Olympian deities treat the men they "love the best by far," the cities highest in their esteem, civilized worshippers who have always observed all the appropriate rites, we might well raise a question or two about the nature of the arrangements here. Divine favour or divine destruction seems fairly arbitrary.

One might note, in passing, how such an exchange helps these warriors face destruction and yet accept that the gods do like them sometimes. Zeus, after all, expresses a certain regret for what the Trojans are going to experience—not that that will be enough to spare them. This scene also registers as fairly normal Olympian behaviour. There is no particular motive for Zeus's decision to provoke his wife or for Hera's hatred for the Trojans. The story might well provide Homer with such a motive in Hera's case (in the Judgment of Paris, in which the Trojan prince chose Aphrodite over Hera), but he chooses not to do so. The reason, it strikes me, has nothing to do with the fact that the story is "too abstract for his manner" or that this divine bargaining is "unmotivated and mysterious" (Griffin 25), whatever those phrases mean exactly, but rests on Homer's obvious sense that any reasonable motive would detract from the most shocking element in this dialogue, the casual and callous normality with which the Trojans are destined to be slaughtered. After all, the motivation on both sides is clear enough: these gods are acting on their most powerful and immediate feelings, which they make no attempt to conceal or justify. The epithets given to the major gods are constant reminders of this quality—with references to lightning, earthquakes, storm clouds, and so on, all of which keep reverberating through the images of human efforts and

hopes the ominous sense of an irrational, overpowering, and destructive cosmic destiny.

Some of those who find such a vision of the divine uncomfortable try to neutralize the obvious implications of this scene. So G. S. Kirk, for example, finds nothing very shocking here. "[Zeus' declaration of affection for Troy and Priam] may cause the listener to wonder why, nevertheless, he allows the city to fall even after he has discharged his promise to Thetis. The answer is that this has been made inevitable by Paris' offense against hospitality which is protected by Zeus . . . and by the Trojans' condoning of it by receiving him and Helen" (Commentary 333). But there is no reference here to that reason. Indeed, it is conspicuous by its absence, as if Homer wishes to go out of his way to bring out the lack of such moral reasoning on Zeus's part. Comments like this one by Kirk, it strikes me, are imposed on the poem in order to enable the reader to evade the central ironies in this harsh vision of experience (more about the origin and effects of such interpretative efforts in a later essay).

Faith in such deities obviously demands an acceptance of irrational and cosmic conflict and the frequently brutal consequences of that for human beings as the way the world and everything in it operates. There is no covenant between the human and the divine (and no sense that the basic conditions will change), no divinely endorsed moral code which informs human beings how they might obtain the favours of the gods, no way in which the warriors can understand the divine forces of the world in clear moral terms, no explicit sense of what the gods expect from human beings or why they have created human beings and the world the way they have. The last point is worth stressing: for all their clear images of, stories about, and personal contact with the gods, these warriors have no clear sense of what the gods want from them, no divine guidance in how they ought to behave. The gods do communicate with human beings from time to time, directly or through omens, but such instructions cannot be counted on and are often ambiguous. So unlike the ancient Israelite, for example, who had a very detailed rule book covering all aspects of life (the Mosaic Code, which was written down and carefully preserved) and a covenant promising a historical reward, the Homeric warrior faces a world permeated by powerful divine presences whose motives and wishes are unpredictable.

This religious vision is a picture of the cosmos as totally controlled by irrational forces beyond human control. The most extraordinary aspect of this warrior culture is its acceptance of such a tough creed. These men do not, like Job, seek an accounting from Zeus, or, like Job's friends, do they search for a "sin" they might have committed to earn divine displeasure. Instead they endorse the fact that unreasonable and destructive conflict is entirely natural and divinely sanctioned, and they continue to function, proud of their power to assert their individuality in the face of such a grim vision of a world governed by an irrational fate originating in the unpredictable dynamics of the divine family.

The *Iliad* demonstrates, of course, that the gods are not always hostile to human beings. The Olympians can provide decisive assistance and intimate practical counsel to individual men or transform the normal warrior into a mighty hero or turn the tide one way or the other in a battle. But such moments are spontaneous results of particular feelings and subject to instant change. Zeus can grant Thetis's plea to avenge the insult to her son and then with equally sudden indifference turn his back on the entire war and attend exclusively to his own affairs elsewhere. Or a god can express a sympathetic concern for the sufferings of humanity, unwelcome evils which the divine wills have brought about, and then proceed to multiply those evils. The capricious desires of the gods mean that the only consistent feature of their relationship to human beings is their unpredictability. From a caring protector of a pampered favourite, any god can instant change into a cruel deceiver of the same man's hopes and an agent in his brutal destruction. In their constant interference with human conduct the gods display nothing we can recognize as a divine concern for a reasonable principle of justice (Dodds 32). In fact, if we want to use the phrase "divine justice" to describe what goes on in the *Iliad*, we will have to strip it of the meaning we customarily associate with it, so that when we speak of "divine justice" we mean something like "the gods act that way because that's the way they feel like acting at that particular moment."

Nothing is potentially more disturbing for modern readers than this vision of the divine, because it is so different from our central faith in a providential God or, if we are not particularly religious, in some secular form of this belief (like a faith in progress or in historical destiny or in gaining power over nature, and so on). We have long been raised to believe that some reasonable moral principles (divinely

sanctioned or otherwise) manifest themselves in human life, and many of our prayers or hopes rest on appeals made in the name of this belief. So the vision of a universe governed by irrational conflict—and the faith of the warriors in such a belief—is a direct challenge to us.

Occasionally the *Iliad* will raise the issue of a moralized fate, that is, a sense that the cosmic justice of the Olympian gods might operate by some consistent principle different from what now rules the warriors' lives (as happens repeatedly in the *Odyssey*, where the sanctity of the home is affirmed by human beings and gods throughout). It's important to notice, however, that such a different sense of divine justice typically comes from one of the warriors as a fervent desire, not as a statement of belief. When Menelaus prays to Zeus for victory over Paris on the ground that Paris has broken a law of hospitality (3.388), he is not invoking a sacred principle but expressing a personal wish. Thus, when Zeus denies his prayer, as he does so often in this poem, Menelaus does not question his faith but reaffirms it. Similarly, immediately before Achilles sets out to avenge Patroclus, he momentarily wishes that the fatal conditions of life might change to something less grimly irrational and destructive:

> . . . so let wars disappear from gods and men
> and passionate anger, too, which incites
> even the prudent man to that sweet rage,
> sweeter than trickling honey in men's throats,
> which builds up like smoke inside their chests. . . . (18.133) [18.107]

These lines prompted Heracleitus to observe "Homer was wrong. . . . He did not see that he was praying for the destruction of the universe; for, if his prayer were heard, all things would pass away" (qtd Burnet 136). But Homer does not utter this prayer; Achilles does. His vain demand for a life more peaceful and reasonable, with an absence of deadly conflict, like the earlier prayer of Menelaus, emphasizes how the hopes of men, even the most powerful, cannot alter the basic conditions of an irrational and violent universe, as both Menelaus and Achilles themselves realize only too well.[1]

---

[1] The strongest suggestion of some divinely sanctioned moral principle occurs in Book 16, where there is a reference to Zeus's anger at those "who have provoked him with their crooked judgments,/corrupting their assemblies and driving justice out,/ not thinking of gods' vengeance. . . ." (16.451). Such a remark, suggesting, as it does, that Zeus is concerned about punishing human beings who fail to live up to

The control the gods exercise over the conduct of the war manifests itself in a number of ways. The most remarkable is their direct interference in the daily events on the battlefield. While their behaviour is impossible to predict, for the warriors divine interference affects almost everything that happens. The gods, in other words, are not just responsible for launching this war (and others). They also determine the decisive events in the day-to-day fighting. The fortunes of war thus depend, not just on the bravery and resourcefulness of the warrior, but on the capricious feelings of external divine agents. Just as what goes on in the natural world confirms the presence of divine force, so major successes or failures on the battlefield stem from some god's interference.

The divine influence on these human actions typically takes one of two forms, direct interference in a physical event or in the emotional or psychological state of the warrior (or both). In the former, a god can guide a spear or arrow to or away from its target, cause a piece of equipment, like a chin strap or an axle, to malfunction, trip someone up at a crucial point, and so on, always working to see that events on the battlefield match his or her desires at that particular moment. Hence, unexpected events on the battlefield do not happen by accident but by divine desire. In Book 3, for example Menelaus finally gets his wish to fight Paris, and it seems clear he has the physical superiority to triumph in such a duel. But his sword shatters (to Menelaus this is clearly the work of Zeus) and then, a moment later, when Menelaus is about to break Paris's neck, Aphrodite make sure that Paris escapes and returns to Troy safely. In the normal course of events, Menelaus should have killed Paris. The unexpected outcome must be the work of the gods.[2]

More complex and fascinating than these moments of physical interference are the times when the gods suddenly and decisively, for

---

some moral standard, is so at odds with the rest of the poem that the lines have invited the suggestion they are a later interpolation (see, for example, Paley's comments in 2:140). Whether that is the case or not, this comment so goes against Zeus's behaviour in the rest of the poem, that it's difficult to give much interpretative weight to it.

[2] Such a belief is common enough among front-line soldiers everywhere, a fatalistic sense that somewhere or other there's a bullet with a particular soldier's name on it or when, faced with the apparent chaos of the killing zone, a soldier affirms that there are no atheists in fox holes. Giving a name and a motive to the unpredictable destructive forces which threaten him is one of the soldier's most important ways of emotionally comprehending and thus dealing with might otherwise be an insupportably meaningless situation.

better or worse, interfere with a particular warrior's feelings or thought processes (which, as we shall see in a moment, are largely the same thing). Such moments are particularly interesting because they bring out a picture of warrior psychology which is significantly different from many of our most common notions about how human beings think (although, as I shall discuss later, this Homeric psychology is still a very insightful way to think about certain forms of modern conduct). Through their psychic interference, the gods repeatedly alter a warrior's normal behaviour and his perceptual process. Dreams come from Zeus (as we see in the opening of Book 2), and the gods can place an idea in a man's head. Alternatively, they can assume the shape of a familiar mortal and deliver an important message or perform an important task. In the course of the poem Apollo does this many times, as Acamas, Mentes, Periphas, Lycaon, and Agenor. They can suddenly infuse a warrior with enormous courage and strength, so that he enjoys spectacular success on the battlefield. Or they can drain a man's courage and make him back off or run away from battle. And so on. Thus the unpredictable irrationality of the divine personalities affects human behaviour frequently, and sometimes there is no permanently clear demarcation between normal human conduct and divinely affected conduct.

Such divine interference has important consequences for our sense of how these warrior understand themselves and thus of how they behave. At the simplest level, such a fatalistic view encourages the belief that people do not bear the responsibility for what they are. Telamonian Ajax is a redoubtable warrior because he has received power and clear thinking from Zeus (7.336), and Achilles' pre-eminence comes from the gods (1.322). Helen recognizes that she and Paris have no control over or responsibility for who they are, and Paris says the same to Hector:

> But don't blame me
> for golden Aphrodite's lovely gifts.
> Men can't reject fine presents from the gods,
> those gifts they personally bestow on us,
> though no man would take them of his own free will. (3.69) [3.65]

By a natural extension of the same idea, the individuals do not bear direct responsibility for the unusual actions they sometimes carry out, because extraordinary events are caused by divine interference. The next essay in this series discusses the heroic code, the shared

standards of conduct by which these warriors live, but we need to appreciate how in the *Iliad* the warriors interpret actions which fall outside the normal behaviour defined by this code as divinely caused. When Achilles unexpectedly does not physically defend his honour in front of Agamemnon in Book 1, he is acting on the direct advice of a god. The normal behaviour in the group (as we shall see) demands from Achilles a different response. Similarly Agamemnon's major blunder in offending Achilles must be divinely inspired. Although this mistake brings a series of military disasters on the Achaeans and although Agamemnon has to offer suitable compensation, he can assign responsibility elsewhere:

> You Achaeans have often criticized
> and spoken ill of me. But I'm not to blame.
> It's Zeus' fault and Fate—those Furies, too,
> who walk in darkness. In our assembly,
> they cast a savage blindness on my heart,
> that day when on my own I took away
> Achilles' prize. But what was I to do? I
> t is a god who brought all this about.
> Zeus' eldest daughter, Ate, blinds all men
> with her destructive power. Her feet are soft,
> for she walks, not on the ground, but on men's heads,
> and she brings folly onto humankind,
> seducing them at random. (19.105) [19.85]

No one challenges this assessment. Agamemnon receives some stinging criticism in the course of the battles, but not on this occasion. For here he speaks what everyone acknowledges to be true. Similarly, psychic interference from Athena drives Pandarus to shoot an arrow at Menelaus in Book 4, thus ending the truce between the warring parties. Even Helen, the famous legendary cause of the war, has no personal responsibility for what is happening. King Priam, who knows better than anyone what this war is costing in human terms, expressly states that she bears no blame (in his remarks at 3.178).

Extraordinary conduct on the battlefield also has a divine cause. The gods can interfere to invest a warrior with unusually heroic powers, temporarily transforming a heroic leader, one among many, into an invincible fighter. In such cases, the action of the god occurs simply because he or she has an immediate desire to assist this individual. In this, as in so much of the poem, the treatment of Diomedes provides an excellent example:

> Then Pallas Athena gave Diomedes, son of Tydeus,
> strength and courage, so among all Argives,
> he'd stand out and win heroic glory.
> She made his helmet blaze with tireless flames,
> his shield as well—like a late star in summer
> which shines especially bright, newly risen from its bath
> in Ocean's streams. Around his head and shoulders
> the goddess put a fiery glow, then drove him forward,
> right into the middle of the strife, the killing zone,
> where most warriors fight. (5.1) [5.1]

In the fighting which follows Diomedes enjoys an unusual series of personal victories over his opponents. Athena helps him recover from an arrow wound and fires his spirit for even more combat, in which for a while he appears to be invincible. His opponents acknowledge that his extraordinary success must be the result of divine assistance:

> "But if he's the man
> I think he is, the fierce son of Tydeus,
> he could not be charging at us in this way
> without help from some god beside him,
> an immortal with a covering cloud
> around his shoulders, the god who pushed aside
> that sharp arrow which struck Diomedes." (5.212) [5.185]

The inspired hero sustains his battlefield charge, even challenging and wounding Aphrodite, until he reaches the limit of his human powers by confronting Ares. At that point, Diomedes goes no further and rejoins the Achaean forces as the normal warrior leader he was before. This moment in the poem gives us our first extended look at a recurring phenomenon in the poem, the *aristeia*, when a particular warrior, with the help of a god, is transformed from a leader among men to an extraordinarily successful battlefield hero. In the *aristeia* the warrior's normal appearance and behaviour change. He becomes abnormally ferocious, courageous, beautiful, and successful, all with the help of a god. In precisely the same way, the gods can fill a character with erotic passion and change him or her into a supremely desirable love partner. Helen has no power to resist the demands of Aphrodite, any more than Paris can resist the divinely inspired erotic impulse to make love to Helen. Questions about whether they ought to surrender to sexual passion while the Trojans perish in defense of the city simply do not make sense.

The people in this world thus have a fatalistic sense of their own behaviour. The ironic forces which govern the world play a decisive role in how they understand themselves. As many writers have observed, we are dealing with people who do not think of the inner life in the way we normally do. They lack an inner moral consciousness or sense of responsibility which might enable them to reflect, evaluate, and decide what to do. Instead they respond directly to the immediate situation they find themselves in or, in unusual situations, under the impulse of divine forces coming from outside. This lack of self-consciousness, a preoccupation with some inner individuality which lies at the heart of our evaluations of people, may be one reason why characters in the *Iliad* all seem very similar in some essential ways. Some are bigger or stronger or more beautiful, some have gray hair or red hair, some are young men, others mature leaders, and so on, but they differ little from each other in any significant inner qualities, and thus we cannot easily make the usual distinctions among them.

Of course, we do get some sense of difference from time to time. Many readers, for example, have reservations about Agamemnon's conduct in certain places and prefer Hector and (perhaps) Menelaus (who at times seems a favourite of the narrator's). But for the most part, characters differ little from each other in the way they think or act. If one were casting a film of the *Iliad*, what significant criteria could one use, apart from age and the occasional hints we get about external appearance, to distinguish among, say, Antenor, Sarpedon, Diomedes, Glaucus, Meriones, Hector, Menelaus, or even Odysseus? Fine inner distinctions would be impossible because our evaluation of these warriors does not arise from any intimate feeling for their moral qualities in a conventional sense, which they do not possess, or from any significant differences in their individual sensibilities but rather from our response to their actions, which are all very similar, the major difference being one of degree. As Erich Auerbach points out in his famous essay on Homer's style, the characters are all basically the same (10). For in the *Iliad*, the main emphasis always falls, not on significant inner differences among human beings, but on the fatal situation common to them all and their responses to it:

> "Friends, whether you're an Achaean leader,
> or average, or one of the worst—for men
> are not all equal when it comes to battle—

there's enough work here for everyone,
as you yourselves well know." (12.289) [12.269]

If this form of thinking seems odd, it shouldn't, because anyone who watches professional team sports or who plays team sports should recognize an immediate similarity between how we evaluate players or fellow team mates or ourselves in the course of a game and how these warriors think. When we use the terms good and bad to describe players in such situations, we are not referring to any particular inner moral qualities, as we are at other times. Our evaluations are based on the actions they perform in a strenuous team enterprise where they are not free to break the basic rules. That's why it's always such a shock to see a great player demonstrate outside the game that he may be a bad person (e.g., a murderer, abuser, drug addict, and so on). And when one is playing a strenuous team game, one does not experience an inner life of deliberation, reflection, or mental agonizing—one's character is, as the saying goes, "into the game," rather than inside one's head, so one is "thinking" (if that is the right word) more intellectually, as these heroes do, in one's chest and heart. That, indeed, is one of the great attractions of team sports (more about this later in the next essay on the heroic code).[3]

Beyond the world of team games, virtually all of us have experienced a sense of acting without reflection, or carrying out something remarkably good or foolish under a sudden impulse, so that when we look back on what we have done, we talk about being inspired, deluded, or compelled to do the act, especially if it falls outside our normal behaviour. The literature of warfare, in particular, offers countless examples of extraordinary conduct the front lines—heroism, cowardice, loyalty, atrocity—for which the agents have no reasonable explanation. Few things are more painful for us than putting one of our combat soldiers on trial after the fact for acts committed in the killing zone. For in such cases, we are demanding a rational moral evaluation of conduct obviously originating from sources beyond the reach of our most fundamental metaphors of how the mind operates.

---

[3] This analogy to sports might be developed to illustrate this point further. If one were casting a film of the Iliad from NBA basketball players, who would one choose? Well, I think there are only two obvious candidates, Shaquille O'Neal as Ajax (because of his size) and Michael Jordan as Achilles (because of his acknowledged pre-eminence). But any number of players would fit, say, the roles of Diomedes, Sarpedon, Hector, Paris, and so on.

Our traditional theories of the mind may inform us that irrational motive forces come from within according to some as yet unknown interaction between the mind and the body, but our common language often suggests otherwise. We still talk of artists being inspired by the muses, of athletes have God in their corner, of gamblers escorting Lady Luck, and so on. Some people find it curious that so many football players in America kneel and cross themselves when they score a touchdown. But there's nothing particularly odd about it. The player is acknowledging the assistance of some outside power in making him successful at that moment. Some fifty years ago or so the television comedian Flip Wilson became famous for his slogan "The Devil made me do it!" We laughed at the excuse, but we recognized exactly what he meant.

The Homeric vision of human motivation also bears some similarity to the behaviour of children and adolescents, who tend to respond spontaneously to an impulse from whatever quarter and often find themselves quite unable to explain why they acted in a certain way (much to the frustration of parents). Here the agent has no consciousness of an inner motive, for the action was an immediate response to an irresistible urge for which he or she feels no personal responsibility, since it did not arise out of a process of mental deliberation. Parents and teachers spend many years teaching the child the notion of the responsible self, the idea that we all have an inner consciousness that directs our actions and that makes us personally accountable for what we do. The lesson usually takes hold very slowly, for there is a natural resistance to this modern metaphor for the mind. If the child does not learn the lesson, however, he can have great trouble functioning in modern society, which bases it social relationships on well-controlled lies and delayed emotional responses, its educational, legal, and moral systems on the concepts of personal responsibility, guilt, and individual self-consciousness, and its politics on the survival values of deceit.

The analogy between the impulsive, non-conscious behaviour of the Homeric warriors and the actions of children may explain why so many readers of the *Iliad* find something childlike and immature in the actions of these characters. The warriors are so impulsive and so immediately candid about their feelings about themselves and others, without the guile we often associate with maturity. No human being in the *Iliad* intentionally tells a successful lie. That would require a consciousness, an inner awareness of the difference between the

spoken words and the truth. No one has any inner secrets. The closest we come to any form of double-dealing is Odysseus's treatment of Dolon in Book 10 or Hector's momentary thought of breaking the heroic code in Book 22. The characters in the *Iliad* do not engage in deception, not even in those tricks common to warfare. They cannot even carry out one of the most important early lessons we teach our children, the delayed emotional response. Achilles's restraint in not physically attacking Agamemnon in Book 1 is so extraordinary that it must be god-inspired. There is no room in this poem for celebrated sly resourcefulness and duplicity of Odysseus in the *Odyssey*, because what people in the *Iliad* say and what they do are spontaneous responses to their immediate feelings. Those who see Odysseus in the *Iliad* has having the same comic resourcefulness he displays in the Odyssey (e.g., Whitman 176) surely overlook the fact that Odysseus acts throughout as a loyal and inflexible apologist for the warrior ethic, energetically and openly correcting the objections of Thersites (in Book 2) and countering the doubts of Agamemnon (in Book 14) and even his own doubts (in Book 11). Homer uses his characterization of Odysseus, famous in legend from the days of Homer's audience to the present as a tricky, ingeniously deceptive liar, to emphasize through the ironic contradictions between his reputation and his actions in this war and the absence of such qualities in Iliadic society.[4]

To describe the warriors' actions and their understanding of themselves as immature or childish, however, sounds unnecessarily pejorative. Their conduct may seem to us very odd in some respects, not because we have outgrown it, but rather because we employ a different metaphor for understanding human behaviour. We do not think in our chests or in our hearts (a significant and recurring image throughout the poem), but in our minds, or at least that's how we like to think the process works. But it takes no great leap of the imagination to sense within ourselves a response to life similar to the Homeric vision, and there is certainly plenty of evidence that when we have to deal with a significant emotional state like love, war, or team sports, we quickly revert to a faith in outside forces at work all around us. Reading the *Iliad* can thus remind us of an understanding

[4] Homer uses the same technique in the *Odyssey* in his portrayal of Achilles, in the scene (in Book 11) where the greatest of all the heroic warriors repudiates the warrior ethic, claiming that life as a lowly farm hand is preferable to the price the warrior pays for his greatness. This comment derives its telling force from the person who utters such anti-Iliadic sentiments.

of human nature quite foreign to our orthodox ways of analyzing our conduct, but familiar enough if we set those temporarily aside and consult our feelings about ourselves.[5]

In any event, the images of divine intervention in significant matters of human behaviour bring out how these warriors must constantly respond to emotional forces induced by irrational and irresistible gods. Hence, their very personalities are part of a natural world governed by conflict. The men succeed and fail, triumph and suffer, in a fatalistic world from which conventional notions of moral justice have been excluded because they are inconceivable. Without the divine promise in a covenant or some guiding moral principles or a rational hope for progress, justice is the given irrationality of things. Without self-consciousness there is no sin or guilt, only actions more or less under the influence of external divine agents. None of this means, as we shall see in the next essay, that the warrior is a mere automaton, a limp feather to be blown around by divine whims. For he has the freedom and the will to assert himself in the face of this paradoxical destiny.

> With Homer there is no marvelling or blaming. Who is good in the Iliad? Who is bad? Such distinctions do not exist; there are only men suffering, warriors fighting some winning, some losing. The passion for justice emerges only in a mourning for justice in the dumb avowal of silence. To condemn force, or absolve it, would be to condemn, or absolve, life itself. (Bespaloff 48)

[5] On a personal note, let me state here one of the great "lessons" I have learned from Homer's *Iliad*, the inadequacy of "guilt" as a concept leading to an understanding of myself. In the course of my life I have done many very silly things, and I have recognized a responsibility for doing something about cleaning up the resulting mess. But I have never felt the slightest bit guilty, when it was clear to me I acted under the influence of a sudden irresistible force which, as far as I could tell, acted from outside myself. That has always struck me as a much healthier mental attitude than endless self-recrimination and an inner awareness of my personal "sins."

ESSAY FOUR
THE HEROIC CODE

The way the warriors behave in the *Iliad* stems directly from what they believe about the world and their place in it. They are, to paraphrase a line from George Grant, imitating in action their vision of the nature of things. And we cannot reach any useful understanding of them (let alone make value judgments about them) without exploring how their conduct arises out of how they see the world.

To start with, we might notice that these warriors have not embraced war unequivocally. Many of them express a wish for a world without warfare or, at any rate, a different arrangement where they do not have to kill others and then, in their turn, die on the battlefield. But there is no altering the given conditions of the world. There is no safe haven they can retreat to, because conflict exists everywhere, a final death is inevitable, and warfare has been established by the divine will. Since they have no option, they accept their condition with a grim candour:

> "Oh Father Zeus, people say for wisdom
> you exceed all others, men and gods alike.
> Yet all this comes from you. . . ." (13.744) [13.631]

> "Zeus sees to it that from our youthful days
> to our old age we must grind away
> at wretched war, till, one by one, we die." (14.104) [14.631]

Even the most famous evocation of the warrior's faith, the speech of Sarpedon to Glaucus, makes the point that the glories of the warrior life would not be worth it if human beings had a way of escaping fate:

> "Ah my friend, if we could escape this war,
> and live forever, without growing old,
> if we were ageless, then I'd not fight on
> in the foremost ranks, nor would I send you
> to those wars where men win glory. But now,
> a thousand shapes of fatal death confront us,
> which no mortal man can flee from or avoid.
> So let's go forward, to give the glory
> to another man or win it for ourselves." (12.347) [12.321]

If life were not life, Sarpedon asserts, he would not fight. Whatever pride he takes in his achievements and standing as a mighty leader, Sarpedon can imagine how much finer human existence would be if the universal conditions were different.

Similarly, the eagerness with which the soldiers stream to the ships under the mistaken impression they are going home (in Book 2) indicates that, whatever is keeping the armies in front of Troy, it is not an unalloyed pleasure in the fighting. Both sides share an equally intense desire for peace:

> Then every Trojan and Achaean held up his hands,
> praying to the gods:
>
> > "Father Zeus, ruling from mount Ida,
> > mighty, all-powerful, of these two men,
> > let the one who brought this war to both sides
> > be killed and then go down to Hades' house.
> > And grant our oath of friendship will hold firm." (3.355) [3.318]

In their hearts, the men might desire a cessation of combat and a binding friendship on all parties, but any attempt to bring that about, like the truce in Book 4, is doomed to failure, because such attempts contradict the given conditions of the world.

To understand the warrior code, the rules by which these men live, we need to recognize it as a response to what they see as the inescapable, perilous, fated condition of human life. The only certainties are constant strife and inevitable death. Turning one's back on the endeavour or trying to walk away from the fighting group simply guarantees that death will come sooner rather than later. Those who run get a spear in the back.

The warriors' sense of their fatal condition expresses itself in their religious attitudes. They diligently worship gods who will, they know, keep the war going forever (here at Troy or elsewhere) and destroy each man in his turn, no matter how he behaves. Such piety demands an extraordinarily tough acceptance of a harsh, unreasonable fate, and all the characters in the *Iliad* have the courage and will to believe in and to celebrate that faith (what *Nietzsche in the Birth of Tragedy* calls the "pessimism of the strong"). They approach their gods with a clear idea of what life has in store for them. Their prayers and formulaic oaths express an acute sense of the individual warrior's chances in

this unchanging situation: if he honours the gods, they may help him on this occasion. A prayer for divine help may be answered.

This stance is not like Pascal's wager that, since we do not know whether there is life of rewards and punishments after death or not, we had better accept belief as the more prudent option. These warriors know they have nothing special to win from the gods in a later life. Their attitude expresses rather a hard, open-eyed acceptance of the fatal reality of life on its own terms. Hence, military disaster, the clearest sign that the divine rulers are not heedful of the warrior's prayers, does not shake their faith in the gods, who have on this occasion disappointed their hopes. When the Trojans triumph over the Achaeans, Agamemnon does not question his earlier sacrifices. He accepts the fact that on this day "Zeus' mind has changed./ His heart prefers Hector's sacrifices" (10.50). Perhaps tomorrow Zeus will distribute his favours differently, and perhaps not.

With this awareness of his common fate, the Homeric warrior chooses to live as fully as he can, to stand up in the front lines celebrating his individual ability to confront his inevitable destiny as fearlessly and successfully as he can for as long as he lasts. Since there is no escape from war and death, he will impose his own presence on the battle, declaring by his brave stance that he counts for something. Unlike so many fighters from later ages, the Homeric warrior does not risk his life for a political or religious cause. He is not seeking to extend the power of any particular side. Even the oath to Agamemnon matters less than the individual's sense of his own stature which he can protect and enhance only by standing in the front lines alongside his companions against the best and the bravest opponents.

> "Don't you hear frenzied Hector encouraging
> his men. He's frantic now to burn the ships.
> He's inviting them to fight, not to a dance.
> For us there's no better choice or tactic
> than to bring our arms and warrior strength,
> against them in combat hand to hand.
> It's better to settle this once and for all—
> whether we live or die—than be hemmed in,
> fighting a long grim battle, as we are now,
> among our ships against inferior men." (15.596) [15.508]

Those who survive to reach old age are, paradoxically, unfortunate, because they cannot share the fighting stature of the younger warriors (unless, like Nestor, they are still capable of participating in battle). They win no further glory, since they lack the strength to resist and thus become mere victims of war, unable to assert themselves against the fatal conditions closing in around them, as Priam observes:

> "When a young man dies in war,
> lying there murdered by sharp bronze, that's all right.
> Though dead, he shows us his nobility.
> But when the dogs disfigure shamefully
> an old man, chewing his gray head, his beard,
> his sexual organs, that's the saddest thing
> we wretched mortals see." (22.90) [22.71]

Thus, the warrior fights because in an irrational, hostile universe he wants his life to mean something, to have value, to earn respect. If he cannot establish his worth as an individual, the only alternative is to accept the passive anonymity of the non-combatant. In that sense, the men do have a choice, as Achilles does, for example. But if they want to confer some significance on their lives under these conditions, then they must go to war. The men who paid money to avoid the war are denied the chance to prove their human value. The Achaean Euchenor is told he could go to war and die or else stay at home and suffer from a long and eventually fatal sickness (13.786). He goes to war and is killed by Paris, thus avoiding the fine and the illness at home. These penalties are not just a financial loss and a physical ailment, but the spiritual sickness of anonymity and worthlessness in a world where one's value emerges only in battle. The warrior does not wish to die. He would prefer an existence where he could escape that unwelcome fate, especially since death is final, the end of everything. But, like all men, he wants his life to have some purpose and to be recognized as having an enduring value. And if he must risk violent death in order to achieve that, then he will live as gloriously as he can, even if such conduct leads to death more quickly than does inaction at home.

> Even though life is transient—in part because it is so—one may give it the permanence of renown. And the static quality of the chief characters is a way of showing that if a man is to achieve this immortality he must choose one course of action rather than another.Through his choice, of course, he gives up the infinite possibility on which the characters of Hamlet or Prufrock are

> based; he renounces it in order to wrest something from the finite and actual which will not be merely fleeting. The result for the *Iliad* is, if we consider this one quality apart from the rest of the poem a simple concept of character. But far more significantly the result is a "placing" of man, a showing of the way in which his glory and his limitations combine. (Knight 37)

Thus, the social group in the *Iliad* commits itself to the search for value through individual achievement in battle. What a warrior can win in combat defines his worth to the group and, beyond that, to the irrational universe. By demonstrating his superiority over other men in the front lines, in the supreme test of hand-to-hand fighting, the warrior gives his individual existence value and purpose and confirms in his own eyes that his life has a significance, for only in that way can he acquire what openly displays his worth to others and to himself, his public status, a preoccupation with which governs his every action. His value to his peers and his sense of himself are based on his ability to carry out the actions required in warfare, and that depends not simply on god-given physical attributes but also upon the number of soldiers he leads, his past successes, his family's reputation, the quantity and quality of his weapons (many captured from fallen enemies), the publicly acknowledged factors which announce the esteem in which his comrades and his enemies hold him.

The social group organizes and controls the behaviour of the fiercely individualistic warriors through the conventions of status. In fact, their resolution in the most stressful moments, when the danger is fiercest, is bolstered by reminders that what is on the line here, as always, is their publicly acknowledged value:

> "Friends, be men. Let sense of shame from all men
> fill your hearts. Remember, each of you,
> your children, wives, possessions, and your parents—
> whether alive or dead. They're not here,
> but, on their behalf, I beg you to stand firm.
> Don't let yourselves turn round and run away." (15.769) [15.661]

Nestor here makes no appeals to their safety or to the justice of their cause or their promise to Agamemnon, no reminders of how nasty the Trojans can be, no references to a glorious fatherland or a splendid afterlife, none of the traditional appeals generals make to their troops. He reminds the men of who they are and exhorts them

to live up to the status they have acquired, their standing in the eyes of the world. For Nestor, the most experienced warrior leader in the army, understands that in an undertaking as metaphysically irrational and as emotionally and physically demanding as warfare, the fighter's principal motivation comes from a desire to maintain or increase his value in the eyes of the group (and from an equally strong desire not to forfeit his reputation). Without that motivation, he could not face the terror.

Obviously, such an emphasis on status requires a shared belief system, so that the warriors instantly agree on what confers or detracts from an individual's status and can resolve any disputes within the context of that system. And the relative ranking of each man is a matter of public consensus. In seeking to arbitrate the initial quarrel, for example, Nestor admits that the gods have given Achilles a military prowess greater than Agamemnon's, but he urges Achilles to follow the king's orders because Agamemnon leads more troops (1.310). Nireus may be the most beautiful leader after Achilles, but he is relatively feeble because he has few soldiers with him (2.748). The potentially dangerous dispute in the results of the chariot race are quickly resolved by Antilochus's open recognition that Menelaus has a higher status than he does. Once that point is publicly acknowledged, Menelaus can generously return the favour by paying tribute to Antilochus's value and giving him the prize (23.748). As we shall see in a later essay, one measure of the extraordinary experience Achilles is going through emerges from his refusal to abide by the customary rules of status, when he rejects Agamemnon's magnificent offer in Book 9. Such behaviour is unheard of.

The demands of the group also require that a warrior never stray too far from his peers, for status (and its converse, shame) can only be conferred if the actions are observed by others. In this society, a warrior's sense of identity and of his relationship to others is derived from the group, which is always observing and remembering his actions. It's significant that the most important breach of the warrior code, Hector's panic and attempt to flee, occurs when he is alone and that he recovers as soon as he thinks he has someone alongside him. The fact that conventions of status can only operate within a common group indicates the importance of mass displays. Only in a public show can this society affirm the importance of what it is doing, reassure individuals of their places within it, and overcome any doubts about their common enterprise. The famous parade of the

different contingents (in Book 2), which originates in a suggestion from Nestor about how to deal with the crisis in morale among Achaean troops, serves not only to list the participants, but also to demonstrate in public the group's solidarity at a difficult time. In addition, it reminds everyone of the relative ranking of the more important leaders. The frequent religious rituals, prayers, and assemblies, even the funeral games, have the same purpose: they assert the communal identity and provide an opportunity for each warrior to confirm and celebrate his own worth, to recognize in public the status of each of his comrades and, in turn, to be recognized by them.

This feature of the *Iliad* stands in contrast to the *Odyssey*, in which, for all the continuing emphasis on status, a great many group activities, particularly the feasting and entertainment, celebrate the joys of social interaction for its own sake and where the identity of each person is often less important than the conventions of civilized hospitality. The name and status of a guest, for example, can emerge during the leisurely social event rather than (as in the *Iliad*) being proudly declared at the outset of an encounter. In the *Odyssey*, the hero is willing to conceal or lie about his status as an appropriate stratagem or patiently endure insults and physical abuse from his inferiors, so as to win out in the end. In the *Iliad* candid public assertions of status are the constant preoccupation of the warrior's life, so that when he moves from the assembly and the parade, when the time for action arrives, his sense of himself as a valuable person and his awareness of how others see him sustain him during the perilous fighting.[6]

> "Glaucus,
> why are we two awarded special honours,
> with pride of place, the finest cuts of meat,
> our wine cups always full in Lycia,
> where all our people look on us as gods?
> Why do we possess so much fine property,
> by the river Xanthus, beside its banks,
> rich vineyards and wheat-bearing ploughland?
> It's so we'll stand in the Lycian front ranks

[6] I don't mean to suggest with these remarks that Odysseus's sense of status in the *Odyssey* is not of enormous importance to him. Obviously, that is a major concern of his and one of the reasons he repeatedly gets into trouble (out of a desire to enhance his reputation by making himself known throughout the world). But the competition for status is not so insistently present in *Odyssey*, and the hero's attitude towards it is a good deal more flexible than that of the characters in the *Iliad*.

> and meet head on the blazing fires of battle,
> so then some well-armed Lycian will say,
> 'They're not unworthy, those men who rule Lycia,
> those kings of ours. It's true they eat plump sheep
> and drink the best sweet wines—but they are strong,
> fine men, who fight in the Lycians' front ranks.' . . ." (12.332) [12.310]

In this well-known speech, Sarpedon pays tribute to the fact that the entire structure of his society, the only one available to him and Glaucus, rests on the warrior code. He is the product of that society, proud of his status within it and willing to live up to its personal and social ideals. However much he might prefer a less strenuous and dangerous life where he does not have to die in action, he does not question what this code requires of him. The attractions of life at home do not tempt him to waver, because the quality of his life there depends upon his status as a celebrated fighter in the front lines.

The *Iliad* repeatedly makes clear, however, that the faith in this code, although common to all the leaders, is a tense affirmation of a sometimes fragile order and that close beneath this tough creed lurks the chaos of a world from which social order or a sense of personal identity has disappeared completely. Agamemnon's apparent denial of the traditional code precipitates an instant disintegration of the army (in Book 2), and the structure of the group, apparently so solid, well disciplined, and ancient, immediately turns to wild disorder. And when Hector, just before his death, momentarily loses faith in the warrior code, he can no longer control his terror and runs away in an absurd panic (in Book 22). Moments such as these help us recognize that the warrior code, like all significant systems of belief, is not a complacent faith in comforting axioms but a challenging, tense, and sometimes vulnerable way of creating worthy purpose in human life, where without such faith human existence would be pointless.

The group code establishes certain conventions in the fighting. Even the fiercest combat, for all the animal frenzy it unleashes, follows a certain traditional pattern (except for Achilles' *aristeia*, which, as we shall see, falls outside the norm). The warrior typically begins by selecting an opponent and declaring his identity to his enemy, announcing his worth by describing his family or past achievements or both. The ensuing fight is almost always a personal one, involving two named warriors, and with those of highest worth, it takes place at close quarters (hence, the contempt which spearmen sometimes

express for archers, who fight from a distance). When a warrior falls, another takes his place, seeking to recover the body and to prevent the enemy from obtaining the weapons and armour of the dead man. Losing the fallen comrade and his gear brings dishonour on the group, and securing the weapons and armour from a fallen enemy brings high status. Frequently, a warrior will gloat over an enemy he has killed or a spear that has missed. A defeated warrior may offer to pay ransom, and certain characters have in earlier times escaped death in this way. The victor makes the decision however, and in the battles around Troy, the offer is customarily refused. In some instances a warrior may decline to fight, as Diomedes does, on the ground that he and his family enjoy a special relationship with the family of his opponent. The heroic code thus makes very specific demands, and each leader knows what he must do in any particular situation.

We should note that the heroic code does not demand suicidal bravery. Under certain conditions a warrior may withdraw from a fight against impossible odds or against an opponent whom a god is obviously favouring.

> "My friends, we're so amazed prince Hector
> is such a spearman, so courageous, warlike.
> But he's always got some god beside him,
> to ward off destruction. Right now, it's Ares
> he's has with him, looking like a mortal man.
> Stay turned towards the Trojans, but fall back.
> Don't try to fight it out with gods." (5.705) [5.601]

To run from battle brings disgrace, but an orderly retreat in the face of a divinely inspired enemy makes good sense. No normal man has to fight against the gods. This option provides those rare moments when a warrior has to ponder a choice: Should he stay in the front-line or move back? Typically, he has to weigh the demands of the group against the power of what he is confronting. Sometimes, as in the above example, he invokes the gods to justify an orderly retreat. At other times, his sense of personal honour keeps him where he is:

> Now famous spearman Odysseus was left alone
> no Achaean there beside him, for fear gripped them all.
> Greatly troubled, he spoke to his proud heart:
>
> > "Here's trouble. What's going to happen to me?
> > If I run away from this crowd in fear,

> I'll be badly shamed. But to be trapped here,
> all alone, that could be worse. For Cronos' son
> has made the rest of the Danaans flee.
> But why's my fond heart arguing all this?
> I know that those who leave a fight are cowards.
> The man who wants to fight courageously
> must stand his ground with force, whether he's hit,
> or whether his blows strike the other man." (11.457) [11.404]

In this case, Odysseus determines that he has more to lose by retreating than by staying, so he fights on. A little later, he is wounded and retires from the battle, for the code does not require injured men to remain at the front lines. Thus, the unwritten but well-understood rules of warrior conduct are flexible enough to provide a range of limited options, but firm enough so that the warrior does not have to deliberate at length about what to do.

If the quest for status establishes the group's shared values and channels the fighting energies in a single direction, the desire to avoid a loss of status makes doubly sure that no one contravenes the code. For the greatest harm that can occur to a particular warrior is shame, the community's public recognition that he has let the group down or failed to live up to its shared rules. The initial argument between Agamemnon and Achilles arises over a question of status and shame. Briseis herself is of relatively little importance. What really matters is the recognition of worth which possession of her as a prize won in battle confers and the shame which will come with a public loss of what she represents. In openly depriving Achilles of a military honour, Agamemnon shames Achilles so much that the latter withdraws from the fighting. The personal insult outweighs any sense of responsibility to a common cause. No one questions the appropriateness of Achilles's actions. Nestor tries to persuade him to return by appealing to the code, but acknowledges that Agamemnon is acting improperly. Later, of course, Agamemnon tries to win Achilles back with a huge catalogue of gifts worth a great deal more than what he took from Achilles in the first place. The fact that Achilles is unwilling to settle their quarrel on those terms indicates just how far he has by then moved away from the normal practices of the group.

Throughout the poem we witness repeatedly the warriors' preoccupation with avoiding shame. When Nestor wants the Achaeans to volunteer to fight Hector, an obviously unwelcome

assignment, which no one is immediately eager to undertake, he so shames his colleagues, characteristically recalling his past exploits, that several leaders quickly step forward (in Book 7). As is commonly observed, the Greek word *nemesis*, which we associate with divine retribution, a principle of cosmic justice, in the *Iliad* means *shame*, the social punishment for failing to live up to the standards established by the group. And nemesis in this latter sense exercises a decisive control over the warriors, "the strongest moral force which Homeric man knows is not fear of the gods, but respect for public opinion. . . ." (Dodds 18). Just how powerful this force can be we see near the climax of the final battle between Achilles and Hector, when Hector finds himself stranded outside the city and has to decide whether to stand and fight Achilles or move back into the safety of the city.

> "What do I do?
> If I go through the gates, inside that wall,
> Polydamas will be the first to blame me,
> for he told me last night to lead the Trojans
> back into the city, when many died,
> once godlike Achilles joined the fight.
> But I didn't listen. If I'd done so,
> things would have been much better. As it is,
> my own foolishness has wiped out our army.
> Trojan men will make me feel ashamed—
> so will Trojan women in their trailing gowns.
> I'm afraid someone inferior to me
> may say, 'Hector, trusting his own power,
> destroyed his people.' That's what they'll say.
> For me it would be a great deal better
> to meet Achilles man to man, kill him,
> and go home, or get killed before the city,
> dying in glory. (22.122) [22.99]

The dramatic moments leading up to this crisis show us that Hector has every possible reason to retreat into the city. He's alone and has just witnessed the rout of his soldiers. His aged parents, Priam and Hecuba, have made the most urgent and pathetic appeals to him from the walls, in the name of the citizens and the safety of Troy. And Achilles, we know, is on a murderous rampage. Moreover, we have earlier seen Hector as a loving husband and parent, so we understand well what he risks if he stays to confront Achilles. But none of these factors is sufficiently persuasive to overcome his fear of what people with think of him if he declines to fight.

This incident raises the question of the relationship between shame and the actions caused by divine interference. If Agamemnon can invoke the goddess Folly to escape the shame his countrymen might direct against him for his treatment of Achilles, and if other warriors can draw back against impossible odds because the gods are assisting their opponents, why cannot Hector do that here? There is no absolutely clear answer to that, except to observe that shame applies to conduct which falls within the normal business of the war, that is, to lapses from habitual behaviour. The appeal to divine interference applies only to extraordinary circumstances. Hector will be shamed here because, in the course of a battle, he has pushed his quest for glory too far, violating the prudence that warriors sometimes require and overlooking the urgent advice of his comrade Polydamas. Moreover, if he refuses to face Achilles, he will contravene the most basic tenet of the heroic code—personal courage in individual hand-to-hand combat. He will be running away from an encounter that many other Trojans, lesser men than he, have already had the courage to undertake. Hector can hardly refuse, in the name of prudence or divine interference, to risk his life, as they did.

The poem provides some insight into the relationship between nemesis and prudence in the conversation between Nestor and Diomedes in Book 8. In the midst of battle, Nestor urges retreat, citing the usual reason:

> "Son of Tydeus,
> wheel your sure-footed horses round. Go back.
> Don't you see Zeus is not protecting you?
> Today the son of Cronos grants Hector glory.
> Tomorrow he'll give victory to us,
> if that's his will. No man stops Zeus' plans,
> no one, not even the most mighty warrior.
> For Zeus' force is more powerful by far." (8.159) [8.139]

Diomedes, more impetuous and less experienced than Nestor, has doubts about what people will think if he retreats. He does not wish to risk being shamed:

> "Everything you say, old man, is true enough.
> But this brings fearful pain into my heart and chest.
> For Hector then will speak out in Troy.
> He'll say, 'The son of Tydeus, in fear of me,

scurried off, back to his ships.' That's what he'll boast.
Then let the wide earth open up for me." (8.168) [8.146]

Nestor reminds Diomedes that, having done his best, he has nothing fear from later talk of disgrace by moving back from impossible odds:

"Son of fiery-hearted Tydeus, why talk like that?
Even if he slanders you and calls you coward,
he'll not convince the the Trojans or Dardanians,
or Trojan wives, married partners of brave men
you've thrown into the dirt, still in their prime." (8.175) [8.152]

This exchange clarifies the code somewhat. A commitment to glory has its limits. One does not challenge the gods, and they must be operating on behalf of one's enemies if one has done one's best and is still in dire peril. But Hector standing outside Troy does not have this option. Achilles is only one man, and Hector, for all his threats, has not faced him squarely yet. The code requires that Hector fight. In escaping the situation by moving inside, Hector would be contravening the ethic which has made him, according to Sarpedon's earlier observations to Glaucus, the most honoured of the Trojans.[7]

In his treatment of the warrior code, as with all aspects of the poem, Homer constantly reveals how the demands of the group expose the ironic contradictions of combat. For if the heroic code inspires men with courage, loyalty, and a constant striving for excellence in a dangerous enterprise, at the same time it stifles in men any latent desires to answer natural impulses which do not meet the often harsh, narrow rules of the group. When Menelaus, for example, is moved to spare the life of a defeated Trojan, Agamemnon points out in the most brutal terms that this battle has no room for mercy:

"Menelaus, you soft-hearted man,
why are you sparing men's lives like this?I
n your own home, Trojans treated you
exceptionally well, did they not?
So don't let any one of them evade
a terrible destruction at our hands—

[7] The apparent ambiguities of the code will be understandable enough to anyone who has played strenuous team sports, especially those which involve a lot of physical contact. In such events, there are moments when a player has to stand up and risk being seriously hurt, and there are moments when a prudent refusal is quite acceptable. This point is especially true for those sports where there are a lot of rowdy spectators.

not even the young child still carried I
n his mother's belly. Let no one escape.
Let everyone in Troy be slaughtered,
without pity, without leaving any trace." (6.63) [6.57]

And so Adrestus is slaughtered, in spite of his moving plea to Menelaus and the latter's agreement. Duty to the group does not permit an individual to answer to personal feelings beyond the limit set for appropriate behaviour on the battlefield, and on this occasion that does not include sparing anyone, for ransom or any other reason. And, as we have seen earlier, Homer typically places the killing of a particular warrior within the context of an absent family, thus reminding us what the warrior code costs, so that we are always aware of the ironic shadows cast by the quest for status in the fighting group. Thus, the human potential of each man, although superbly realized in some respects, is also enormously limited. The rules which establish and enhance a human being's value also annihilate the embodiment of those values—his own courage kills him.

The ironic combination of the highest forms of human excellence and utter destructiveness manifests itself also in the final goal the warrior sets for himself. For the greatest thing he can achieve is a glorious and lasting memory of his actions. Time will inevitably bring about his death in battle, but through his heroic fame his importance can live on in his family and community. And so the Iliadic warrior leader seeks as the highest purpose of his life not happiness or riches but enduring fame. From this arises the importance of the funeral ceremonies, above all the funeral mound, the lasting memorial for future generations, and of the stories of past heroes, whose achievements live on in the memories of these warriors and in the songs they listen to about past exploits. Helen observes that the only justification for the terrible suffering is the urge it fosters to keep the memories of great heroes alive: "Zeus gives us an evil fate,/ so we may be subjects for men's songs/ in generations yet to come" (6.442). The heroic code thus channels the vital energies of these men into the paradoxical search through killing and being killed in war for something that will transcend time. The warrior becomes most famous only when he has perished.[8]

[8] It may well be that we owe to these songs celebrating the dead heroes of the past the origin of tragic drama (a much disputed subject). The songs themselves would

> What [Homer] exalts and sanctifies is not the triumph of victorious force but man's energy in misfortune the dead warrior's beauty the glory of the sacrificed hero, the song of the poet in times to come—whatever defies fatality and rises superior to it, even in defeat. (Bespaloff 79)

No matter how paradoxical the ironies of the heroic code, the warriors' adherence to it is unambiguous. None of the leaders directs at the group ethic any overt criticism, and they can be very severe on a colleague who fails to live up to its demands, as Diomedes shows when he criticizes his superior, the commander-in-chief (in Book 9). Again and again, the reader sees in their actions, ambitions, and beliefs the complex irony of their lives, but the warriors accept the situation without question. Achilles, of course, becomes something of an exception because, in his isolation from the group, he acquires a new perspective on

the code and then, in his climactic *aristeia*, discovers for himself the inescapably self-destructive contradictions at the heart of it. But for the normal warrior leader, like Diomedes, Odysseus, Ajax, Sarpedon, and Idomeneus, the road to fame (and thus the purpose of life) always remains firmly inside the parameters set by the shared heroic code, and he thus remains unaware of the complexity of the experience in which he plays an integral part.

These ironic limitations of the heroic code become even more evident if we start examining the lives of the non-combatants: the women, children, and old men. Obviously these groups cannot compete for status in this society, unless, like Nestor, they can remain in the front lines. So they must derive their sense of worth from their relationship to a warrior as part of his identity. This is obvious enough from the depiction of women in the poem, many of whom are treated more or less as objects to be awarded to warriors as part of their status. The first prize in the wrestling match, for example, is a tripod worth twenty oxen, and the second prize is a woman skilled in handicrafts worth four oxen. Well, why not? The warrior needs a tripod to clean up after the battle. A gifted female artisan has far less use in warfare. Similarly, Agamemnon offers Teucer as a fitting

---

re-tell the hero's greatest exploits, culminating in his final battle. One can easily imagine such recitations developing into drama as soon as the leader of the chorus begins depicting the hero's actions, that is, once he becomes an actor impersonating the dead hero.

reward a tripod or chariot or a woman who will go to bed with him. In the *Iliad*, the realities of war shape human values, and those who cannot contribute directly to the war have a relatively low value compared with people or objects of direct military utility. These details stand in marked contrast to the *Odyssey*, where women, especially those gifted in art, music, and domestic life have a much higher esteem. For similar reasons, old men generally count for little if their days of fighting have passed. They have become like "cicadas perched up on a forest branch, chirping their soft, delicate sounds" (3.164), good for nothing but irrelevant chatter. Even Priam, king of Troy, acknowledges the pathetic weakness of the old. We are reminded again and again that this warrior life, for all the values it confers on certain human qualities, rigidly excludes many aspects of human experience.

One particularly eloquent moment in the poem reveals these contradictions in detail, that is, the meeting between Hector and Andromache and their son in Book 6. In fact, this extraordinary scene's major purpose is to expose the limitations of the warrior's creed. In response to Andromache's lament for the slaughter of her family and her plea to her one remaining protector, Hector outlines his understanding of the paradoxical code which requires him to fight on:

> "Wife,
> all this concerns me, too. But I'd be disgraced,
> dreadfully shamed among Trojan men
> and Trojan women in their trailing gowns,
> if I should, like a coward, slink away from war.
> My heart will never prompt me to do that,
> for I have learned always to be brave,
> to fight alongside Trojans at the front,
> striving to win fame for father and myself.
> My heart and mind know well the day is coming
> when sacred Ilion will be destroyed,
> along with Priam of the fine ash spear
> and Priam's people." (6.539) [5.440]

But Hector's awareness of the destruction of his people, all the more significant because we know Achilles will soon claim Hector as another victim, does not lead Hector to criticize the heroic code. So devoted is he to it, that in imagining the disaster which will overtake the city, he acknowledges that the most painful thought of all is the

knowledge that, even though he will be dead, his name will be shamed by the public humiliation of Andromache. His priority here echoes the reaction of Agamemnon earlier when he witnesses his brother's wound. For all his fraternal concern, Agamemnon's major worry is that his reputation will suffer if Menelaus dies.

Then Hector reaches for his son. The child, understandably terrified by the metallic figure of the armed warrior, wails in distress. In the most intimate domestic moment in the entire poem, both the parents find the child's response mildly comical and together they laugh in unison. Their mutual amusement at the cries of their baby son is understandable enough, but even here the affection of the moment has its complexities. For Hector armed, a man transformed into a metallic apparition ready to do battle, is a fearful sight, and the child's fright is a natural reaction. But to those who life is defined by the heroic code, both Hector and Andromache, the infant's distress is a source of amusement. It stems, in part, from the parents' complete acceptance of the normality of war and their lack of awareness of any alternative. Hence, being upset by the sight of a warrior is amusing.

Moments later, as he looks lovingly at his baby son, Hector's hopes for the lad's future confirm just how incapable he is of fully understanding the culture which has destroyed and will destroy so much human life, including his own:

> "Zeus, all you other gods,
> grant that this child, my son, may become,
> like me, pre-eminent among the Trojans,
> as strong and brave as me. Grant that he may rule
> Troy with strength. May people someday say,
> as he returns from war, 'This man is far better
> than his father.' May he carry back
> bloody spoils from his slaughtered enemy,
> making his mother's heart rejoice." (6.583) [6.476]

The speech presents quite impartially the ironies of the warrior's life. Hector and Andromache understand slaughter. They have seen and lamented its consequences, and they know it will overtake them and their fellow citizens sooner or later. Yet the only ambition Hector has for his son is a successful participation in the process that has exterminated or soon will exterminate all the child's immediate relatives. Some observers see a tension in Hector here ("Hector's loyalties are divided," Schein 174), but Hector's proud unambiguous

ambitions for himself and Astyanax reveal no conscious confusion or doubt on his part. However much Andromache weeps for the killing of her family and whatever Hector's pessimistic vision of the future, neither of them pushes their emotional attitude to a criticism of their way of life, in which their faith remains unwavering. The irony in the scene is all the more eloquent because of the genuine love we feel Hector and Andromache have for each other and their child and because we know what will happen to them all soon enough. That they should continue to accept their way of life without any critical sense of the destructive ironies at the heart of it reminds the reader all the more vividly of the complexity of the picture Homer is developing.

The way in which Hector's and Andromache's loving laughter directs a critical insight into the adequacy of the heroic code brings to mind other moments in the poem where the shared intimacy of mutual laughter in the midst of affectionate comradeship evokes an unmistakable irony. In Book 10, for example, after Odysseus and Diomedes carry out an extraordinarily bloody raid against the Trojan allies, an episode which Homer describes so as to bring out the utmost pathos and revulsion against slaughter, the book ends with general laughter at the expense of the enemy.

> "Brave Diomedes killed their master,
> along with all twelve of his companions,
> their finest men. There was a thirteenth killed,
> a spy we captured near the ships, sent there
> by Hector and the other haughty Trojans,
> to scout around our camp."
>
> Odysseus finished. Then he laughed with triumph,
> driving the sure-footed horses past the ditch.
> Other Achaeans came after him, rejoicing. (10.669) [10.559]

In the laughter of Odysseus and his comrades we recognize a natural reaction, but the reminder of the brutal killing of defenseless, sleeping soldiers and a helpless captive qualifies our assent. According to the warrior code, Odysseus and Diomedes have done well and are fully entitled to gloat. What in the scale of human values, we may wonder, has that exultation cost? Homer insists upon the question, but leaves the answer up to us.

The most celebrated moment of human laughter in the *Iliad* takes place in the incident with Thersites in Book 2. Here we must not let the literary descendants of the man, especially Shakespeare's portrayal of him, warp our judgment of what he actually says. For Thersites's objection to the entire enterprise, the only speech we have from a common soldier, deserves close attention:

> "Son of Atreus, what's your problem now?
> What are you missing? Your huts stuffed with bronze,
> plenty of choice women, too—all presents
> we Achaeans give you as our leader,
> whenever we ransack some city.
> Or are you in need of still more gold,
> a ransom fetched by some horse-taming Trojan
> for his son tied up and delivered here
> by me or by some other Achaean?
> Or do you want a young girl to stash away,
> so you can screw her all by yourself?
> It's just not fair that you, our leader,
> have botched things up so badly for us,
> Achaea's sons. But you men, you soldiers,
> cowardly comrades, disgraceful people,
> you're Achaean women, not warriors.
> Let's sail home in our ships, leave this man,
> our king, right here in Troy to enjoy his loot.
> That way he might come to recognize
> whether or not we're of some use to him." (2.261) [2.225]

The language may be colloquially rough, and Thersites may be the ugliest looking soldier on the expedition, but the speech calls into question the basic assumptions of the group in a manner unlike anything else in the poem. For Thersites is essentially challenging the value of the warrior code. He directs at it what we might call (stretching things a bit) a reasonable moral objection: Look here, this war is not fair to me and my fellow common soldiers, so why don't we all stop fighting and go home? Why should I keep risking my life to enrich these leaders? In his reply to Thersites, Odysseus does not even meet the objection on its own terms—perhaps because this concept of fairness is entirely alien to him or else because he recognizes only too clearly the dangers of engaging Thersites in an argument of this sort. Instead he berates Thersites verbally and attacks him physically until Thersites whimpers and cowers away from the blows. The soldiers then laugh at the sight of the "rabble rouser" in pain. Their reaction closes the group against Thersites and

confirms their adherence to the warrior code which he has just challenged. But the reader, standing outside the group, sees the ironic implications of "noble" Odysseus's response. In this way of life, there is no place for Thersites's way of thinking. To admit it would be to undermine the entire fabric of the society. My own sense is that Odysseus does not here display his legendary duplicity, concealing his appreciation for Thersites's thinking behind a necessary stratagem. As an orthodox warrior leader who subscribes to the conventional group belief, Odysseus does not even comprehend what Thersites means. Odysseus sees the objection as a challenge to Agamemnon's authority, which it is, and he acts accordingly. By making the soldiers laugh at the pain he is inflicting he, in effect, neutralizes that challenge.[9]

In his play *Comedians*, Trevor Griffiths calls attention to two common forms of the joke. The first confirms people's shared attitudes. The laughter expresses a group's response to what its member perceive as something outside themselves which they wish to exclude or distance themselves from. A joke releases any tension or unease they may feel about a challenge to their habitual ways of thinking and thus reinforces the limitations of the group's shared belief. The most common form of this sort of joke is something racist or sexist (many comedians, of course, get very rich on this form of humour). The second style of joke "has to do more than release tension, it has to liberate the will and the desire, it has to change the situation" (Griffiths 20). Such laughter educates the group into a new awareness of itself. The laughter of the men in the *Iliad*, and there is not very much, always belongs in the first category. It acts as a quick and often harsh confirmation of the community's standards at the expense of anyone who might threaten to open a momentary breach in the closed awareness of the group, and thus their humour possesses none of the educational effects of the type of laughter which transforms. As readers we probably don't find these incidents particularly funny, but we are not meant to. We can appreciate, however, how the

[9] Some commentators have drawn comparisons between Thersites' objection and the initial outburst of Achilles. So, for example, Whitman observes, "Few things are more subtle in the Iliad than the way in which this 'good-for-nothing,' the social and physical antitype of Achilles, reiterates the resentment of the hero. . . ." (16). The significant differences between the two episodes, however, should not be overlooked. Achilles's objection comes from a man who believes in the code and who has been rewarded handsomely by it. His faith in it fuels his anger at the loss of status, and his accusations, made in extreme fury, are not altogether justified (as we shall see in a later essay). Thersites's comments, on the other hand, come from someone with very little status, who is rejecting the code because it is inherently unfair to those who must risk the dangers without the concomitant rewards.

communal merriment exposes the limitation of the faith which enables these men to keep going.

One might note here the funny story Hephaestus tells against himself in order to deal with a potentially dangerous domestic moment on Olympus at the end of Book 1. The incident brings out the rich joys of the second type of comedy, which enables the joke teller to cope with strife through self-deprecating wit rather than through confrontation. But such humour is available only among the gods, for no warrior ever does what Hephaestus does here to "change the situation."

ESSAY FIVE
ARMS AND THE MEN

THE EMPHASIS ON MATERIALS OF WAR

In depicting the world of the warriors in the *Iliad*, Homer pays special attention to the objects of war, the material possessions inextricably bound up with the demands of the warrior's daily actions. And just as we derive significant insight into any culture by examining the artifacts that the people most value, so in the *Iliad* we are always discovering the ironies of war in the articles which the fighting men use and admire. Not surprisingly the cultural values of these prized objects evoke the same complex responses as the religious beliefs and the warrior code, according to which these men understand themselves and their world.

One notices from the start that the material world of the *Iliad* is remarkably narrow. Almost every object in the poem has a practical use in the war, and objects with no direct military function or with no bearing on the man's status as a warrior count for little and do not merit extended attention. As we have observed already, a copper cauldron has a value three times that of a woman skilled in crafts, because the soldier needs a good cauldron in his hut and because possession of extra cauldrons is a sign of his status. He does not require domestic fine arts. Readers who come to the *Iliad* with some experience of the *Odyssey* often remark upon the considerable difference in texture between the two poems. Much of that sense comes from the ways in which the *Odyssey* constantly celebrates beautiful objects and environments for their aesthetic value, for their capacity to inspire delight and wonder. The *Iliad* has little room for such a rich variety. In the world of peaceful, hospitable human civilization central to the *Odyssey*, the artistic magnificence of homes and the objects in them, just like the paradisal qualities of nature, bring into people's lives a vitally important aesthetic pleasure. So here we often find a wide variety of splendid articles that continually evoke from Odysseus or Telemachus a delight unconnected to any desire for status, and those responsible for producing such beauty deserve special praise. Hence the importance in the *Odyssey* of women skilled in crafts, of musicians and dancers, and of all the artistically gifted. Women in this world occupy an honoured place, because to a large extent they create and sustain the life which enables human beings to enjoy beautifully created works in their

splendid homes. And artists like Demodocus and Phemius, who would be quite useless on the battlefield, have a special prominence in the royal court. While the world of the *Iliad* also honours the creative skills of the artist, it has no room for art except as it serves to decorate the warrior's equipment or create objects relevant to the war effort.

In the *Iliad*, for example, we find no marked celebration of the aesthetic magnificence of Troy. We learn that it is a rich, powerful, well-built city and that Priam's palace is "splendid," with "fifty private bed rooms, all of polished rock" (6.308), but Homer spares us any further details. He concentrates instead on what matters most in this world: the battlefield exploits of the men who occupy the rooms and the weapons they and their enemies use to kill each other.[10] Nestor's humble field hut, a military installation, gets as much attention as Priam's royal apartments. Similarly, the poem rarely offers us a glimpse of objects or activities which do not have a direct bearing on the war. When Hector visits the women in Paris's house (in Book 6), the women are carrying out their "famous" handicrafts, but Homer's description draws our attention more emphatically to the really beautiful artistic creations here, Hector's huge spear and Paris's splendid armour.

The non-military objects which do matter are those which play some part in the warrior's status or which help to maintain the central fighting ethic of the group. Helen's weaving in Book 2 is important enough to dwell on because she is creating "pictures of the many battle scenes/ between horse-taming Trojans and bronze-clad Achaeans,/ wars they suffered for her sake at the hands of Ares" (3.141). The fine materials in Hecuba's wardrobe, some of the loot Paris brought home with him from Sparta, come to our attention because Hector needs a suitable war offering to Athena. Achilles has

[10] Seth L. Schein disagrees on this point: "The beauty and sophistication of the architecture, combined with Homer's emphasis on the sleeping arrangements of Priam's children and their spouses, show Troy to be a center of civilized refinement and domestic decorum" (170). It strikes me that these qualities Schein sees are conspicuously absent from this description and that if Homer had wished to insist on them (as he does in the *Odyssey*) we would read much more about such details, especially about their effect on people who look at them. Schein's comment, of course, is part of his attempt to insist that there an important cultural difference between the opponents, between, that is, "the masculine society of the Greek army" and the society in Troy, which honours "the distinct role and sphere of women" (173), in the service of his misleading but reassuring vision of the war as a moralized combat.

a wonderful lyre, which he plays to himself away from the battle (9.228). But the important point about the instrument is that it is a battle trophy and that it enables him to sing about "the celebrated deeds of men." The beautiful object matters because it sustains the spirit of the warrior, by enabling him to remember and enjoy his own battle exploits. The description of Nestor's cup (in Book 11) provides one possible exception to these observations, but even here the author draws our attention to how drinking from the magnificent vessel demonstrates Nestor's prowess, so that the notion of warrior status is not entirely absent.

In the same way, the *Iliad* pays relatively little attention to the daily needs of food or sleep. The meals are important chiefly as a preparation for battle or as a ritual maintaining the solidarity of the group. The warriors do not take a special delight in the feast for its own sake, as a joyous social communion with friends, a time to relax and enjoy the civilized pleasures associated with domestic banquets. There is none of that famous cozy human warmth of the *Odyssey*, the emphasis on beautiful manners, fine dishes, well-crafted chairs and footstools, wonderfully potent wine, musical entertainment, warm beds, and so on. When we do sense something like that emerging, as in the scene of Nestor's entertaining his friends (in Book 11), the demands of war, this time in the form of Patroclus, quickly interrupt the social gathering. Perhaps the closest we get to such a feeling of disinterested pleasure occurs near the end of Book 10:

> Then the two men waded
> into the sea, washed off their legs and necks and thighs,
> removing all the sweat. Once the surf had taken
> layers of sweat from off their skin and their hearts
> had been refreshed, they stepped in shining tubs and bathed.
> They washed, rubbing lots of smooth oil on themselves,
> then sat down to eat. From the brimming wine bowl
> they drew off sweet wine and poured libations to Athena.
> (10.682) [10.572]

The picture celebrates the intense male comradeship which comes from their shared success in a dangerous enterprise. And we can sense the mutual joy in such a daring victory, for which sweet wine provides an appropriate libation. But here the stress remains firmly on the war. The two friends are, after all, washing off the blood and sweat of slaughter. And the final reference to Athena reminds us of a similar reference a few lines earlier, when Odysseus thanks the

goddess for delivering them a helpless victim. The bathing and refreshment thus do not register as an unambiguous social celebration designed to bring repose after a long day. The impression is that Odysseus and Diomedes need a wash and some emotional relief in order to continue their fighting the next day.

WEAPONS AND STATUS

The objects that really matter in the *Iliad*, as one would expect, are the weapons of war. To own the most impressive armour, a spear no other man can throw, or a large number of captured arms marks a man as a warrior of special prominence. When Meriones, for example, asks Idomeneus to provide him with a spear, Idomeneus takes the opportunity to announce his own worth:

> "Spears? As many as you want—in my hut
> twenty one stand against the sunny wall,
> Trojans spears I take from warriors I kill.
> I never think of fighting hostile troops
> from far away—that's why I've got there
> brightly shining spears and embossed shields,
> with helmets, too, and body armour." (13.303) [13.260]

Idomeneus values the spears (significantly he knows the exact total) and displays them prominently in his quarters because they possess great value both as practical weapons and as marks of worth to his peers. And he does not hesitate to point out to Meriones that a warrior can win spears only from fighting the enemy at close quarters, in the fiercest fighting of all, the combat over the fallen corpse. Meriones senses the implied challenge in Idomeneus's remarks and, for all the urgency of the situation, takes the time to point out that he has lots of captured weapons in his hut, too, but it's far away and he's in a hurry. None of the men displays the slightest false modesty about his war possessions. Nor do we see any envious attitudes that deceitfully deny the value of someone else's equipment. The leaders may argue about who owns the finest armour or the fastest horses, but they agree about what makes these possessions important. The man who foolishly trades his excellent equipment for something inferior, as Glaucus does with Diomedes (in Book 6), must have lost his wits.

This attitude to material things is neither covetousness nor an excessive desire for displays of mere wealth. The valued objects

matter because they announce the warrior's status and are a public statement of his worth. The sometimes vicious attitudes towards comrades in the funeral games, the hot tempers and almost suicidal tactics in the chariot race, for example, seem incommensurate with the intrinsic value of the prizes. But there's no point in talking about "intrinsic" value here. The objects matter because of what winning them or losing them will do to the victor's reputation. In a sense, we might even say that the warriors in the *Iliad* attack each other primarily because they wish to acquire more fine objects which will enhance their status. Stripping an enemy for his weapons, even at great risk, is a cultural imperative, just as much an obligation as defending a fallen comrade from an enemy who wants to do the same. In the night foray of Diomedes and Odysseus, the Argive pair eagerly kill thirteen defenceless sleeping soldiers to obtain enemy horses. Nothing in Homer's description of the event suggests that there is any glory in the slaughter, quite the reverse, and we get no sense that the horses will benefit the Achaeans materially in the war. Ownership of these fine horses, however, marks Odysseus as a heroic man, favoured of the gods and therefore even more important among his peers. Moved by the same spirit, Hector urges on his horses with an explanation of why the battle matters: it gives him an opportunity to win more prizes for himself:

> "Come on then, go after them with speed,
> so we may capture Nestor's shield, whose fame
> extends right up to heaven—it's all gold—
> the shield itself, cross braces, too.
> From horse-taming Diomedes' shoulders
> we'll strip the decorated body armour,
> a work created by Hephaestus.
> I think if we could capture these two things,
> Achaeans would climb aboard their ships tonight." (8.220) [8.191]

Hector appears to want the spoils just as much as, if not more than, the victory. Nestor's shield matters to him, not because Hector requires a superior weapon (the emphasis on gold, which symbolizes the social value of the shield, suggests that it might not be the easiest weapon to use) but rather because the shield is well known; it has a fame which Hector can appropriate if he can acquire the shield for his collection.

FORM, FUNCTION, AND EXCELLENCE

The details Homer provides about the weapons, especially the artistic skill on display, brings out the cultural worth of these objects and almost always evokes once again the ironic paradoxes at the heart of the warrior culture. The passage describing the bow of Pandarus is a good example:

> Pandarus took up his bow of polished horn,
> made from a nimble wild goat he himself once shot
> under the chest, as it leapt down from a rock.
> He'd waited in an ambush and hit it in the front.
> The goat fell down onto the rocks, landing on its back.
> Horns on its head were sixteen palm widths long.
> A man skilled in shaping horn had worked on them,
> so as to fit the horns together to create a bow.
> He'd polished it all over, adding gold caps
> snugly fitted on the tips. (4.124) [4.105]

Here, as in other descriptions, there's an emphasis on the process of making the weapon. The bow is a product of human resourcefulness, patience, courage, and skill, qualities which have transformed nature into something functional and beautiful. The gold is not simply a decoration. It is an essential part of its artistic and practical excellence of the object and of the status of the person who owns it. However, this wonderful object has been made and is being used to kill human beings. Just before this description we are told what Pandarus is about to do with the bow (break the truce and thus restart the war), and immediately after the lines quoted above, we are reminded of the function of this bow—it is designed to shoot "an arrow, a fresh-winged courier/ bearing dark agony." The gods have given Pandarus his skill, and nature has provided him with the materials. His admirable creative energies have fashioned a beautiful and valued object which carries out a deadly function.

To separate value and function in this manner is somewhat misleading, since the *Iliad* always associates value, beauty, and function in an inextricable combination. Weapons, like human beings, display their excellence, their unique value, only in action or in potential for action. This notion of excellence (*arete*) includes the sense that worth depends upon the proper fulfillment of the function for which the agent, man or material object, exists. For something to have full value, it must fulfill its *arete*. It must, that is, realize as

completely as possible in action the specific virtues for which it exists. In the *Iliad*, a warrior's *arete* manifests itself in the fighting or competitive games or in debates in the assembly of leaders. Similarly, an object's *arete* depends upon its contributions to the war. And just as none of the warrior heroes is ugly, for the fighting which proves his excellence makes him beautiful (Thersites, who wants to abandon the fight, is the only physically ugly man mentioned in the poem), so the weapons of war are beautiful. Their deadly potential makes them so.

This idea that the excellence of the weapon, like the status of its owner, depends both on its appearance and its performance creates those curious moments in the poem when the weapons acquire a vital life of their own:

> Some spears hurled by brave hands
> flew swiftly forward, then stuck in his great shield,
> and many stood upright in the space between them,
> impaled in earth, still eager to devour his flesh. (11.644) [11.571]

> Shrill war cries came from either side,
> arrows flew from bowstrings, many spears were thrown.
> Some impaled themselves in the flesh of quick young men.
> Many fell halfway before they reached white skin,
> skewered in the earth, still longing to taste flesh. (15.372) [15.314]

The spear robbed of its "white skin" has not fulfilled its function, which is to "taste flesh." Its arete has been violated. The last quivering of the spear which has not found a human target, like the final death throes of the defeated warrior, calls to our attention that grim paradox central to Homer's vision: in this life, creative fulfillment, the proper realization of one's excellence, can only come through the destruction of life, including, sooner or later, one's own.

The ironic union of artistic beauty and destructive function runs throughout the *Iliad*. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the following remarkable simile describing the wound Menelaus receives on the battlefield:

> The arrow pierced it,
> going through that mail, and grazed the skin of Menelaus.
> Dark blood at once came flowing from the wound.
> Just as when some woman of Meonia or Caria
> stains white ivory with purple dye, making a cheek piece

> for a horse, and leaves it in her room—an object
> many riders covet for themselves, a king's treasure
> with double value—horse's ornament and rider's glory—
> that's how, Menelaus, your strong thighs, your shins and ankles
> were stained with your own blood below the wound. (4.163) [4.140]

The comparison here between the peaceful work of famous artists and the wound, one of the most remarkable similes in the poem, comes as something of a surprise. Wounds, too, like deadly bows and heavy shields, can bring a momentary beauty to the bloody work. This is not a strained rhetorical trope similar to the "blood is the god of war's rich livery" style of Christopher Marlowe, but an impersonal fact of life, linking human creativity, the constant striving for beautiful objects which define a man's status, and the destructive perils of war. A similarly surprising reminder of this paradoxical union of beauty and destruction comes in another memorable comparison when Ilioneus has his head chopped off:

> Peneleus drew his sharp sword and struck his neck,
> chopping head and helmet, so they hit the ground,
> the spear still sticking from the socket of his eye.
> Holding it up high, like a flowering poppy. . . . (14.580) [14.499]

The most graphic image of the warrior armed depicts him in his chariot riding in heroic glory over the earth soaked in blood:

> Saying this, Cebriones urged on their horses
> with the lovely manes, cracking his whip over them.
> Obeying the lash, they took the fast chariot at top speed
> in the direction of the Trojans and Achaeans,
> trampling on shields and corpses as they galloped on.
> The axle was completely spattered underneath,
> as were the rails behind, with gobs of blood thrown up
> from horses' hooves and chariot wheels. (11.601) [11.531]

Hector, Cebriones, and the chariot, the most complex product of man's unique creative skill, the union of animal force, artistically shaped material, and coordinated human control, here arise out of the earth and define the glory of the warrior in motion on the battlefield. This picture of the power of nature harnessed by human skill and yoked to a beautiful created object symbolizes the living warrior's most heroic pose. As Hector moves briskly along, he presents to the world his glorious individuality, his full value as a human being, his *arete*. The warrior's appearance, here and elsewhere,

brings out how the creativity of man changes the human form. His physical nature he conceals behind shaped metal. He does not move over the earth with a natural human gait but rides in a beautiful and destructive chariot. The image of Hector in his glory, like the very similar picture of Achilles later in the poem, insists upon both the full manifestation of heroic individuality and the slaughter. The beautiful vision of man, animal, and machine grows out the bloodshed which nurtures it and which will transform this cultural icon into a thing of terror. The pursuit of glory takes place in the midst of a shower of gore, which the activity necessarily generates, turning the green earth into a murky swamp of mud, bodies, weapons, and blood which will soon enough swallow up Hector himself and each warrior when his turn comes. Sprung from the vital energies which arise spontaneously from the earth and returned in a mangled mess back to the earth, the Iliadic warrior lives for those moments when he can declare his individual glory in proud confidence, fully armed, a metallic work of art, still only a few feet from the ground, but moving superbly and reaching with his spear upward to the sky. The image stands out clearly, but its resonance reverberates as mysteriously as the eternal and violent rhythms of nature.

WEAPONS AS SYMBOLS OF CULTURAL TRADITIONS

The physical objects in the *Iliad* can also derive their significance from traditional cultural associations they embody. Since one of the important functions of art, especially in a society as conservative as the warrior group in the *Iliad*, is to enshrine and transmit the established values of the past, the warrior's possessions, as well as contributing to his status among his peers, also link him to the famous leaders of the past, even to the gods themselves. The headgear Meriones provides for Odysseus (in Book 10) has come by a circuitous route from the military booty won by Autolycus, Odysseus's maternal grandfather. Thus, the object is more than a useful protection for the coming raid. It has a cultural importance as well, for it informs us that Odysseus is now participating in a traditional activity which links him to his famous ancestor and to other warriors from distant lands.

Sometimes the cultural association of an important material possession can remind us of the continuing ironies of the traditional code. A well-known example is the royal sceptre of Agamemnon. Originally a product of the divine skill of Hephaestus and a present

to Zeus, it has passed down from the father of the gods and men to Hermes, then to Pelops, from him to Atreus, then to Thyestes, and finally to Agamemnon. As part of Agamemnon's royal appearance in the assembly, the sceptre reminds everyone of the conservative values on which his authority rests. For the reader who recognizes in the names the famous family curse on the House of Atreus, the sceptre acquire also an ominous sense of doom for the possessor, in the same way the armour of Achilles does, which in the full story of the Trojan war destroys almost all those great heroes who wear it or seek to possess it: Patroclus, Hector, Achilles, and Ajax.

Our sense of the cultural importance of the beauty in the weapons emerges most clearly in the descriptions of the distinctive armour with which the heroes announce their individual human value and at the same time conceal their vulnerable bodies from the deadly perils of warfare. The passage in Book 11 picturing Agamemnon's magnificent equipment announces the king's importance, for the cuirass is a royal gift from lord Cinyras and the rest so splendid that the gods thunder their approval. Everything in the outfit forms an essential part of the warrior's equipment, but each piece also has its own beauty. His "richly decorated" shield, a "beautiful work," is a terrifying reminder of the reality of death in battle: "On that shield, as crowning symbol, stood the Gorgon,/ a ferocious face with a horrific stare./ Terror and Panic were placed on either side" (11.38). Agamemnon's armour enables him to carry into battle, not just a useful military protection or a declaration of his royal pre-eminence, but also an artistic expression of the greatest cultural achievements of his society. As he moves forward, he declares to all in his person the full values of his civilization: personal courage, enormous individual authority, and images of terrifying ferocity and beauty produced by an artisan's creative skill.[11]

---

[11] Most of us know enough about the history of weapons to recognize just how important the connection is between the warrior who destroys and the artist who creates. As Kant observed, the urge to warfare paradoxically stimulates the highest cultural achievements. The Japanese samurai, for example, fought with a sword that was simultaneously one of the most efficient implements of destruction every devised and an emblem of his culture, an object of surpassing beauty which carried on its blade in the engraved poetry the emotional certainties basic to his creed. The blood of the slaughtered enemy flowed over the delicately etched verses. Even today our own personal response to the machinery of modern combat (especially aircraft) often indicates that we continue to find important cultural values in weapons in the beautiful form and the deadly function wedded eternally in the lethal artifact.

THE SHIELD OF ACHILLES

Given the obvious cultural importance of the weapons in the *Iliad*, we recognize clearly the particular significance of the lengthy description of Achilles's divine armour (in Book 18). This section gives us a vision central to the entire epic in the description of the weapons of the mightiest warrior of all. The artisan god Hephaestus makes the shield for Achilles, who is about to push the heroic code to its limits, and beyond. Before we witness his *aristeia*, we are given in the design of the shield the most complete single metaphor for the world of the *Iliad*. Whatever our response to Achilles may be as he sets off on his bloody revenge, we recognize that his conduct grows out of the way of life his armour celebrates, for he carries the divinely crafted image of that life through all his remaining battles.

Hephaestus first emphasizes in the design that scenes on the shield take place within the context of the entire cosmos:

> The shield had five layers. On the outer one,
> with his great skill he fashioned many rich designs.
> There he hammered out the earth, the heavens, the sea,
> the untiring sun, the moon at the full, along with
> very constellation which crowns the heavens—
> the Pleiades, the Hyades, mighty Orion,
> and the Bear, which some people call the Wain,
> always circling in the same position, watching Orion,
> the only stars that never bathe in Ocean stream. (18.598) [18.483]

These first figures on the shield, like the very last ("Hephaestus then depicted Ocean,/ the mighty river, flowing all around the outer edge"), indicate that the human life depicted exists within the framework of the whole world. What does not appear on the shield is not part of life, and what we do see on the shield represents all the possibilities of life, realized in the perfection of divine art.

Then follow two scenes of civilized life. In the first, human beings celebrate weddings, music, dancing, and a peaceful and reasonable arbitration for murder through competitive performances in the law courts. In the second scene, human life devotes itself to war, with Ares and Athena, as usual, prominent in the fray (significantly enough, the only Olympian deities on the shield). The latter image evokes the full irony of battle: the men, "covered in shining bronze," kill and are killed under the power of Strife and Uproar and the

unpredictable work of "cruel Death," figures actively participating in the fight. One notices immediately the stark contrast between the two scenes, between, that is, pictures of a peaceful, creative, civilized life in the city and of the hazardous, destructive enterprise of war beyond the walls. In the first image, everyone plays an important role: women move freely to join in the festivities; the old men occupy important places as participants in the legal proceedings, young men have an important role in the dancing. In the second scene, the old men, women, and children can only stand on the wall keeping watch. The adult men, all the physically active mature male citizens, have gone to war.

The juxtaposition of these two scenes does not, however, suggest a simple logical connection between them. Hephaestus's design does not hint, as it might have done, that the second scene represents an action occasionally necessary in defence of the first. Such a possibility would suggest a more comforting view of war than we have witnessed in the poem, namely that war does not have a permanent and pre-eminent place in man's affairs except as an essential but temporary undertaking in defence of civilization's more important values: marriage, civic justice, and peaceful celebrations. The war scene is, by contrast, a picture depicting a permanent feature of human life, an eternal part of the cosmic design. The contrasting images display two different worlds, each a divinely sanctioned aspect of man's being. Nature may have two faces, and each scene belongs to the given pattern of the cosmos, but the design does not suggest that these are alternative people can choose, for warfare is just as much an inescapable fact of life as is the peaceful human community.[12]

The pictures on the shield which follow these opening scenes give us again the different aspects of nature. The earth provides for human beings the chance to plough, harvest, and enjoy fine wines and rich communal feasts. But the earth is equally home to the lions, who live to gratify their carnivorous appetites. The divine artisan does not resolve any apparent contradictions. He offers no synthesis of peaceful fertility and civilized control with the passionate and brutal

[12] Kenneth John Atchity sees in the symbolism of the shield a moral message preaching the evils of battle and the goodness of civil, peaceful strife. For him, the shield is remarkable for its "didactic distinction" (185). This view is yet another example of the persistent critical habit of forcing onto Homer's fatalistic and irrational sense of war a moral scheme more consoling to modern sensibilities.

frenzy of destructive conflict, for there is no middle ground, other than in the astonishing beauty of the physical object depicting such ambiguities. So the final human scene celebrates the "dancing magic" which keeps the crowd's attention riveted, an evocation of the creative powers we have to translate the incomprehensible ambiguities of life into beauty and joy in the coordinated rhythmic movement of the group. The reference to Daedalus invokes the spirit of the most famous human artist of all, who built the magical labyrinth around the destructive Minotaur, and thus reminds us of the paradoxical union of creativity and destruction. The shield here shows us a peaceful dance, but like the dance of war we have followed throughout the poem, it asks us to recognize that the highest achievement we can aim for in a hostile but vital world is a pattern for joyful physical movement, a rhythmic beauty that will last as long as people have the will to express themselves against the harsh irrationality of fate. As the artist-god gives shape to the metal, forming an object of eternal beauty, so men shape their lives, individually and collectively, to create a meaning where without their efforts chaos would rule supreme. And that effort produces, by the most natural means, the dance of battle.[13]

Homer does not end his description of Achilles's armour with the evocative final details of the dancers and the surrounding boundaries of the earth. Before the end of Book 18, he brings the reader suddenly and prosaically back to the reality of the situation by reminding us once again what this surpassingly beautiful work of art is, namely, a practical necessity for the greatest warrior about to set

[13] Cedric Whitman observes that the shield of Achilles functions as a metaphor and that we therefore waste our time trying draw an exact picture or to unearth an identical artifact (126). Nonetheless, there is at least one suggestive archeological parallel to this famous description. Some years ago, in April 1975, an exhibition of ancient Scythian art opened in the Metropolitan Museum in New York. This warrior culture in the seventh and sixth centuries produced some magnificent objects recognizably similar to Iliadic art. Of one piece the reviewer Robert Hughes observed:

> The centerpiece of the exhibition is, however, the 12-in wide gold pectoral dug from a kurgan or burial mound near the town of Ordzhonikidze in 1971. In the upper course we see domestic life: sheep, foals, calves, a pair of Scythians making a skin shirt. In the middle, vegetable nature: an exquisite frieze of curling tendrils and blossoms with tiny birds perching on them. And below, the goldsmith set forth the central myth of Scythian life: endless combat, unceasing subjugation of the weak by the strong—griffons attacking horses, feral cats killing deer. An entire world is summed up, with a sculptural intensity that Donatello could hardly have surpassed; and one cannot say whether ferocity or beauty prevails, or whether, for the Scythians, there was any difference between the two. (54)

out on his destructive, glorious career. We thus recall that the creation of the finest artistic work also serves the war. Without the fighting, without Achilles's urge to battle, there would be no shield. Ironically, the most eloquent celebration of peaceful life and artistic achievement occurs only on this war implement. And that's as it should be, because the highest potential of the divine and human imagination is inextricably bound up with eternal conflict.

ESSAY SIX
HECTOR AND ACHILLES

THE ILIAD AS A TRAGEDY

Commentary on the *Iliad* often seems to involve some interesting questions about the nature of the two principal human characters, Achilles and Hector, in particular, about which of the two is the hero of the poem and whether either of them qualifies as a tragic hero. The answer to the first of these questions seems clear enough: Achilles is obviously the hero, as the invocation to the poem announces (*pace* all those, like Thomas Cahill, who wish to raise doubts about the matter). The second question is more problematic: Are Hector and Achilles tragic heroes? Or does one of them fit the bill and other not?

Such arguments about the tragic hero are almost inevitably circular: one sets out a list of criteria which the tragic hero must meet, then applies them to Achilles and Hector, and so reaches a conclusion determined by one's initial assumptions. The persuasiveness of the case rests on the a priori (and perhaps contested) assumptions with which one begins, a dubious logical procedure. So I do not propose to follow that line of argument here. Instead I wish to focus on the conduct of Hector and Achilles in the poem (without applying any particular label to their characters in advance), especially in comparison with the normal behaviour of the other warriors, in order to see if there is anything distinctly different about what happens to them. If there is, we might want to explore the extent to which that might indicate similarities with other later heroes who in large part define what we mean by a tragic hero, especially with reference to Greek drama (e.g., Oedipus).

In other words, I intend here to measure Achilles and Hector against the heroic code, as that is established in the poem by the warrior leaders, and see what that line of enquiry produces. Such a comparison is significant, because (to telegraph where I am going) each of them experiences a relationship with this shared belief which is, in some important ways, different from that of the other warriors. Achilles moves beyond the traditional code into uncharted territory, where he is terribly isolated, a journey which gives him a new and potentially shattering perspective on what they all believe. This development is unique to him in the poem and (I shall argue) is close

enough to what tragic heroes go through to enable us to say that he enters the realm of "tragic experience." Whether that qualifies him to be a tragic hero I shall leave to others to judge. Hector's career is very different. He is the only warrior leader (apart from Achilles) who momentarily loses faith in the heroic code, and that loss is devastating, not because it brings him any new insight, but rather because it makes him lose control of himself in an absurd panic. He regains his composure before his death and dies an orthodox warrior hero. But (I shall argue) we cannot say of him, as we can of Achilles, that he has pushed experience into some as yet unexplored realm.

THE WARRIOR ETHIC REVISITED

An earlier essay in this series (Essay 4) examines the heroic code of the Iliadic warriors, so I shall not go into any detail here. However, before looking at Hector and Achilles we need to remember the major features of the ethic that sustains these warriors as a normative guide to their conduct. The warrior ethic and the religious and social beliefs fundamental to it establish for the Iliadic leader a coherent vision of experience which we can briefly sum up as follows: in a fatalistic universe of constant irrational natural and cosmic strife, where the only certainty man has is the knowledge of his own inevitable death, the final end to his personal existence, the individual has the freedom to choose his response; the finest men, in their freedom, decide to assert their individuality by defining themselves as worthy human beings in battle, risking death in a continuous series of personal encounters. The immediate rewards for the warrior are social esteem and moments of glory in this life and perhaps an enduring fame after death. Each leader organizes his life in the service of this vision. What contributes to it has value and what does not serve its needs has no place. The warrior code is thus radically pessimistic in the sense not only that the pursuit of personal happiness does not exist as a reasonable long-term option, the choices life offers being inherently unsatisfactory in some important ways, but also that the vision does not provide any acceptable alternative to a chosen life of harsh dangers and either an early death or an insignificant old age. The warrior lives with a cruel destiny which he cannot change, but, in spite of that, he constantly strives with all his resources to stand up and declare himself. Only in such a brave reaction does his humanity acquire any significance and value.

This harsh creed serves a number of important functions, for it gives the warrior a sense of his identity in relation to those around him and establishes shared guidelines for how to act in a world which does not provide any divinely sanctioned moral truths. As we have seen, the heroic code makes stern demands but also establishes certain limits. One does not have to push one's heroic self-assertion to the extreme limit: one can refuse to fight against the gods. It also provides well-understood unwritten rules for mutual dealings among the leaders, including any disputes. Thus the heroic code offers a reassuring sense to each warrior of who he is and how he must behave. The traditions of his family, his past experiences, his position in the social hierarchy, and, above all, the expectations of the group, provide not only a challenging and reassuring sense of how the warrior should act but also a guarantee that he will not be abandoned in death. His comrades will fight for his corpse and celebrate his memory.

Setting aside Hector and Achilles for the moment, we observe that all the major warriors in this poem subscribe to this creed uncritically; in other words, they do not challenge its authority, and they always act in accordance with its demands. As we have seen in an earlier essay, they do not have to think like us, puzzling about what is appropriate from moment to moment. Their shared faith in the heroic code gives them immediate and spontaneous instructions, and the group is always around them to observe, encourage, and, if necessary, criticize. Homer structures the poem so that, when we have to follow the major events in the careers of Hector and Achilles, we already know in detail the standard by which their warrior group operates. One of the major functions in the poem of Diomedes and Sarpedon, for example, who get so much attention before Achilles returns, is to consolidate our understanding of the heroic code. These warriors, like their peers, never stray beyond the group or the group's faith in its values. Sarpedon's final battle and dying speech (in Book 16) confirm his adherence to the shared code. He lives and dies a brave warrior, always among his comrades and bolstered by the ethos for which he is such an eloquent spokesman. In spite of the fact that he can imagine a better life if the conditions were different, he never, not even in dying, moves outside the group, physically or spiritually.

This is obviously a hard faith, and many readers, no doubt, are tempted to see these heroes as victims of a perverted system of belief. But, as I have argued earlier, their conduct arises compellingly out of what they believe about the world and is an expression of their freedom to choose how they will confront a grimly beautiful and destructive fate. They could opt out of the war, but for them mere survival at home is less important than a significant, worthy life on the battlefield, especially since they will all die sooner or later anyway. So none of them raises any significant doubts about or loses faith in their shared creed. This notion of their freedom to choose is important, because it is not the case that these men are mere slaves to circumstances, unwilling robots pushed to destruction by blind impulses, as, for example, Julian Jaynes suggests, "The Trojan War was directed by hallucinations. And the soldiers who were so directed were not at all like us. They were noble automatons who knew not what they did" (75). Such a view is no more applicable to these warriors than it is to modern soldiers or, for that matter, professional athletes in strenuous, often dangerous, team sports, whose actions stem from a similar belief. Their quality as soldiers or athletes arises from how they choose to conduct themselves in circumstances they must confront (if they wish to be considered worthy) but cannot change.

HECTOR

In the light of the above summary remarks, we can see that for almost all the poem Hector is an orthodox warrior leader. Of course, he possesses a special pre-eminence as the unquestioned leader of the Trojans, and they obey his orders without raising any doubts (at least until Polydamas offers alternative suggestions about their tactics). Before Achilles's return to the war, Hector is one of the most successful followers of the heroic code. As we have seen in an earlier essay, even when his own behaviour brings out very clearly some of the more complex ironies of the code, as in the scene with Andromache and Astyanax, for example, he remains an uncritical servant of his culture's vision of life. His attitude to the gods and to their treatment of him reveals no significant differences between Hector and the other warriors, except for the degree of his success. His conduct on the battlefield, including his many triumphs and his setbacks, his being wounded, and his recovering with the help of Apollo presents nothing we are not already familiar with from the experiences of other warriors.

But the scene of Hector's final battle introduces something very different, an act which gives him a unique importance in the poem. For in that encounter with Achilles, we witness a remarkable departure from normality. Just before the fight, Hector, for the very first time, becomes totally isolated on the battlefield, physically displaced from his comrades, who are all dead or inside the walls. He has enjoyed a dazzling success and a cruel reversal in leading the Trojans against the Achaean ships. Now he stands alone outside the walls of the city. His parents have made their most eloquent pleas for his return. Hector must decide whether to face Achilles or retreat within the walls, declining battle. His moment of supreme crisis has come. Hector's first response to this unusual situation is, as we have seen, to reaffirm the code by which he has lived. If he goes back into the city people will laugh at him, and he will suffer the worst experience he can imagine, public shame for his conduct in battle. By comparison with that certain result, he prefers his chances against Achilles.

But then an extraordinary moment occurs. In his physical isolation, Hector suddenly changes his mind and starts examining ways to avoid the conflict. He briefly considers betraying everything he has lived for, by throwing himself on the mercy of Achilles, offering enormous gifts—half the wealth of the city and Helen as well. Hector instinctively realizes how abnormal such an action would be, for he acknowledges that he would have to take an oath to divide Troy's riches without deceit, the first suggestion of the potential for dishonest conduct in a noble warrior. That possibility he then rejects as impractical and dishonourable. Achilles may spurn his offer and kill him anyway, thus redoubling his shame. And so he returns once more to the simple clarity of the warrior code: "No, it's better to clash in battle right away./ We'll see which one wins victory from Zeus" (22.163). Hector's hesitation here—his summoning up, even momentarily, dishonourable options—indicates that his faith has started to waver. It has become uncharacteristically difficult for him to meet the present situation with the customary heroic response.[14]

---

[14] Those who seek to understand Hector by paying close attention to his psychology (not always the most reliable way of understanding the characters in the *Iliad*) may see an important connection between his conscious hesitation here and the unconscious ironies evoked in his conversation with Andromache in Book 6. J. M. Redfield offers the illuminating suggestion that Hector's terror at the gleaming armour of the approaching Achilles is a deliberate reminder of Astyanax's terror at the sight of his father's military appearance earlier (158). Hector's momentary

Hector's behaviour at the first appearance of Achilles suggests, then, that the strain of adhering to the community ethic has become so strong that Hector, in his physical isolation from his fellow soldiers, has great trouble maintaining it. He does not want to act in the way which his vision of life tells him he should. Nothing in the warrior code will justify the options he would prefer to attempt. And so Hector does the unthinkable—he runs away. His instinctive decision to take flight indicates that he has momentarily lost the will to continue the heroic role, that the warrior's faith no longer answers to or can contain his most urgent emotional demands. So he breaks down. Because he is at a total loss, left with no comrades to support him and nothing to tell him what to do other than a sudden onrush of fear, he panics and surrenders himself to the most human of impulses, a desperate attempt to escape certain death. Instantly the significance of his life collapses, and his proud, individualistic stance crumbles into a nightmare:

> Like a dream in which a man cannot catch someone
> who's running off and the other can't escape,
> just as the first man can't catch up—that's how
> Achilles, for all his speed, could not reach Hector,
> while Hector was unable to evade Achilles. (22.247) [22.199]

The extended description of Hector's running away in repetitive circles around Troy illustrates the absurdity of life from which the heroic assertion of individual worth has disappeared. The heroic code does not permit Hector to enter Troy and evade battle, while his personal feelings do not permit him to stand and fight. The once proud warrior has consequently become totally disoriented, like a terrified rabbit, because the faith that has sustained him him is inadequate to his situation, and he does not know what to do, or rather he cannot endure doing what his previous way of life tells him he must do. In the absence of such a continuing faith in the heroic code, how else can a man cope with the terrible fear of death but keep running until the destroyer catches him? But Hector has nowhere to run to. Caught in an acute dilemma from which there is

---

doubt immediately before his duel with Ajax may be significant in this regard (in Book 7). [Back to Text]

no way out he instinctively changes his heroic path, up to this point in his life always a direct linear course to and from battle, into an absurd, never-ending circular chase in no man's land. The passage offers no suggestions that Hector is aware why he is behaving in this manner. He does not even consciously decide to run. Once his faith in the warrior code disintegrates, he loses control of himself.

Significantly, Hector regains his heroic composure as soon as he thinks he has found a comrade to stand with him on the battlefield. With Deiphobus apparently at his side, Hector instantly recovers the warrior code which had failed him when he was alone, and he can now move to face Achilles in the conventionally manner. Having accepted the strong likelihood of his death he seeks to bargain with Achilles to make sure he receives the traditional funeral honours. The latter's fierce, uncompromising refusal indicates that he is now following a very different vision from Hector's customary faith. This Hector does not see. Back inside the only system of belief he has every experienced, he seeks to hang onto the certainties it offers. Even when he recognizes that Athena has tricked him and faces the sure knowledge of his own imminent death, Hector shows us that he will die as he has lived, among the finest examples of the warrior code:

> "This is it, then.
> The gods are summoning me to my death.
> I thought warrior Deïphobus was close by.
> But he's inside the walls, and Athena
> has deceived me. Now evil death is here,
> right beside me, not somewhere far away.
> There's no escape. For a long time now,
> this must have been what Zeus desired,
> and Zeus' son, the god who shoots from far,
> and all those who willingly gave me help
> in earlier days. So now I meet my fate.
> Even so, let me not die ingloriously
> without a fight, but in some great action
> which those men yet to come will hear about." (22.3730) [22.297]

Hector comes close here to recognizing something profound about human experience, the complex ironic mystery at the heart of life. But he turns away from that insight, unwilling or unable to push into the unknown territory he would encounter if he confronted the cruel irrationality of fate head on. This speech does not reveal any

extraordinary insight into human life, a more intense and deeper understanding than the heroic code provides every brave warrior. By recalling himself to the traditional notion of his earlier faith, Hector is, in a sense, protecting himself. He has not re-embraced that creed because he has freely chosen to do so, in the full light of its ironic consequences returning to the orthodox fold with the fresh and vital awareness of a temporary apostate. He is grabbing hold of it, as if that were the only way to confer some meaning on his final moments. His dying request to Achilles for proper treatment of his corpse is thus an apparently vain last invocation of the customary rituals, a final plea for the traditional honours which make his suffering and death meaningful. And when Achilles's refusal to honour Hector's dying words reveals again just how far the victor has moved away from normal conduct, how impervious he now is to the common expectations of the group, Hector can only make the desperately weak dying reply that the gods may punish Achilles if he does not behave properly.

Hector's last combat thus present a cruelly ironic portrait. His death is not, by his own standards, absurd, as it might have been if Achilles had speared him in the back while he was running away. The assertion of his heroic dignity, however, is undercut by our sense that in his desperation he is using the tradition as, so to speak, an illusion. Hector must know before he dies that his life will count for something, and the only system of values he can reach for is the traditional one which has just failed him. True, Hector has regained his courageous composure, but the experience of collapse has not brought him to a significantly new awareness of his condition. Hence, Hector's death does not support the contention that he is significantly transformed before he dies, that he somehow gains an insight into the absolute verities of human existence, that before his death "he sees the whole truth in the face of it, the flaw which false hope had made in his courage is cured, and he meets Achilles like an equal" (Whitman 212), or that "At this moment, and only at this moment, Hector is equal to Achilles, and superior to all Iliadic characters, in the depth and intensity of his consciousness of life as limited and valorized by the fact of death" (Mueller, *Iliad* 64), or that at this moment he is "endowed with a brief moment of clairvoyance" (Michalopoulos 95). To equate Hector and Achilles here or to compare Hector with Oedipus is to invest Hector's death speeches with a significance they will not support. For there is no sense here

that Achilles and Hector meet as equals. Quite the contrary. Hector remains an admirable human warrior-leader, but Achilles we know is on a different plane altogether. The spiritual difference between the two is as marked as the difference between the normal armour of Achilles which Hector is wearing and the divinely crafted armour of his opponent.

Achilles's immense physical, emotional, and spiritual superiority over Hector in this encounter is perhaps one reason why so many readers find Hector a far more sympathetic figure than Achilles. The preference rests not only on our natural liking for the leader of the most famous underdogs in our best known war, who will soon lose everything to the victors, or on our natural admiration for the chief of those fighting in defense of their homes and families, or even on the way in which our Christian traditions can more easily ascribe to Hector orthodox virtues. We also like Hector because we can readily understand what has happened to him. In comparison with Achilles's invincible confidence, brutal success, and terrifying spiritual isolation, Hector's momentary loss of faith and the emotional uncertainties of his final battle strike us as particularly human, actions we ourselves might well demonstrate in the fatal ironies of the killing zone.

ACHILLES AS A TRADITIONAL WARRIOR LEADER

The *Iliad* is, of course, centrally the story of Achilles, who is, beyond all doubt, the hero of the poem, as the opening invocation announces, not only because he is the mightiest of the warriors, whose presence or absence has a decisive outcome on the battles, but also because in his experience of the war he pushes his understanding of human life beyond the customary limits and explores the extreme consequences of that vision with an integrity and intensity that no one else in the poem even understands, let alone matches. In following the career of Achilles in the *Iliad*, therefore, the reader has to confront issues which no other warrior leader raises.

In discussing the story of Achilles, one might usefully begin by outlining the general stages through which he passes on the route to the final calm acceptance of his own death. First, the poem depicts him as a famous and successful but recognizably normal heroic leader. That is how he has been up to the quarrel, and his peers all acknowledge his high status (especially Nestor in Book 1). After the quarrel with Agamemnon, he enters a period of unusual inactivity, in

which for several books he disappears from the action. When he re-enters the story in Book 9 to entertain the ambassadors from Agamemnon, it is evident from the nature of his refusal that some important changes have been taking place. In his response to the death of Patroclus, Achilles reveals yet another development, and this change leads directly to his decision to return to the war and to his subsequent *aristeia*. Finally, after the killing of Hector, in the most extraordinary scene of the poem, a transformed Achilles meets Priam to arrange the surrender of Hector's corpse. By the end of the narrative, the warrior leader of the opening has become so changed that he is quite unlike any of his former comrades. He has been through an amazingly intense isolation, and his suffering and emotional dislocation have given him quite a different perspective on the traditional heroic code by which he has lived his life until a few days before.

From what we learn about the life of Achilles before the quarrel with Agamemnon and in the first moments of that argument, Achilles appears to be quite similar to the other leaders, except for his outstanding speed, strength, and battlefield success. There is no suggestion that his life has not been rooted in the ethic they all subscribe to. In Book 1, the other leaders acknowledge his military prowess, a gift from the gods, but they accord him no unique honours in the peer group other than that, and Nestor, the voice of traditional authority, makes clear the relationship between Agamemnon's and Achilles's relative social positions. His response to the expropriation of Briseis is what we would expect from any other warrior leader, intense anger over a loss of status which the removal of the girl represents. And his decision to withdraw his and his men's services from the battle represents a logical, if extreme, response to Agamemnon's insult. The anger he unleashes against the Achaeans, prophesying disaster for the army, and his vow not to help arise out of his feelings that, according to the warrior code, he has been shamed, a very passionate outburst, to be sure, but by no means a conscious decision to abandon that framework of belief. In fact, by hoping that his withdrawal will shame Agamemnon in front of everyone else, Achilles is obviously relying on the traditional code to bring him satisfaction. The language of his oath, however, contains ironic suggestions that Achilles at this point is not aware of the full significance of what this moment will bring:

> "I'll tell you, swear a great oath on this point,
> by this sceptre, which will never sprout
> leaves and shoots again, since first ripped away
> from its mountain stump, nor bloom any more,
> now that bronze has sliced off leaf and bark.
> This sceptre Achaea's sons take in hand
> whenever they do justice in Zeus's name.
> An oath on this has power. On this I swear—
> the time will come when Achaea's sons
> all miss Achilles, a time when, in distress,
> you'll lack my help, a time when Hector,
> that man killer, destroys many warriors.
> Then grief will tear your hearts apart,
> because you shamed Achaea's finest man." (1.256) [1.233]

His words here offer us a complex insight into the future course of his life. He takes his oath on the most important emblem of traditional respect among his peers, the object symbolizing "justice in Zeus's name." In accordance with the freedom that tradition grants each warrior, Achilles declares his choice and confirms it by reminding the assembly of the ancient authority and the value system which has made him "Achaea's finest man." Then he hurls the staff on the ground. Obviously, in his anger, he means to indicate to his fellow warrior leaders as dramatically as possible his most passionate feelings about Agamemnon's insult. But by casting aside the symbol of their common religious and political faith, Achilles unwittingly reveals the deeper consequences of his action: he is rejecting the group and therefore the communal warrior code which gives him the only system of meaning he understands and which has made him what he is. After all, Agamemnon's insult only carries weight within the context of the orthodox warrior culture, and Achilles's extreme reaction to the king's arrogance illustrates just how thoroughly he is a product of that group belief. His immediate motive may be passionate anger and a desire to teach the Achaeans just how important and valuable he is, but the dramatic gesture indicates the start of an emotional and spiritual displacement from the group.

The poetic imagery of Achilles's oath conveys also the hidden complexity of the moment. The wood staff will never flourish again, for it has been cut away from its nourishment, its tree and its environment, and is now dead. Achilles's emphasis on that image in the course of cutting himself away from the organism which has nourished him raises the question: How is he to flourish now that he

has apparently thrown away the only system of values he has ever known? And the implied comparison with the staff indicates an answer: dry, dead wood flourishes again, if at all, only in fire, for only in the glorious blaze which destroys what it feeds on can the lopped-off limb regain vital heat and become, in the process of self-destruction, a beautiful living thing. Here again, Achilles is announcing no carefully thought-out plan. His oath and his rejection of the staff are spontaneous responses to his deepest irrational feelings, in his view quite appropriate to the insult he has just received. But the dramatic irony latent in the imagery—the gap between our complete understanding of what the moment represents and Achilles's only very partial grasp of its significance—alerts us to the full implications not only of the action but also of Achilles's ignorance. This dramatic irony receives further emphasis a few lines later, when Achilles asks his mother to secure Zeus's favour in giving help to the Trojans, so that events will shame Agamemnon. Thetis responds with an lament for the untimely death of her son. At this moment, Achilles's death is the furthest thing from his mind—he wants revenge. But Thetis and the reader see the more profound significance of the events which launch Achilles's story in the *Iliad*.

It's important to stress (yet again) that Achilles's anger here comes from an understandable reaction. The feelings are intense, but they originate in the natural response of a proud, successful warrior-prince, who up to this point has always conducted himself in accordance with the demands of his society. The anger is not abnormal (except perhaps in degree). Nor is Achilles, as some critics have suggested, already displaced from his group before the fight with Agamemnon or in some way very different from them, at least concerning his sense of himself and of the warrior group.[15] To insist that Achilles is in some way very different in his nature is to remove from his story its human significance, which depends for its power on his transformation from an important warrior leader among his peers into a solitary avenger. For what makes Achilles extraordinary is not his initial behaviour or his character before the quarrel, but rather the changes that take place when he withdraws from the fighting and then refuses to come back.

---

[15] Paolo Vivante claims that Achilles's anger is "a divine, not a human emotion" (54), and Schein states that from the outset of the poem Achilles is "radically different from [the other Achaeans]" (91).

THE EMBASSY TO ACHILLES

The Achaean ambassadors to Achilles (in Book 9) base their appeal to him, just as Agamemnon does, on their understanding of what is appropriate behaviour for a warrior leader. They assume that Achilles is still the man they have always known and will thus respond favourably to a restoration of or increase in his status with material possessions far in excess of what he has lost and a fulsome public apology from Agamemnon. And they are right to make this assumption because, according to the warrior code, any normal leader would and should accept such an extraordinary offer. Hence, Achilles's continuing refusal, his quick rejection of their offer without any discussion, indicates that, however he felt at the time of the original quarrel, when such persuasion might have worked to change his mind, the inexorable emotional logic of his choice has been at work while he has isolated himself from the fighting.

Whatever one thinks of Agamemnon, his offer to Achilles is extraordinarily munificent, marks of the very highest status. It would be difficult to imagine what the king might add to the rich gifts of gold, horses, towns, loot, daughters, and dowry. The fact that Achilles rejects the offer so quickly and in such intemperate language indicates at the very least that away from the battle his passionate sense of his own individuality has grown so intense that he is unwilling to make any compromise in the name of the group, even if such a compromise would enormously enhance his status. One should notice, too, that the reasons Achilles gives for his conduct are extremely dubious, especially when he complains about everyone getting the same portions of booty. We know that he has received ample rewards for fighting in the past (and not merely an equal and paltry share of what everyone gets), as he himself admits in his reply to Odysseus, "I'll take back from here more gold, red bronze,/ fair women, and grey iron—all I captured" (9.457). And Agamemnon's offer, one would think, would be enough to persuade any man, if his major concern were material rewards. After all, the extravagance of the compensation is a mark of Agamemnon's extremely high regard for Achilles. The inadequacy of the reasons and the intensity of the response show that Achilles's refusal here rests on something other than the normal standards of the group, something we might call his personal determination to stand apart no matter what. Achilles may well believe what he states, but the logic of his refusal does not bear close scrutiny, especially in the extreme language he uses:

"He cheated me, betrayed me.
His words will cheat no more. To hell with him.
Let him march to his death by his own road,
for Counsellor Zeus has stolen his wits.
I hate his gifts. And he's not worth a damn.
Not even if he gave me ten times, no,
twenty times more than all he owns right now,
or will possess in future, not even
all the wealth amassed in Orchomenus,
or Egyptian Thebes, where huge treasures sit
piled up in houses—that city of gates,
one hundred of them, through each can ride
two hundred men, horses and chariots
all together—not even if he gave me
gifts as numerous as grains of sand
by the sea or particles of dust,
not for all that would Agamemnon win
my heart, not until he satisfies me
in full for all my heartfelt bitter pain." (9.468) [9.375]

His feelings here have become totally disproportionate to the original insult. Even if he still defines the injuries done to him in terms of the warrior code, he clearly is developing a much more passionately uncompromising sense of his own rightness and is rapidly leaving conventional behavior far behind. Putting the matter another way, we can say that Achilles's new feelings about himself have outgrown his ability to explain them. He reaches for the conventional vocabulary to account for his present attitude, but his appeal to the code cannot properly describe how he is now feeling, for he is moving out into uncharted waters where no compromise is possible. After all, this speech amounts to saying that there is absolutely nothing Agamemnon could do to satisfy him, even if Agamemnon had virtually all the wealth in the world.

We also clearly recognize that important changes have been taking place in Achilles sense of himself, because he now can seriously imagine possibilities outside the heroic code. He talks about love, going home, getting married, and remaining idle on his father's property. Dishonour, he claims, is less important than death. No wonder his listeners are shocked into silence at his response to Odysseus, for Achilles is rejecting outright everything the warriors (including him) have ever lived for. To offer love as a replacement for military glory and status, domestic possessions for plundered riches, peaceful leisure for heroic effort, and life for fame—all that

astonishes his listeners. It's important to note that these comments do not necessarily define a new faith Achilles has acquired, for in the passionate and often illogical appeals to traditional beliefs and to antithetical principles the speech expresses considerable confusion. But the mere fact that Achilles can say and think such things amazes his audience. They no longer recognize the man who walked away from the assembly a few days before.

The second spokesman for the embassy, Phoenix, the old family friend and Achilles's teacher, appeals to him in the name of their affection for each other and of ancient precedents for heroes whose anger relented. The speech has much more personal warmth than Odysseus's words, but the effect on Achilles is much the same. His rejection, though more friendly, is equally firm and contains at least one significant point which alerts us further to how he is changing:

> "Phoenix, dear old father, noble lord,
> I don't need such honours, for I possess
> honour in the will of Zeus. That will keep
> me here beside my own hollow ships,
> so long as there is breath within my body,
> strength in my limbs. But I'll say this to you—
> bear it in mind—do not confuse my heart
> with these laments, these speeches of distress,
> all serving that heroic son of Atreus.
> You should not love him, in case I hate you,
> who are now my friend. You would be noble
> to join with me, and so injure the man
> who injures me. . . ." (9.766) [9.608]

In the intense conviction of his own rightness, Achilles demands a total lack of compromise and refuses to think about how loyalty works both ways. Confident that he is following the will of Zeus (a very bold and self-assertive claim), he insists that anyone who disagrees with him will not be his friend, and friends should "injure the man who injures me." But what about Achilles's obligations to his friends, who are being seriously injured by Hector and the Trojans? There would be little point in making this argument to Achilles, however, since he would be unable to perceive the logic in it, so governed his now by his extreme feelings about himself.

The final speech, the shortest and most effective, comes from Ajax. He bases his appeal to Achilles on the friendship of his comrades

who "honoured him above all others there beside the ships" (9.796). We don't normally think of Ajax as a skilled orator, but here he adopts the masterful tactic of addressing his opening remarks to Odysseus, as if Achilles were not even present, a point which is, in a sense, true, because Achilles has, by his refusal to entertain the offer (which, Ajax points out, any man would accept for insults much greater than what Achilles has been through) ceased to be a comrade, a member of the group. Ajax's tactic obviously makes some connection with Achilles's remaining social feelings, because he does finally concede that he may return to battle once Hector reaches the ships. The comment from Achilles promises nothing definite, but the change in tone and the suggestion of a possible reconciliation reminds the reader that, for all his peremptory dismissal of Odysseus, Achilles has not yet totally isolated himself from his companions.

The speeches in Book 9 merit very close attention because they show us that while the battles have been going on, something very unusual and significant has been happening at the end of the Achaean line. In his inactivity, Achilles has been emancipating himself from the demands of the warrior code and, in so doing, has launched a course of action which brings out hitherto concealed possibilities of individual assertiveness. His actions arise spontaneously from his own feelings about himself. There is no sense of predestination or cosmic determinism here. But the ominous suggestion presents itself that he is now setting himself over and above all forms of customary restraint, identifying what he wants as Zeus's will, banishing from his thinking any notion that what the warrior group believes is important, and regarding anyone who disagrees with him as an enemy. The angry pique of the original quarrel with Agamemnon is changing into something much more profound, complex, and dangerous—the isolation of a man who acknowledges no authority except that of his own passionate will.

ACHILLES AND PATROCLUS

When Hector succeeds in breaching the Achaean rampart and burning the ships, Achilles does reconsider, and the decision leads directly to his re-entry into the war. To understand the significance of this change, we need to consider in role of Patroclus, Achilles's dearest friend, whose death drives him back to battle with his feelings transformed. Something about the relationship with Patroclus is so

special to Achilles that, when he loses his friend, his understanding of the world changes in an extraordinary way.

At first, Patroclus appears unexceptional, another warrior among many others. As a member of Achilles personal retinue, Patroclus listens to him singing, pours wine for the ambassadors from Agamemnon, tends the fire, prepares a bed for Phoenix, and sleeps with a woman in the same hut as Achilles. Later, in Book 11, he goes to get information about the wounded Achaeans and to treat Eurypylus, before returning to Achilles and begging to be allowed to return to battle in order to assist their beleaguered companions. The pattern of these actions gradually develops a picture of Patroclus as an unusually kind man, attentive to the needs of others and sensitive to their distress, in a manner unlike anyone else in the poem. Among the constantly assertive warriors, Patroclus appears something rather special, moved more by simple human concerns for his friends than by the more egocentric demands of the heroic code. No other warrior on either side, for example, makes a plea more squarely based on simple feelings about others than does Patroclus at the opening of Book 16. Unlike Agamemnon's worry about his brother's wound or Hector's fears about Andromache, Patroclus's anxiety here is disinterested. He seeks permission to return to battle, not to enhance his reputation but to provide desperately needed assistance to their "worn out" friends. Menelaus's later tribute to Patroclus as a man who "knew how to treat every man with care," while reminding his fellow soldiers of Patroclus's "kindness" (17.818) further strengthens our sense that here we have a warrior with a special interest in the welfare of others.

The combination of Patroclus's qualities—his constant attendance on Achilles, his warm concern for others, the strong sense of mutual love between the two men, and the unique duties he has from his father to look after Achilles, "to give shrewd advice,/ prudent counsel, and direction to him" (11.909)—suggests that his relationship with Achilles has an important symbolic function. For in a sense Patroclus emerges as a constant reminder of Achilles's more sympathetically human side, his continuing social identity as a member of the warrior group. Patroclus's compassionate attachment to his fellow soldiers represents a quality which Achilles, by his withdrawal, has rejected, but the bond between Achilles and Patroclus keeps alive in his spirit at least some feelings for the warmth of human comradeship and loyalty to the community of

warriors. Whether we see Patroclus and Achilles as two side of the same man or as two quite separate individuals doesn't really matter. In his obvious feelings for Patroclus, Achilles displays a part of his nature quite different from the heroic self-assertiveness with which he conducts himself in front of everyone else (after the quarrel), and so long as Patroclus remains alive, Achilles still retains a vital link with the rest of humanity—he still has feelings for others, even if he is in the grip of fatal passions which threaten to extinguish those feelings. Hence, we can readily understand not only why Achilles agrees to Patroclus's tearful request to help the Achaeans but also why he gives him his personal armour. Of course, there is a tactical reason (to trick the Trojans into believing that Achilles himself has returned), but Achilles is also, in a sense, responding personally to the dire needs of his comrades. He is sending a part of himself out into the battle once more. It's important to notice, by the way, that this whole incident is initiated by Achilles when he sends Patroclus out to get information about the progress of the battle, a sign that he is perhaps not quite so emotionally isolated from his old friends as he might like to think.

In granting permission to Patroclus to return to battle, Achilles significantly appears torn by conflicting feelings. On the one hand, he wants a normal life among his peers, but, on the other, he wishes to emancipate himself from them as fully as possible. His first instructions appear to suggest that he has abandoned his lonely quest for ultimate justice on his own terms:

> "Now, pay attention to what I tell you,
> about the goal I have in mind for you,
> so you'll win me great honour and rewards,
> so all Danaans will send back to me
> that lovely girl and give fine gifts as well." (16.104) [16.83]

Achilles could have achieved these goals long before by agreeing to accept Agamemnon's offer. Nothing Patroclus does now will produce something equal to that earlier list of material wealth (and the status that comes with it). That Achilles should still be making a suggestion like this indicates that a part of him is still responding to the conventional ways of acting among his peers. And the restraints he places on Patroclus (not to attack the city itself but to stop once he has saved the ships) arises, by his own admission, from his desire not to have his own glory overshadowed.

However, in the very same speech, Achilles indicates just how powerful the other side of his nature has become, the uncompromising desire to have everything on his own terms, without the group:

> "O Father Zeus, Athena, and Apollo—
> if only no single Trojan or Achaean
> could escape death, and just we two alone
> were not destroyed, so that by ourselves
> we could take Troy's sacred battlements!" (16.121) [16.97]

By any normal standard, this wish makes no sense. It obviously goes against the very human desire of Patroclus to assist his comrades and also denies Achilles's wish a few lines earlier on for a return of the girl and more honours from the Achaeans. For if Achilles and Patroclus were the sole survivors, who would be left to confer status on them and value on the achievement? The emotional logic, however, is clear enough. Achilles would like to push his isolation to an extreme by not rejoining the community, but he does not wish to lose his relationship with Patroclus. He wishes, that is, to answer only to himself and yet retain his customary humanity. In the very process of expressing his deepest wishes, he exposes their paradoxical impossibility.

ACHILLES AFTER THE DEATH OF PATROCLUS

If we recognize in the relationship between Achilles and Patroclus the last and most important vestiges of Achilles's basic links to his fellow warriors, with what he used to be, then we can much more readily grasp the significance of Achilles's enormous grief at Patroclus's death and the extraordinary measures he takes to provide the funeral rites. For Achilles is here lamenting and burying himself—or at least that part which has made him a loving human being, rooted in a community, with a social identity everyone acknowledges. With Patroclus dead, he is now moving further out into new and uncertain territory, without the old links to his fellow men, and, what is particularly important, he now recognizes the fact. The death of Patroclus forces Achilles to confront the destructive consequences of his passionate, individualistic stance and to recognize for the first time the harsh ironies of fate, without the consolation of a group belief.

The first experience of this insight (which occurs when Achilles hears the news of Patroclus's death in Book 18) overpowers Achilles. He hurls himself into the dust and utter a dreadful lament which echoes throughout the entire world. And when he gets up again, he carries with him the terrible knowledge of how his life will now play itself out: he will accept his heroic fate, win revenge for Patroclus, and go to his own death.

> "Then let me die, since I could not prevent
> the death of my companion. He's fallen
> far from his homeland. He needed me there
> to protect him from destruction. So now,
> since I'm not returning to my own dear land,
> and for Patroclus was no saving light
> or for my many other comrades,
> all those killed by godlike Hector while I sat
> here by the ships, a useless burden
> on the earth—and I'm unmatched in warfare
> by any other Achaean armed in bronze,
> although in council other men are better—
> so let wars disappear from gods and men
> and passionate anger, too, which incites
> even the prudent man to that sweet rage,
> sweeter than trickling honey in men's throats,
> which builds up like smoke inside their chests,
> as Agamemnon, king of men, just now,
> made me enraged. But we'll let that pass." (18.122) [18.98]

What's extraordinary in these lines is the tone—the terrible calmness, which enables him to dismiss the passions that have driven him to this point (although they do not entirely disappear from the story), and to acknowledge in a way we have not yet witnessed a transcendent detachment from normal human concerns, so that he can accept his own responsibility in the quarrel with Agamemnon and even his own imminent death. Having learned from the death of Patroclus that he cannot have life entirely on his own terms, he will see it through to the end, true to the feelings that got him where he is.

It's important to notice that in the final stages of his story Achilles is not merely seeking revenge for Patroclus. If that were all, then his actions would be an absurd response to something that happens all the time in this war, as Odysseus points out when Achilles refuses to eat:

> "Too many men are dying every day,
> one after another. When would anyone
> get some relief from fasting? No, the dead
> we must bury, then mourn a single day,
> hardening our hearts." (19.280) [19.226]

But Odysseus (and his comrades) cannot understand that Achilles's response to the death of Patroclus expresses much more than just his grief at the loss of a dear friend. For Achilles is responding to a radical insight into the nature of life itself. In wanting both the common human bonding symbolized by his feeling for Patroclus and the ultimate greatness of the passionate individual who demands to live life on his own terms, Achilles has sought the impossible. He has exposed the complex nature of human fate (something the heroic code, the communal faith, normally keeps concealed). This he now recognizes. His actions from this point on arise out his sense of the injustice of human life, which will not grant any man, no matter how intense his passions or great his achievements, all his desires. Having unwittingly sacrificed his common humanity, Achilles will not seek to regain it but will continue in the lonely splendour and suffering of the man who will now pursue the mystery of fate to its centre and who, in complete freedom, accepts total responsibility for his personal confrontation with it. On the face of it, Achilles does return to group, but no longer as a fully participating member. He refuses to eat or sleep, seems unconcerned about status, and thinks of only one thing, getting back on the battlefield.

The full recognition of what life means gives Achilles a paradoxical quality. One the one hand he becomes extraordinarily brutal, an invincible and immovable butcher of human life, free from any conventional social or emotional restraint, a man who will fight against anything that stands in his way, even the gods themselves. On the other hand, he sometimes displays a transcendent calm, a fully mature acceptance of the mysteries of experience, unaided by any of the rituals men devise to shield them from a complete knowledge of their own condition. The first characteristic turns Achilles into a human firestorm, inexorably destroying everything in his path. The second gives him an almost prophetic power appropriate to a man who has seen deep into the heart of darkness and returned to the world of human striving. Achilles's actions against the Trojans in battle and in the bloody sacrifice of animals and men on Patroclus's funeral pyre do not stem solely from his desire for revenge against

Hector. His wrath here he directs against the world itself, which has refused to grant him everything he demanded from it and which has killed Patroclus. Without Patroclus and what he represents, Achilles has no reason to live, and his remaining human passions express themselves in a cruel slaughter against everything that has disappointed his greatest hopes, including his attack on the Scamander river, against both nature and the god. If his will has come to nothing, then he will will nothingness by attacking the world as an uncompromising destroyer. At the same time, however, Achilles's great spiritual suffering has opened his eyes to a much more all-encompassing vision of what it means to exists as a human being alone before fate.

Both of these qualities emerge in the incident with Lycaon, in which Achilles delivers one of the most extraordinarily powerful speeches in the entire poem:

> So Lycaon begged for mercy from Achilles.
> But the response he got was brutal:
>
> "You fool,
> don't offer me a ransom or some plea.
> Before Patroclus met his deadly fate,
> sparing Trojans pleased my heart much more.
> I took many overseas and sold them.
> But now not one of them escapes his death,
> no one whom god delivers to my hands,
> here in front of Ilion, not one—
> not a single Trojan, especially none
> of Priam's children. So now, my friend,
> you too must die. Why be sad about it?
> Patroclus died, a better man than you.
> And look at me. You see how fine I am,
> how tall, how handsome? My father's a fine man,
> the mother who gave birth to me a goddess.
> Yet over me, as well, hangs fate—my death.
> There'll come a dawn, or noon, or evening,
> when some man will take my life in battle—
> he'll strike me with his spear or with an arrow
> shot from his bowstring." (21.115) [21.98]

Achilles can dismiss Lycaon as a "fool" because he knows that pleading for life in the face of death makes no sense, especially when death comes in the form of an invincible warrior for whom the

warrior code has ceased to exist in any meaningful way. In a world without love and companionship, death is the only reality that matters, and anyone who is afraid of the end of an absurd life is indeed a fool. But then he can call his helpless victim "my friend" and in a kindly tone insist upon their common equality in the face of death. Killing and being killed, Achilles now understands, belong to the inevitable order of the universe, beyond all human custom, all systems of value, all illusion-giving conventions of status. Death, which makes all men equal, no man can evade or transcend, not even the greatest of men who deliberately sets himself apart. He and Lycaon are playing their parts as human beings on this earth, according to the fatal conditions into which they were born. That Achilles can declare his common humanity openly with such eloquence while performing the killing that ends human life and brings him closer to his own death indicates just how far he has travelled into the fatal ironies of human existence. His urge to destroy everything, including later the corpse of Hector, brings out his radical dissatisfaction with life, but his moments of terrible composure suggest that the process of transformation continues. The difference between the normal warrior's passionate boasting and fierce preoccupation with his own status and Achilles's lonely detached calm, the awesome tranquility of his solitary, irresistible, aware ruthlessness, reveals the unique qualities of his present spiritual limbo.

Not until after the killing of Hector does Achilles succeed in emancipating himself from the passionately destructive demands of his nature. The heroic calm breaks when he slays the Trojan hero and savagely mutilates the corpse. And though he can finally fall asleep, he gets no easy rest. We know from Achilles's attitude to Agamemnon during the funeral games that the traditional concerns of social man have largely ceased to matter to him. He can make his peace with the commander-in-chief and even award him an unearned prize, because such normal concerns as status do not matter to him anymore. The suffering he has undergone and the death which he knows awaits him have given Achilles a wholly different view of human life, as a result of which the reasons for the original quarrel now seem trivial. For the sake of his friend (and for what they shared together) he will observe the customary funeral rites, but he is no longer driven by the intense search for his own personal glory. When he talks about his own funeral mound, he specifies that he wants "nothing excessive—what seems appropriate."

ACHILLES AND PRIAM

The final stage of Achilles's story takes place in the encounter with Priam, in the meeting between the isolated young destroyer and the long-suffering old king, both soon to perish and both filled with sorrow for the conditions of human life. For the first time in the poem, two opponents face each other as men, not as warriors, and for all the bloody history of their antagonism they interact as human beings first. They touch each other's real flesh, rather than trying to puncture each other's hearts with spears hurled through artistically decorated metal. No gesture in the poem is more moving than Priam's initial greeting:

> He came up to Achilles, then with his fingers
> clasped his knees and kissed his hands, those dreadful hands,
> man-killers, which had slain so many of his sons. (24.587) [24.477]

The two men share an awareness of the imperative claims of their common humanity—beyond status, riches, past exploits, present enmity. Through the intense suffering each has experienced they can unite momentarily in a single act of human compassion:

> Priam finished. His words roused in Achilles
> a desire to weep for his own father. Taking Priam's hand,
> he gently moved him back. So the two men there
> both remembered warriors who'd been slaughtered.
> Priam, lying at Achilles' feet, wept aloud
> for man-killing Hector, and Achilles also wept
> for his own father and once more for Patroclus.
> The sound of their lamenting filled the house. (24.625) [14.509]

And the two men so different in all other respects, can demonstrate a mutual respect and tenderness in a shared sense of divinely ordained human grief:

> "But come now,
> sit on this chair. Though we're both feeling pain,
> we'll let our grief lie quiet on our hearts.
> For there's no benefit in frigid tears.
> That's the way the gods have spun the threads
> for wretched mortal men, so they live in pain,
> though gods themselves live on without a care." (24.643) [24.522]

Now Achilles can at last surrender Hector's corpse. In so doing, his new understanding of life moves beyond all selfish passion into a state of pure acceptance, a state of being earned through the stages of suffering he has experienced. Revenge on the body of Hector no longer matters. This condition is not a stoic resignation, nor is it achieved without effort, as the suggestion of the old anger indicates, when Achilles momentarily turns on Priam. But Achilles's final acknowledgment of Priam, like the old king's of him, creates a picture of their mutual awe before the ineffable mystery of life:

> When they'd satisfied their need for food and drink,
> then Priam, son of Dardanus, looked at Achilles,
> wondering at his size and beauty, like gazing
> face to face upon a god. Achilles looked at Priam,
> marvelling at his royal appearance and the words he heard. (24.779)[24.628]

For the first time in the poem, two men look at each other, say nothing, and appreciate each other simply for what they are as human beings. There is nothing left for them to say or do.

THE FUNERAL RITES FOR HECTOR

The last scenes of the poem depict the funeral rites for Hector, with the traditional rituals in place. Hector here receives the immortality for which he and all the warriors have striven throughout their lives, a public burial and the lasting memorial appropriate to a great hero. In that sense, Hector's final rites are a suitable summing up of all the deaths we have witnessed. In the celebration around the corpse the hero enters the communal memories of his people, his greatness is assured, and he achieves the only triumph over death available to him. At the same time, however, the laments of the Trojan women over Hector's bier and the very abrupt close remind us that the heroic careers of Hector and of Achilles, who is now waiting to die and to receive his memorial, and the deaths of all the other heroes have effected no significant changes. The war will go on; Troy will fall; the warriors will continue to fight elsewhere. That is the fate of human life, the glory and the terror, the triumph and the destruction, the paradoxical ironic mystery from which there is no escape.

HECTOR AND ACHILLES AND TRAGIC HEROISM

Having explored in some detail the stories of Hector and of Achilles, we can return to the question with which we began: Can we usefully apply the term tragic hero or tragic character to them? I have no wish here to argue for a particular definition of that key term which I might then employ as an analytical tool to answer the question. And so I propose to offer a few cursory remarks comparing the two warriors with characters who are, by common agreement, among our most famous tragic heroes (I have in mind especially Oedipus, Lear, and Macbeth).

Central to the stories of Oedipus, Lear, and Macbeth (and other figures we call tragic) is a willed isolation, a determination to have the world answer to them rather than entertaining any thoughts of compromise. Often this sense of isolation develops slowly and subconsciously, usually in response to a decision the character himself has made, but when he becomes aware of his emotional (and sometimes physical) displacement from the group around him, he characteristically becomes even more resolute to proceed on his own, even (or especially) when he recognizes the self-destructive consequences looming ahead. This refusal to compromise his sense of passionate individuality, his sense of his own absolute rightness, in defiance of any commonsense response, makes him distinctly different from comic heroes, who typically strive to adapt, learn, adjust, endure, and forgive, so that they can be reintegrated into their society, and it is the great mystery at the heart of the tragic response, arising from deep within the hearts of certain people, who would rather perish on their own terms than live by anyone else's standards.

This highly developed sense of passionate egocentricity is, I would claim, foreign to Hector. Throughout the poem he remains a loyal servant of the social code which has made him what he is, except for the moment when he panics and runs. And this exception appears to confirm the previous remark, because when Hector is fully isolated, he disintegrates, and he requires the presence of a fellow warrior to bring him back to his senses, so that he dies a firm believer in what he has always lived for. By contrast, when Achilles collapses in the dust at the new of Patroclus's death, he gets up again even more locked into his assertive and solitary individuality.

Achilles, we can all acknowledge, goes though a very different experience, which makes parts of his story similar in some respects to the stories of Oedipus, Lear, and Macbeth—especially his willed determination to stand apart, no matter what the cost. And, like them, the suffering he undergoes gives him, as we have seen, insights granted to no one else in the poem, including Hector. There is no doubt that if Homer had included the death of Achilles we would have little trouble considering him our first great tragic hero. But Homer does not include that episode.

Of course, not all tragic heroes and heroines die (e.g., Oedipus in *Oedipus the King* and Nora in *A Doll's House*), and some have argued that the term tragedy applies also to the nature of the suffering, without reference to the ending, the agony that comes from willing oneself to face up to fate or the gods with no consoling social illusions (so in that sense we might say that Job's experience during the suffering he undergoes is tragic, although his complete story clearly is not, since he eventually compromises and is rewarded handsomely for doing so). Much depends on the extent to which we feel that Achilles has by the end of the poem become happily reintegrated into Achaean society. Schein, for example, observes that Achilles at the end of the epic "is re-established as his distinctive self—as the hero he was . . . in the beginning" (162), an interpretation that, in effect, makes Achilles' story rather like Job's.[16] Such a view strikes me as strongly overstated, an attempt to neutralize any discomfort we may feel with what we have experienced in following Achilles's life. We are given virtually no details about Achilles after the meeting with Priam (although the final mention of him as going to bed with Briseis casually suggests he's not as displaced and

[16] Many people, of course, have objected to the ending of Job's story as a violation of the entire emotional logic of the tragedy (a later interpolation, perhaps, to bring us a more comfortable picture of God's justice). Schein is determined to mitigate any potentially tragic effect the *Iliad* may have, so that the poem becomes much more optimistic and reassuring to modern readers. For example, he sees in the ending something in which "love and solidarity seem somehow more powerful than death and destruction" and which points "beyond conventional heroic values toward an ethic of humaneness and compassion" (187). This, it strikes me, is sugar coating the darkly ironic weight of the entire poem, including the ending, to make it more palatable to modern sensibilities. And given the intensity of Achilles's and Hector's experiences and Homer's complex vision of warfare as man's fate, I find Michael Silk's summary judgment, even with his later qualifications about Achilles, very odd: "The *Iliad* is primarily celebratory, not exploratory. It presents the unchanging surface of experience, rather than the depths where nothing is constant" (102).

suffering as we have seen him). This point needs to be balanced against his sense and ours of his impending death.

My own sense is that Achilles's story is close enough to those of the other tragic heroes I have mentioned to permit us to place him in their company. What he goes through is certainly comparable to the experiences of Oedipus and Lear and Macbeth and others, and the effect of his story, like theirs, is a profound and moving challenge to our modern faith in, say, the progressive rational amelioration of life in the community or in the benevolent operations of a providential God or in a moral universe. Achilles's actions have momentarily torn aside the illusions men devise to enable them to cope with the mystery of nature, and he has taken upon himself the full consequences of that action. His suffering, like that of the other heroes, alters nothing in the world, but it affirms everything about the greatest spirit of man, the striving to rise above the ironies of war and of life itself. That's why it is so difficult to reach a clear moral evaluation of Achilles (Is he good? Is he bad?)—for, like so many great heroes we call tragic, he has pushed himself into a realm beyond the range of such human moral categories.[17]

[17] That may be why those who try to come up with a clear moral evaluation of Achilles sound so oddly wrong, as in Moses Hadas's attempt to trace the "moral deterioration" of Achilles: "The balance of right and wrong is depressed on the side of wrong when he rejects Agamemnon's bid for reconciliation. He rehabilitates himself and asserts the victory of civilization when he overcomes his own passionate impulse to abuse the boHector dy of and returns it to Priam" (16). That may reassure us about the importance of moral categories, but the terms are irrelevant to Achilles's view of why he is acting the way he is. That's what makes him such a disturbing figure.

ESSAY SEVEN
HOMER'S *ILIAD* AND THE MODERN IMAGINATION

The enduring (and growing) popularity of Homer's *Iliad* offers the most persuasive testimony of all that the vision of life celebrated in the poem still reaches deeply into the human imagination, spanning more than two thousand five hundred years. Cultures since Homer's time have constructed social and personal lives on systems of meaning very different from the harsh demands of the warrior code, but the continuing power of the work reveals just how strongly the significance of that ancient way of living still speaks to the human imagination. For, to stress the main assumption on which the interpretation in these essays rests, the *Iliad* endures, not because it qualifies as an important historical document picturing for us a civilization of human beings quite unlike us, but rather because it makes direct contact with our modern imaginations, enabling readers to discover or re-discover those parts of their identity which contemporary visions of human nature often inadequately express or ignore altogether.

Today almost all readers live in a culture that thinks of itself in a manner very different from the society depicted in the *Iliad*. For one thing, we organize our personal, social, and political lives around a vision antithetical to traditional fatalism. Both capitalist and socialist democracies, offspring of the optimistic, rational, and progressive theories of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, accept as the major challenge of life the possibilities of changing the world continuously for the better, so that human beings can liberate themselves as quickly as possible from cosmic fate or malignant chance. And we have developed extraordinarily powerful rational metaphors which enable us to comprehend nature and the mind in such a way as to foster this central imperative of our culture, especially in North America, where we have almost no traditions from before the age of progress (other than our aboriginal cultures, which have had virtually no effect on the thinking of non-aboriginal citizens). This optimistic doctrine, which we might call liberalism, informs virtually all contemporary political and personal thinking in the West (excepting only those traditional religious faiths which have survived from earlier times, notably the Roman Catholic Church). Underlying our apparently rich array of political choices, there is a

massive consensus about the appropriate relationship between man, nature, and the gods.[18]

Clearly this modern orthodoxy encourages a faith incompatible with the pessimistic fatalism and the conservative ethic of the warrior peer group. What sane modern man sets out to direct his energies in a vain fight in the killing zone when all the important battles, in which victory is, of course, attainable, require him to combat the corrigible faults in his social organization, environment, or personal life? When we substitute rational sociology or psychology and a faith in scientific progress for irrational fatalism, we erect a substantial imaginative barrier between ourselves and Homer. Moreover, in applying our modern models to the interpretation of human character, we have become extraordinary self-conscious. We can no longer accept actions, especially unusual departures from the norm, as simple spontaneous expressions of character for which the agent does not bear total responsibility. Instead we measure them by analytical tools which enable us to explain them away as products of this or that inner process: behind every unusual action lies an unusual molecule or a strange family life. Obviously this affects our ability to appreciate the behaviour of the Iliadic warriors, for by modern standards we can easily see their apparently strange conduct as the actions of deviants, case studies in abnormality, something to be dismissed, controlled, or condemned. And the tragic hero, the person who launches himself on an ironically self-destructive quest for ultimate meaning, becomes an oddball. The ancient symbol of the highest possibilities for the human spirit degenerates into a clinical specimen. And so, when our faith in our most cherished modern ideals fails us, we populate our stories with tragic-comic figures, who cope with an emotionally absurd world by playing games, trying to fill in time until something happens, or else we laugh with the comic figures who retreat with style from the chaos. The instinctual certainties of ancient heroes often turn neurotic or farcical.

---

[18] My remarks here owe a great deal to the writings of George Grant and Michael Howad.

Moreover, those forms of modern belief which celebrate individualism have little room for the conventions of status, public opinion, and shame as worthy guides to conduct. Inheritors of the Romantic movement, we adhere strongly to the official notion, especially in our private lives, that the individual has an obligation to create his own future in his own way, without regard to pressure from peers. To do this, we need to separate ourselves from the past. The conduct of one's ancestors, if it counts at all, is something we must move beyond. Particularly in North America, where the cult of self-reliance has taken such deep root, the conservative family and peer group standards in the Iliad run counter to the spirit of the place. What popular cowboy hero, the ultimate self-made man, ever had parents, a home town, or a peer group to control his actions? His sense of value comes from his self-generated code of conduct, often in defiance of and usually unconnected to any social group. Always in motion and always alone, he defines himself, in large part, by the absence of any traditional associations. And anyway, in the huge, anonymous, multi-cultural, pluralistic cities where most of the hero worshippers live, where do we find the truly significant peer group we need to answer to?

> Each tragic hero, in his defeat, beats on the boundaries of existence and makes them less limiting. The limits had to come from the idea of a community, where every individual had a name and a local function. This sort of community, with a system of individual craftsmanship interlocking for the common good, this pure division of labor, is a far cry from revolutionary ideas of community or communism. These larger economies are geared to units of such massive size that every individual must be expendable. Tragedy is a remnant of the time when no one was. The older idea of community is an organic one, and the malfunction of one member of that community analogous to the failure of an organ of the body. That "body politic" has now become the "system." (Lenson 160)

To such a culture what can Homer's *Iliad* possibly say? The continuing vitality of the poem indicates that it obviously provides something significant to us, but given the radical differences sketched out above (in much too cursory a fashion), what could that be? In searching for an answer to this question, we discover why reading the *Iliad* matters, why the poem, for all its strangeness (or perhaps because of its strangeness) generates an imaginative excitement often missing from contemporary fiction. For the *Iliad* acquaints us (or re-

acquaints us) with potentialities of the human spirit with which we may have lost contact in daily lives shaped by a different and, in some respects, more limiting vision of reality. In doing this, the poem obviously challenges our sensibilities and forces us to explore from a fresh perspective many of those unexamined assumptions which we accept as the truth because we have never known or imagined any alternatives. If that takes place, then the work is educating our imaginations in the fullest sense, putting us in vital contact with those parts of our own nature that our modern faith cannot entirely satisfy.

HOMER AMONG THE MORALISTS AND CLINICIANS

To accept the challenge of the Iliadic vision of life is not always easy, for the picture Homer gives us may radically contradict our cherished beliefs in a very different system of order. It is not surprising, then, that the history of Homer criticism reveals a number of different ways in which interpreters of the *Iliad* have traditionally sought to ward off the challenge by changing the poem into something more readily compatible with more comforting visions of experience. In such cases, the dialectical tensions between the old vision and present sensibilities, which lies at the heart of all significant interpretation of old works, becomes weighted in favour of the prejudgments and cultural biases of the reader, and the potentially fruitful interaction between the past the present transforms itself into an energetic defence of modern ideas, often at the expense of the text itself.

Some of the earliest criticism we have of Homer, for example, finds his vision unacceptable because the religious system in the *Iliad* is incompatible with a belief in divinities who uphold clear moral standards or who behave in a morally acceptable manner. Plato's treatment of the poets, and especially of Homer, is well known. They must leave the ideal state, with due honours, if their fictions are not commensurate with the rational system of belief upon which everything in the state is to be organized. Nowadays, the great authority of Homer as an enduring classic, the fame of his poems, means that serious critics, lacking Plato's revolutionary intentions, find it impossible to dismiss the *Iliad* out of hand, but anyone who teaches the epic to general readers will recognize a common initial response to the poem in the rejection of it on the ground that, by modern standards, what it contains is abhorrent. Significantly, such a response does not always indicate, as we might too readily assume, an insensitivity to the poetry. On the contrary, the moral disapproval

that the *Iliad* sometimes evokes can demonstrate that the readers are seeing and reacting to the emotional implications of Homer's vision. The energetic dismissal of that vision can express the urgency with which they feel the need to respond decisively to a seductively dangerous alternative view of the world (my own sense is that this remark applies especially to Plato).

A second, more sophisticated strategy for dealing with any discomfort the *Iliad* might occasion is to make the poem much more familiar by imposing a traditional moral framework upon it, that is, to interpret the poem so that it fits a more reassuring sense of moral order in the cosmos. The history of Homeric studies reveals a long tradition of such a response to the poem.[19] This method defends the poem against the criticisms of those who would dismiss it outright on moral grounds, but at the expense of forcing onto Homer's vision a simple moral paradigm, which can enervate the work's most paradoxically vital heart. If the reader can draw a familiar and comfortable moral from the story, subordinating its radical and discomforting ironies to the moral verities of a modern way of thinking, then the poem becomes an endorsement of contemporary belief rather than a challenge to it.[20] Those interpreters who, like Don Juan's mother, earnestly wish to pass on classical literature to the young as easily and inoffensively as possible often find this method of dealing with the *Iliad* very persuasive.

> His classic studies made a little puzzle,
> Because of filthy loves of gods and goddesses,
> Who in the earlier ages raised a bustle,
> But never put on pantaloons or bodices;
> His reverend tutors had at time a tussle
> And for their Aeneids, Iliads, and Odysseys,
> Were forced to make an odd sort of apology,
> For Donna Inez dreaded the mythology. (Lord Byron, *Don Juan*)

---

[19] For an interesting study of this and related matters, see Howard Clarke. The Christian precedents of such a treatment of pagan literature are very old and authoritative, stemming, in part, from Deuteronomy 21:10, which advises the God-fearing man who wishes to domesticate a beautiful and desirable infidel enemy to "bring her home to thine house and she shall shave her head, and pare her nails," in other words, immediately surrender all her wild, dangerous, and alluring strangeness. If she behaves herself for a while, she may stay, and an appropriately safe union may be consummated.

[20] So, for example, Dryden's summary judgment in "Preface to Troilus and Cressida" that Homer's moral is "union preserves a commonwealth and discord destroys it" (1:213), or Hadas' view, quoted in the last essay, that the story of Achilles is a victory for civilization.

In a similar vein, a certain Archdeacon Williams in the nineteenth century was surprised to find "most of the essential principles of Christianity in the *Iliad*," and could explain this remarkable similarity only by accepting the fact that heathen Homer must have had access to the tradition of the Hebrew patriarchs (qu. Blackie 16). We may well chuckle at the credulous archdeacon (as did some of his contemporaries), but the tradition to which his interpretation belongs is still very much alive, even if its adherents are not quite so ludicrously explicit about the matter. An approach to the *Iliad* which seeks to transform the Trojan war into a moral encounter between the forces of civilized good and barbarian evil, for example, and which, therefore, ignores the overwhelming similarities between the opponents and the eternal, fated quality of the war, makes the harshness of the *Iliad* much more acceptable. We may hate the destructiveness of war as much as the ancient warriors, but we cope with that by the notion of a just war, where the forces of good are (regrettably) justified in punishing their nasty opponents. Indeed, this is the commonest argument we use today (with the Iraq conflict still raging) to reconcile ourselves to war's brutality. That such an interpretation of the war in the *Iliad* violates Homer's vision will be apparent to anyone who has found the arguments in these essays at all persuasive.

In his study of the *Iliad*, for example, Seth L. Schein insists upon important cultural differences between the two opposing groups, so as to make the Trojans the "aggressors" and "transgressors, who are morally responsible for their own ruin" (20). This judgment is unacceptably strained. Given the fact that the Achaeans have come a long way from home to raze Troy, destroy its male citizens, including the children, and to enslave the women, Schein's desire to place the war in an modern orthodox framework of belief, making it a punishment for sin, has led him to bend the notion of aggressor and transgressor beyond a reasonable limit. This assessment, moreover, violates the commonly expressed sympathy many readers have for the Trojans. G. S. Kirk, too, like C. M. Bowra (23), shares the view that the *Iliad* demonstrates a simple moral lesson, "all this has been made inevitable by Paris's offense against hospitality" (*Commentary* 333). Thus, he can transform the terrible power of the gods into something much more comfortable: although they are "not always Sunday-school characters in Homer, they are nevertheless determined guardians of the basic rules of order and respect" ("Homer" 73), a

comment which changes Homer's irrational and fiercely quarrelsome and destructive divine family into a group of those genially and mildly sadistic but, on the whole, pedagogically effective junior housemasters and housemistresses who maintain the rules in the traditional private school.

The application of a simple moralistic formula to Homer's narrative has some unfortunate effects. First, it denies that quality for which Homer has always been highly acclaimed, namely, his impersonality, the objectivity with which he impartially records the most passionate efforts of heroic men. Secondly, this approach suggests that, far from challenging our imaginations with a sense of life's mystery, Homer has already done all the significant thinking we need to bring to the poem. Thirdly, reduction of the *Iliad* to a simple morality piece does raise at least one interpretative problem which those who offer such a reassuring hypothesis characteristically avoid. Quite apart from the persuasive evidence that Zeus and his divine family are not driven by or upholders of such a simple moral code, this common interpretation inevitably raises the question familiar to readers of *Paradise Lost*: How does one reconcile such a neat moral scheme with the disproportionately harsh punishment, the brutal deaths of many warriors, the destruction of an ancient city and its inhabitants, in response to the sin of romantic adultery and theft. A reasonable consideration of this issue prompted Herodotus to observe that the Greeks "were seriously to blame; for it's the Greeks who were, in a military sense, the aggressors. Abducting young women, in their opinion, is not, indeed, a lawful act; but it is stupid after the event to make a fuss about it" (42). If we are prepared to entertain the notion that the *Iliad* is a tale with a straightforward moral (and as critics we should be prepared to examine any reasonable hypothesis), then we should also be ready to explore the implications of that interpretative approach fully and not simply use it to close off further consideration of the poem's complexities.

One can make similar objections to other attempts to derive from the poem a picture more amenable to our conventional imaginations: for example, Kenneth John Atchity's sense of the "didactic distinction" in the moralized lesson depicted on the shield of Achilles or Redfield's assertion that "There is not much nobility in the act of war, which is in itself a negation of human things, barbaric and impure" (101). Such attempts would obviously include the strategy of distancing the reader from the heroic warriors by the use of a style

rich in clinical terms, a language which tries to establish their extreme psychological abnormality. When, for example, critics write of the Iliadic warriors as schizophrenic and constantly subject to hallucinations (Jaynes 93) or describe Achilles's behaviour as "pathological barbarism" (Kirk, "Homer" 73) or "the throes of an acute neurosis" (Michelopoulos 95), the critical vocabulary may encourage reader to place the Homeric characters in that special place we reserve for the sick people we find unacceptable, the hidden medical facility into which we need never glimpse, once we've read the diagnostic labels. Such an interpretative language obviously inhibits the reader from exploring imaginatively the connections between her own behaviour and the often brutal conduct of Homer's warriors. Such loaded medical language is of no help in coming to grips with anything important in the vision of life this poem presents—it's rather like offering as an analysis of Lear's conduct the fact that he is senile or of Oedipus's story that he's too paranoid, comments with no helpful explanatory value. For if Homer's characters are clinically ill or psychologically abnormal, then why do we need to attend to them as human beings with recognizable connections to ourselves?

> Our response to the *Iliad* can be explained as a recollection of the infantile struggle to define the self in terms of the mother's image, projected to the child, of himself, a struggle that is erotic in Freudian terms and a response to sense impression in Hegleian terms. We find in the *Iliad* a concentration on this narcissistic struggle and seek thereby the explain the paradox that in a poem about a war fought for a woman the focus of attention is on the relationship between the hero and his dear male companion. (MacCary xi)

The modern approach defined in the above quote leads inevitably, as one might expect, to the positing of an "Achilles complex" which "with its speculation of the self, if uncorrected by oedipal displacement onto others of all our ontic energy, is a vector reversing to recover that void: the death drive" (250). And so the imaginatively rich suffering of Achilles becomes the study of yet another modern maladjusted heel.

CASTRATING THE GODS

One of the most curious and yet popular method for neutralizing the potentially disturbing qualities of the *Iliad* leads critics to dismiss the

significance of the religious vision because the gods are "merely" literary devices, with no meaningful link to anything that matters outside the poem. This tradition goes back many years and remains, even in this century, in spite of our vastly increased knowledge about the vital importance of "primitive" faith, a common way of approaching what can be for some people a particularly difficult aspect of the poem. C. M. Bowra's well-known comment is an excellent example:

> This complete anthropomorphic system has of course no relation to real religion or morality. These gods are a delightful gay invention of poets who were prepared to use their material freely in an age which enjoyed its gods. (222)

For some reason, this rather odd view is fairly common: "The gods whom Homer pictures are not the gods he worshipped; they are poetic creations whom Homer adapted to his own needs without fear and evidently without reverence" (John Scott 174); "the gods of the *Iliad* belong to the conventional world of the epic and were understood as such by the audience. Just as the epic tells not of men, but of heroes, so also it tells stories, not of gods conceived as actual, but of literary gods" (Redfield 76); "The gods are in general not an expression of the poet's religious beliefs but part of his mechanism for preparing future events" (West 17). And so on.

Obviously there's a certain validity to such claims that Homer's divine figures are a literary creation, because Homer's gods are present in a literary work. But the intention here seems to be to persuade us that they are "merely" literary creations, an invitation not to take them as serious explorations of religious belief. The confident tone these remarks project rests on no firm historical evidence, since we have no access to reliable information about the relationship between Homer, his poem, and the religious beliefs or poetical conventions of his age. And a study of later Greek religion can encourage us to see these gods as considerably more than delightful literary inventions (whatever that means precisely).

> The Homeric image of divinity is an image of marvellous and compelling adequacy; it underwrites and explains the human sense of contradiction and conflict in experience, and yet contains contradiction within a more fundamental order. It enables divinity to be understood as the source of disorder in the world, and, in the extreme case, mirrored in the myth of war between the gods and

> giants, as the ultimate defence of order against brute chaos, as well as being the unconquerable barrier to human excess and the potentially destructive violence of human self-assertion. We would be quite wrong, I suggest, to set aside the model of divinity that we find in the Homeric poems and imagine it as a purely literary fiction and no part of the "sense" of Greek religion. (Gould 25)

Moreover, even if the historical record clearly demonstrated a significant difference between Homer's religious vision and the views of his contemporaries or established the existence of a conventional literary Olympian family with no religious significance, that would still not necessarily mean that the Iliadic gods carry no religious weight outside the poem. For Homer, as a great artist (like Blake or Milton) is perfectly capable of creating an enduring and serious vision at odds with contemporary orthodoxy. Our response to the gods must take its cue, surely, from the attitudes to them developed in the poem. For example, the important difference between our assessments of, say, Milton's divine characters in *Paradise Lost* and Pope's celestial machinery in *The Rape of the Lock* emerges not from any connection or lack of connection we may perceive between these visions and the historical reality of the fiction or the biographies of the authors, but from the very different attitudes towards the divine which the narrators of the poems and characters in them express. And whatever we may, from our contemporary perspective, want to believe about the gods in the *Iliad*, there is no doubt that the narrator and the characters take them very seriously indeed.

HOMER AMONG THE HISTORICAL SCHOLARS

The most firmly entrenched way of separating the reader's modern sensibility from what Homer's text has to reveal about our common humanity, however, is the approach which insists that we can only properly appreciate the poem if we deal with first and foremost as an ancient historical object, firmly rooted in a particular time and place and inaccessible except to those willing to absorb a great deal of historical information. I have no wish here to weigh the conflicting demands of the past and the present in our interpretations of ancient texts, but any brief survey of modern treatments of the *Iliad* must take into account the ways in which the historical approach to such a work can, in many cases, encourage an emphasis which lessens the immediate imaginative impact of the work for the non-specialist. It may well be true, as one anonymous reader of an earlier version of

this essay observed, "the best critics of Homer have always been historical critics, and it is quixotic to think otherwise." But it is equally true that specialized historical enquiry, for all its obvious achievements (including, most importantly, the text of Homer's poems), has often tended to remove the *Iliad* from the realm of public discourse, that is, from the world of the general reader, who is not prepared to wade through rivers of historical facts in order to reach an understanding of the poem. There is no necessary reason why historical criticism must do this, but that it often does is attested to by many melancholy observations:

> Modern studies of classical antiquity tend to stress anything and everything rather than the moral-political nexus. The present trends in classical scholarship cannot be taken as a reliable guide to either the past or the present value of the classical humanities for us. . . . To put it in a relatively polite and objective way, most scholarship in the humanities is not very humanistic, if measured by the value-oriented old humanities. (Else 807)

> The problem lies not in historians' methods but in their ambitions. Professionalization and specialization have reshaped history, like all academic disciplines. Historians—partly from the stark necessities of making a career, partly from a natural inclination to direct their work to those best fitted to judge—write almost entirely for other historians (or for the students in courses taught by other historians, which in practice usually amounts to the same thing). The proliferation of more or less esoteric methodologies in the past ten or fifteen years has accelerated this tendency considerably. Countervailing pressures to speak to a wider audience of educated men and women are fitful and feeble. In this, history closely resembles other disciplines. (Turner 223-4)

My own (unresearched) sense is that in the past twenty years or so, the renewed interest in Great Books programs in North America has lessened the emphasis on historical approaches to Homer, at least in the classroom, since many (or most) of those students now studying the *Iliad* have no intention of immersing themselves in Classical Studies and are studying the work without constant reference to its historical context. Nonetheless, it is still important to emphasize that we have to be careful not to shield ourselves from Homer by insisting that it is an old work from another age, which we can understand only by constant reference to historical facts, as best we can ascertain them. Of course, the *Iliad* is immensely important as a historical document, but we need to remember, too, that "As poetry

[the Homeric epics] are independent of place and date, for their appeal is to human nature" (Myres 3). Thus, when Cedric Whitman tells us that it is "impossible to approach the Homeric poems as one would approach the written text of any other author" (8), we need take this advice with some care. If Whitman simply wants to call attention to Homer's unusual style, then the remark states only what we might point to in any great masterpiece—its uniquely challenging poetic language. If, on the other hand, the claim here is, as it seems to be, that the oral conventions of Homer's poetry turn the epic into something inaccessible to the modern reader without a thorough grounding in the scanty records of oral poetry in Ancient Greece, then the general reader has to ask herself whether she should not give up and turn her attention to reading Shakespeare, until such time as a well-known scholar tells her that understanding the plays is "impossible" without a thorough grasp of Elizabethan stage conventions and the history of blank verse. Whitman's book, interestingly enough, refutes his own claim, for, in addition to its remarkably interesting scholarship, *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* stands out as one of the most useful critical interpretations of the *Iliad* largely on the strength of the central chapters, in which Whitman deliberately sets aside his historical concerns and approaches the text of the poem directly, in accordance with the ahistorical principles of a New Critic, a methodology for which he offers a persuasive defence (102 ff).

HOMER AND MODERN WARFARE

Nowhere does Homer challenge our modern sensibilities more than in our feelings about war, for our vision of that common human activity is significantly different from that of the Iliadic warriors, even though we may share with them a sense of war as an unwelcome evil, a brutal and destructive enterprise which threatens much that human beings most cherish. In recognizing this, our modern spirit approaches war as it would any other evil, as a problem with particular human causes (psychological, social, political, economic, and so on) and therefore as something corrigible. Our civilization has worked hard to eliminate any trace of the idea that warfare is a given fact of life which we need to organize into coherent rituals in order to make it bearable, and we have made repeated attempts to end warfare (e.g., the "war to end all wars"). The result has been, to say the least, ironic: we have multiplied by the millions the destructiveness of the experience we so confidently set out to control and have left the

presence of war as common as ever. In the process, even our most humanitarian intentions have become horribly transformed into routine atrocities and, largely as a result of our rational plans for the improvement of our condition, the battlefield has, in many cases, lost its vital human significance and turned into a place of "terrible, terrible war made so fearful because in every country every man lost his head and lost his own centrality, his own manly isolation in his own integrity, which alone keeps life real" (D. H. Lawrence 216).

To make this observation is not to claim that Homer is right and that we are wrong. Such crude, sweeping evaluations are simplistic. What a confrontation between Homer's vision and our modern historical experience might suggest, however, is that our vision of warfare and the metaphors of human nature and society from which it springs may well be flawed in some fundamental ways which, because we are so thoroughly products of modern times, we cannot properly comprehend. With the traditional rational optimism which forms the basis for most of our political rhetoric and media analysis, we may not be able to grasp the ironic complexities of the most ironic of human experiences. Looking back over the past two and a half centuries, we can easily find evidence to suggest that many of the great slogans born from the Enlightenment were excessively sanguine. And surely none of those confident pronouncements viewed in retrospect now appears more disingenuous than liberalism's most famous dictum about war, the heading to section twenty-four in the first chapter Carl von Clausewitz's *On War*, "War is Merely a Continuation of Policy by Other Means." To the rational analyst, there's no mystery about it, for warfare is just one more useful tool in our box of political instruments, and "Anything other than that which still remains unique to war is concerned merely with the peculiar nature of the means war uses." The wars in the century and a half since the publication of these words are a terrible denunciation of the naive rational analysis which makes warfare nothing more than a convenient tool available to our policy planners.[21]

To point out this irony of modern times is not to claim that our best hopes for humankind are entirely misplaced. Nor does it mean that

[21] Significant, too, is the industrial metaphor upon which Clausewitz bases his analysis: "The conduct of war resembles the workings of an intricate machine with tremendous friction, so that the combinations which are easily planned on paper can be executed only with great effort" (17).

we must set aside our efforts to contain or mitigate warfare. These are worthy and necessary priorities. However, a challenge to our conventional ways of thinking about war might well help us recognize that many of the frustrations we encounter and mistakes we make in thinking and deciding about war may well stem, not from the complications in or misuse of Clausewitz's toolbox, but from the rational metaphor we apply to something which properly belongs to the mysterious and irrational order of nature, which is, in the well-known words of J. S. Haldane, not only stranger than we presently imagine, but stranger than we can possibly imagine.

It's clear, for example, that we don't like to acknowledge Athena's presence in the battle lines, that is, to acknowledge that war answers to certain powerful, joyous, and creative potentialities in the human spirit. That the finest men often respond to combat with enthusiasm and a vital pride in themselves and that the working class, which was going to save society from the cruel militarists, is often particularly eager to volunteer for the next campaign can puzzle us, often into angry denials of what we do not wish to confront, in spite of the evidence all around us. Our understanding of war, in other words, may suffer from limited and limiting notions of human nature and providence and prevent us from a more intelligent sense of war's mystery.

And yet the mystery insists on manifesting its power. Commenting in 1910 on our continuing inability to abandon warfare, William James observed:

> Turn the fear over as I will in my mind, it all seems to lead back to two unwillingnesses of the imagination, one aesthetic, and the other moral; unwillingness, first to envisage a future in which army life, with its many elements of charm, shall be forever impossible, and in which the destinies of peoples shall nevermore be decided quickly, thrillingly, and tragically, by force, but only gradually and insipidly by "evolution"; and, secondly, unwillingness to see the supreme theatre of human strenuousness closed, and the splendid military aptitudes of men doomed to keep always in a state of latency and never show themselves in action. These insistent unwillingnesses, no less than other aesthetic and ethical insistencies, have, it seems to me, to be listened to and respected. One cannot meet them effectively by mere counter-insistency on war's expensiveness and horror. The horror makes the thrill; and when the question is of getting the extremest and supremest out of human nature, talk of expense sounds ignominious. The weakness

> of so much merely negative criticism is evident—pacificism makes no converts from the military party. The military party denies neither the bestiality nor the horror, nor the expense; it only says that these things tell but half the story. It only says that war is worth them; that taking human nature as a whole, its wars are its best protection against its weaker and more cowardly self, and that mankind cannot afford to adopt a peace-economy. (9)

These words appeared before we witnessed the staggering increase in battlefield and civilian atrocities in two world wars and more or less continuous warfare somewhere or other ever since, and yet, to judge from the continuing popularity of war in nations great and small and the enormous commitment around the world to maintaining military institutions, pacificism continues to win too few converts from the military party. That being the case, it strikes me that a fatalistic sense of the complexities of war might well be a more useful way of thinking about the subject, a traditional starting point which, in our rational hopes for progress, we have too easily dismissed. Of course, such a stance might contradict our most cherished dreams, but if we wish to cope with the realities of war maturely, we must surely by now be willing to recognize the dangers of those illusions which have repeatedly disappointed us and left us incapable of dealing intelligently with our own battle experiences.

HOLLYWOOD

The most obvious contemporary evidence for our inability to comprehend fully our own wars comes from the very popular but very confused films which attempt to make sense of the conflicts in Vietnam (and now in Iraq). The most remarkable characteristic of these conflicts is the way in which they resist the easy moral categories our modern North American culture has developed to understand its own wars. For the first step we traditionally undertake to understand the brutality of war is to identify a particular evil person or group against whom the national forces of goodness can then direct an arsenal of well-armed liberal principles to solve the problem quickly and efficiently. We need to identify someone to blame, especially someone who, in the progressive combat between good and evil, can finally be overcome by the forces of goodness. American popular artists had no trouble fitting World Wars One and Two and the Korean War into this conventional paradigm, because the nasty Germans, Japanese, and Chinese were, in the popular imagination, so obviously the sources of all the evil which warfare

brings and because the forces of good eventually triumphed. But the war in Vietnam is not susceptible to such treatment, and what's going on in Iraq creates problems, as well. The Vietnamese appear so uncomfortably close to the American vision of what constitutes goodness (constantly fighting for their liberation from foreign occupiers and tyrannical corruption in Saigon, for example), and, for all the later Rambo revisionism ("They never beat us in a pitched battle" and so on), the Vietnamese eventually triumphed. No one can deny the atrocities of the killing zone, and no one can yet forget the scenes of American personnel desperately scrambling for the last helicopters. Where did all this originate? Where is the clearly identifiable culprit? Years later, similar atrocities in Iraq are a daily feature of the news, and the forces of goodness are increasingly bogged down in a destructive mess they themselves created. What happened?

And so in the popular imagination the blame is placed on the liars in the White House, deranged militarists, or on some sinister military-industrial complex. Even those who know better, who are aware of the hopelessly ironic experience of the war in which the country had become enmeshed, could not challenge the national mythology which it is their political duty to sustain. Asked why he had not told the American people the truth about Vietnam, President Johnson answered with characteristically colloquial but revealing candour, "When your mother-in-law has only one eye and that eye is in the middle of her forehead, you don't keep her in the living room." One sees what the president meant. In the Great Society Polyphemus is not a native son, or at least we do not openly admit to a relationship. The optimistic national faith in the goodness of man and the country does not wish to confront a more sinister vision of itself. By contrast, it wants to protect itself with "the illusions of eternal strength and health, and of the essential goodness of people; illusions of a nation, the lies of generations of frontier mothers who had to croon falsely, that there were no wolves outside the cabin door" (F. S. Fitzgerald 134). In the Vietnam experience the wolves came right into the house, and ever since, following President Johnson's advice, American popular artists have been trying to shove them into a hidden back room.

Such widely hailed films as *Apocalypse Now* (1979), *Platoon* (1987), *Full Metal Jacket* (1987), and *Good Morning, Vietnam* (1988), for example, depict graphically enough the horrors of war. In fact, the single most

remarkable quality of these films is their rendition of the grinding and bloody interaction between men and matter, and the most compelling moments arise out of the powerful images of the destructive machinery of war. But to judge from these films (and others), the director lacks any significant way of making sense out of this destruction. The obsession with the material face of war often suggests that the director is hoping that a coherent human response to the experience with somehow emerge from a faithful rendition of the harsh surface details. The frequent and unsatisfactory use (by now a familiar convention) of the coordinating central monologue by the main character to link the scenes only reminds us how impossible it is for any American Everyman to remain true to his national faith and, at the same time, to recognize the fatal ambiguities of conduct to which the depictions of war are calling attention.

In other words, these films, by providing naturalistic pictures of men in battle, immediately raise certain complex questions about the nature of warfare, but then, as if ignorant of or horrified by what is emerging, the films inevitably fail to manifest an intelligent awareness of the ironies which they themselves reveal. And obvious example occurs in *Platoon*, which rather crudely directs the viewer to accept Sergeant Elias as evil and Sergeant Barnes as good. But the film necessarily raises a question it does not dare to explore: Why, then, is the good man doing exactly the same thing as the bad man, killing the enemy and leading his men out to be killed? And why, for all his protestations to the contrary, does he appear to be so good at it and to enjoy himself so much. Quite against the director's intentions, the "evil" Sergeant Elias, emerges as the only character of real depth and interest in the film because he is the only one who looks directly at the war and makes a considered decision to accept it as a condition of his life, since he cannot escape it, and to impose his will upon it, rather than constantly trying to evade it or to complain about it with a string of colloquial and repetitive obscenities.

Apocalypse Now neutralizes any imaginative discomfort by presenting the central character, Willard, as abnormal right from the opening frames, a man who sleeps beside his gun and slashes his own flesh as part of his morning ablutions (the name itself is interesting: the best known earlier Hollywood character named Willard was a young lad obsessed with rats). The violence is shocking, but the image finally consoling: whatever happens on the strange trip up the river need not affect the viewer's sense of himself, because clearly Willard is, like

Colonel Kurtz, a freak. And Willard does not have to deal with anything he might have learned from his nightmarish trip because the film leaves him stranded, miles up a foreign creek, while napalm takes care of the horrors he has experienced. Interestingly enough, Coppola borrowed extensively from Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* to create a narrative for the film but, in his treatment of the main character and the ending, totally neutralizes the point of Conrad's haunting tale. *Good Morning, Vietnam* brings the protagonist right up against some of the complexities of war, including the awareness of his own complicity in the violence, and then forcibly removes him from having to act on that awareness, easily and evasively resolving his problems with a silly baseball game and laying the blame for the evils of war on stupid military types. He does not have to evaluate and act upon his new knowledge because by the time he finds out what is really happening, he knows he is going home.

In adopting such evasive strategies, whatever their declared intentions about delivering the reality of war, many modern film-makers are really trying, and to judge from the public approval for their efforts, evidently succeeding, in consoling the audience, in demonstrating with sentimental popular art that the liberal vision is still intact and that, but for a few nasty generals, mentally unbalanced citizens, and sleazy politicians, the Vietnam war would never have happened. By striving to put that war behind America into the repository of traditional national myths, the films resurrect the frontier lies and reassure their audiences that the wolves have migrated elsewhere. Responding to the optimistic imperatives of the national consciences, the film-makers dissolve Homer's front-line sibling partnership of Athena and Ares, convert Athena into a lover of peace (or, more commonly, a hater of war), keep Ares, now the orphan result of some inexplicable and unwelcome lethal recessive mutation in the form of a few nasty human beings, and set the two deities against each other, finally awarding the palm to Athena. In the process, for all the full-screen horror these films depict, the harsh, irrational fatalism of warfare becomes changed into a reasonable, comforting, and sentimental moral allegory which can then be applied to the opening of the next encounter. In that sense, there's a clear line between the re-interpretations of Vietnam and the bellicose confidence which launched the Iraq expeditions.

The imaginative failure of American popular culture to comprehend its own experience of war emerges also in the great hostility which often greets attempts to explore the phenomenon in more complex ways. Cimono's film *Deer Hunter*, for example, makes an unusual and intelligent attempt to picture the connections between the experience of combat and the warrior's origins in and his return to a community governed by traditional ritual. Although in the film the connections between that community and the war are very tenuous, Cimono's treatment of the effects of war and especially his very disturbing and powerful central metaphor of Russian roulette offer no easy moral triumph for the American way. Indeed, at the end of the film the communal singing of "God Bless American" brings out the thinness of the national sentiment when matched against the irrational absurdity of the experiences we have witnessed. But liberal apologists routinely castigate the film with charges of xenophobic "racism" and "political amnesia" largely because Cimono shows the Vietnamese soldiers caught up in the barbarous treatment of prisoners of war. And thus the potential illumination of some aspects of war's complexity gets shoved aside while opponents of this critical vision debate the historical veracity of Cimono's narrative (see, for example, "Four Shots" and Kael 512-519).

Similarly, *The Warriors* (1979), not a Vietnam film but a particularly interesting exploration of urban combat, earned the wrath of Sol Yurick, the Marxist-inspired author of the book on which the film was based. He hated the film because it had taken his vision of the economic deprivation of the young New York street gangs, an attack on the social imperfections of American society--"You see, I wanted to get across the sense of what the social distribution of wealth really means" (qtd Auster and Georghkas 22)—and turned it into a challenging picture of how in the midst of an irrational, hostile, and fated labyrinth from which there is no exit and where danger leaps out from every corner, the human spirit responds with a Homeric sense of aggressively brutal and frequently beautiful individualistic assertiveness, held together by the dynamics of status within the group. The author's liberal imagination could not accept the Greekness of the film. That's odd, of course, because he had based his story on Xenophon's *Anabasis*.

FINAL THOUGHTS

To introduce into an essay on Homer's *Iliad* a discussion of modern popular visions of battle is a legitimate way of calling attention to a central argument of this essay, namely, that Homer's epic has much to teach us about ourselves. For a culture's vision of war, the way its people comprehend that universal experience, arises out of its deepest assumptions about man, nature, and the gods, that is, from the mythology basic to the way people think and feel. One is not surprised, therefore, that the difficulties popular film-makers have in exploring the Vietnam conflict are to a large extent shared by intellectuals investigating the same events. The academic literature on that war, by now very copious, demonstrates again and again the extent to which the attempts to understand what happened and why are limited by the liberal assumptions about the nature of man fundamental to our intellectual inquiries. The terrible emotional impact of a brutal war and humiliating defeat are explained away in accounts of the events which point to the unskillful use of the machinery of war, the evil or stupidity of particular leaders, the ignorance of those who should have studied the data more thoroughly, and so on. Significantly absent is the notion that warfare is something beyond complete human control and understanding and that, therefore, the confidence with which we discuss it and try to use it as "merely the continuation of policy by other means" or as a machine with lots of friction reveals a dangerous naiveté which we would be wise to take into account. Such studies thus not only prevent us from recognizing any possible connection between the destructiveness, our inadequate metaphors, and the mysterious passions lurking in nature, but also finally reassure us: there is nothing intrinsically wrong with the metaphor or with the common man; we (or some of us) just applied it incorrectly.[22] And, after all, the Vietnamese never beat us in a pitched battle.

To those who maintain such a comforting hypothesis the example of Senator William Fulbright is particularly instructive. In his opposition to the Vietnam expedition, Fulbright was fond of pointing out the parallels between American folly and Thucydides's account of the Athenian expedition to Sicily. The comparison is obviously pertinent, in the same way that a comparison with Homer's vision of the Trojan war is pertinent, for it calls attention to the ironic disparity between

[22] See Smith, "Vietnam Without Fear" and "Vietnam Post Mortem."

the fondest hopes of ambitious, naive, overconfident, and misinformed human beings and the eternally mysterious reality of nature, human and non-human. One wonders, however, what might have happened in the congressional debates on Vietnam if Senator Fulbright, the most authoritative spokesman in Congress on matters of foreign policy at the time, had attended to Thucydides earlier, before he began his opposition to the war, before, that is, he personally sponsored, in August 1964, the Gulf of Tonkin resolution, which gave the American intervention whatever national legitimacy it possessed.

This resolution, it is worth remembering, passed unanimously in the House after only forty minutes of debate. In the Senate only two dissenting voices were raised (Senators Morse of Oregon and Gruening of Alaska). Senator Fulbright, who apparently regretted his decision ever after, claimed that the President had lied to him. Both Homer and Thucydides, in their different ways, could have informed the Senator clearly enough that in matters of warfare, folly and deception in high places are not unusual. The same information might well have proved useful in similar discussions years later over the reasons for going to war in Iraq for the second time.

The point worth stressing here, of course, is that in any fully informed debates about going to war it is useful to bring to bear an intelligent sense of what war is going to involve, so that any notions that a declaration of war can lead to a "quick fix" and an obvious "exit strategy" in the service of a rationally thought-out foreign policy are balanced against a sensitive appreciation for what "going to war" really means, especially when those discussions are being carried out by people who have no direct familiarity with the enterprise and are not sufficient attentive to those who have. The most obvious example of such a need is George W. Bush's decision to invade Iraq. It is clear enough he and his closest advisors simply ignored the advice of those who did have a better appreciation for the complexity of warfare, namely those in the military who stressed that such an expedition would need a few hundred thousand troops and would require the Americans to stay for years. Brushing such reservations aside, the President launched the war, posed under the "Mission Accomplished" banner, and then watched his confident application of force evolve into what may well turn out to be the most disastrous foreign policy decision ever made by a US president. There are few better examples of the naiveté of modern liberal thinking about

warfare, and as I write these words (in April 2006) there is something fascinating about watching President Bush constantly wrestling with his inability to confront what he is up against.

It is clear that on the basis of those assumptions which inform how people think and feel, they determine the most important choice in their personal, social, and political lives. So long as we restrict ourselves to the conventions in which we have been educated to perceive reality, our ability fully to grasp what we are is, in some essential manner, limited, for we have no proper way of understanding, let alone dealing with, problems which arise out of the very concepts we use to interpret nature, including our own. The *Iliad* remains important and valuable to us, not because it provides us with a viable alternative system of belief, but because it puts great pressure on us to examine the adequacy of our conventional ways of thinking and feeling, especially about warfare. That human beings can often respond powerfully to uncomfortable visions which challenge their favourite ideas is evident from the popularity of Homer's epic, which, in spite of the fact that many translations and interpretations seek to blunt that challenge, remains an imaginatively rich and moving vision.

This force of a different view of nature stands revealed also in the most extraordinary and eloquent legacy of the Vietnam experience, the memorial in Washington, DC, to the Vietnam dead. For this tribute to the victims of the war, designed by Maya Lin, is anything but a conventional monument neatly deposited on an appropriate civic square, a tidy white decoration celebrating with a suitable *pro patria mori* slogan the valour and patriotism of the slain. The black Vietnam wall rises from the earth like some grimly beautiful chthonian presence announcing the secret and bloody powers of nature itself. The contrast between it and the neighbouring Washington Monument and Lincoln Memorial with which the shape of the wall deliberately links itself, could hardly be more striking (to say nothing of the contrast between it and the newer and much more conventional World War II memorial). Not surprisingly, the design met fierce opposition to what conventional thinking, accustomed to very different tributes to the fallen, labeled a "black gash of shame," something "unheroic, unpatriotic, below ground, and death oriented" (Swerdlow 563). That the design could survive the selection process intact with only minor (although deleterious) modifications is a tribute to the emotional richness of the stark image. Extraordinary, too, is the feeling the memorial creates in the visitors who approach

it, a reaction quite different from the typical responses to traditional cenotaphs. At the Vietnam wall, those close to it feel impelled to touch the stone or kiss it, as if they wish quite spontaneously to establish an irrational but vital contact between the earth out which it arises and their own frail lives. No purely rational analysis of the Vietnam conflict even understands, let alone communicates, a sense of the atavistic truth which emerges from that stone and ground.

> In spite of all our needs
> we do help at her labors.
> We deliver bodies to fertilize the earth we fight over.
> We die to make bodies count for something,
> to control the places of slaughter
> that old terror we still call Mother
> in the earth wind and water
> intended a fields of praise. (Gerald Barrax)

There is surely no profounder public symbol of the challenge to the modern Western imagination than the images honouring the ideals of George Washington, the founder of the nation, the eloquent and courageous striving of Abraham Lincoln, the preserver of the union and president during the Civil War, and the mysteriously beautiful and ominous powers of the earth itself, all in close proximity in the political heart of the Western enterprise. Our future will be determined more than anything else by the extent to which we can in our public and personal lives manifest and combine the paradoxical qualities of human life that these monument, all of them, reveal and preserve, recognizing that we must retain our faith in the ideals that lift our eyes up to the sky, that we must fight to defend the best hopes for mankind, and, finally and most important, that in seeking life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness for all, we put those very ideals at terrible risk whenever we neglect the ancient and powerful forces which still, whether we care to acknowledge them or not, ascend irresistibly out of the earth to impose limits upon our most cherished visions of ourselves.

To be put back into imaginative touch with the irrational centres of human life is to experience the fullest and most mature awareness of our most vital hopes. For only by testing those hopes against alternative visions can we properly understand a little better than we do the conditions common to us all.

> So long as we see our troubles exclusively from the familiar cultural, anthropocentric perspective, they can appear only as problems awaiting a technical or political solution. But what if we tried not so much to overcome our problems as to understand them and listen to what is speaking there? Nothing in today's civilization encourages so seemingly passive a stance, but if we were able sometimes to look at our situation through older eyes and with their aid relearn the power of limit (the limes or boundary line separating the human settlement from the wild, whose encroachments must always be respected), then the more equable relation between culture and nature which some are looking for might seem less unattainable. A search into our past might prove to be not a step back but a way of facing the questions that come at us from the future. (Carne-Ross 60).

One final point. In recent decades we have been witnessing in North America something of a cultural crisis, a loss of confidence in the Western enterprise and an increasing confusion about the value of our civilization. As our power over human and non-human nature grows exponentially, so, too it seems, to our doubts. Many of those who have written recently about this malaise from many different intellectual perspectives echo the words in the above quotation, seeing in our neglect of the past the source of our confusion and in a rediscovery of that cultural past the very best hope we have for regaining a sense of a purposeful present and future.

I share the conviction that our best hopes for the future must emerge, if at all, not from a more energetic recommitment to future inventions, utopian revolutions, therapeutic innovations, narcotic anodynes, or freer trade, but rather from an imaginative re-engagement with our neglected traditions. My purpose in writing these essays on the *Iliad* has been to encourage the reader to see in this great poem, in its beauty, power, and terror, a uniquely rich vision of human nature which can reacquaint us with ourselves, with the joy and wonder of tragic striving in the face of destiny, a response which may still summon from us the courage to realize more fully and intelligently what we can be, in an age that often, it seems, in the effort to liberate humankind, has somehow sadly reduced our significance.

ESSAY EIGHT
ON MODERN ENGLISH TRANSLATIONS OF THE *ILIAD*

JOHNSON. 'We must try its effect as an English poem; that is the way to judge of the merit of a translation. Translations are, in general, for people who cannot read the original.' . . . BOSWELL. 'The Truth is, it is impossible perfectly to translate poetry. In a different language it may be the same tune, but it has not the same tone.' (Boswell 921)

"It is a very pretty poem, Mr Pope, but you must not call it Homer" (attributed to Richard Bentley).

SOME OPENING OBSERVATIONS

George Chapman, the first well-known translator of the *Iliad* into English, had little sympathy for his critics. "Envious Windfuckers," he called them (quoted Logue 1). In so doing, he helped to launch a lively and continuing modern tradition of fierce arguments about the merits of various translations of Homer's great war epic. One of the most curious features of this tradition is its intensity. People tend to have very strong feelings when it comes to discussing their preferences, and even cautious scholars easily fling aside the restraint they normally display in their academic work to express their unqualified praise or dismissive contempt for this or that English version of the Iliad.[23] It's not just a matter of academics getting aggressively superior in defense of the Greek text (which is hardly Homer's original poem, but no matter), although that can enter into it (after all, departments of Classics justifiably see themselves as the traditional guardians of the poem, hierophants charged with protecting it from impurities) or would-be poets tossing accusations of dry pedantry at the scholarly establishment. To judge from conversations in internet chat rooms, students and first-time readers and Homerophiles generally are also eager to initiate confident and often aggressive debates about their own preferences.

Such arguments are common these days, for we have all sorts of translations to choose from, new and old. In fact, at no time in the history of Homer in English have we had so many options readily

---

[23] Take, for example, a statement like the following (made by Andre Michalopoulos): "no translation has surpassed, *or ever will surpass* the magnificent Victorian translation of Leaf, Lang, and Myers for the Iliad . . ." (6, emphasis added) or Fitzgerald's comment on Lattimore: "[the translation] would survive as long as Pope's for in its way it is quite as solidly distinguished" ("Heroic Poems" 699).

available. Not so long ago, the translations of Rieu and Lattimore ruled the English-speaking *Iliad* world between them for a generation, but now the field is much more crowded, with recent versions by Fitzgerald, Fagles, and Lombardo in print (among others) and even more choices in the public domain on the internet (including many of the long forgotten versions now freely available through Google Books). The most obvious reasons for this are a growing interest in Homer among Greekless readers (especially as a Great Book in Liberal Studies and Humanities curriculums) and the prospect of a tidy income from the text-book market. Faced with such a rich array of choices, a neophyte seeking the "right" translation or a teacher in search of a class room text has good reason to worry about an attack of consumer anxiety.

Presumably anyone in search of a translation has to begin by rejecting Boswell's notion (often repeated by later students of the questions) that translation is inherently impossible. We may not be able to get the exact equivalent of Homer's poem, whatever that means exactly (since the surviving official text is clearly not exactly the same poem Homer composed and since virtually all those dealing with the *Iliad* are reading it silently at home rather than listening to a professional bard singing the text at a large group feast), but with a judicious sense of the limits of the translator's artistic license we can get close enough to it to satisfy ourselves that we are dealing with Homer or at least an acceptable form of the original.[24]

[24] If we push the notion of the "impossibility" of a translation, we can soon reach the conclusion that all reading of traditional poetry (in English or otherwise) is impossible, simply because we cannot recreate in ourselves the sensitivity to a vocabulary we no longer use or an intimate emotional familiarity with the situation for which the original was produced. In a sense, all such reading is a "translation" from something old and strange into something more immediately accessible (and that's as true of Shakespeare as it is of Homer). This general observation holds even if we have very accurate and complete factual information about that traditional vocabulary and situation. Those who read the *Iliad* in Greek or who recite it to themselves in Greek are not necessarily any closer to the "real" Homer (whatever that means) than the person reading an English translation. The fact that they think they are will certainly make their experience of the poem different from reading it in English and may well enhance their enjoyment of it, but they are no closer to the original experience of the ancient warrior leaders listening to a professional bard recite the *Iliad* than the audience at those odd productions of Shakespeare which seek to replicate his company's stage conditions and pronunciation is to the Elizabethan audience way back when. For it's not just a matter of the "tone" of the original, as Boswell claims; more important than that is the reader's sensitivity, his response to tone generally, and that will be inevitably

And in making a decision about the most suitable translation (especially for classroom use), we will probably have to settle for one particular favourite. Few teachers of the classics would deny that the best way to study the *Iliad* is to read the original Greek in conjunction with as wide a variety of different translations as possible (ancient and modern), so that one's enjoyment of the Greek text is played off against one's appreciation for the different interpretative talents which the translators bring to bear upon a vision of experience and a language so different from their own. Such a rewarding way of exploring the text is, alas, available only to very few readers, so we tend to wrestle with the different possibilities, settle on one, and defend that choice as best we can.

All arguments about translations, however, are inherently problematic because they are inevitably circular. One starts by setting down (implicitly or explicitly) certain criteria, applies those to various offerings, and then makes a decision based upon those criteria and (more importantly) upon the relative weight one assigns them. The outcome is thus predetermined by one's initial preferences, which rest upon a host of personal biases about what long narratives in general and an ancient epic in particular should "feel" like (and these biases are often decisively shaped by one's own personal experience in dealing with long traditional narratives). It may be easy enough to secure general agreement about the initial criteria involved, but everything depends upon the way these are ranked and applied.

Then, too, there is the matter of remaining faithful to the translation which first aroused a particular reader's imagination about Homer. In my experience, this factor often plays a decisive role in a particular reader's preference (I myself have always had a strong affection for Rieu's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* for precisely that reason). Hence, initiating a disinterested conversation about the merits of different texts can be a difficult business.

THE PAST AND THE PRESENT

Before going onto to explore some of the major criteria in greater detail, perhaps we should reflect for a moment on the general challenge facing the translator of an ancient text. In a sense, his task

---

shaped by his reading habits and his contemporary culture, including the ways that contemporary culture has or has not educated him to read or recite old poems.

is to mediate between the strangeness in the language and vision of the original (which are not a product of the modern world) and the contemporary sensibility of his readers. Since the successful experience of reading an ancient poem necessarily requires these two to interact, the translator is, in effect, something of a broker, shaping something foreign and, at times, difficult, so that it fits contemporary taste (which includes contemporary taste in dealing with traditional poems). This task is more delicate than it sounds (or should be), because if the translation is to work effectively it must be accessible to the imagination of the reader—it must, as it were, speak a language she understands—and yet it must also not completely forfeit the strangeness, because the value of an old poem (and especially of the *Iliad*) emerges in no small measure from the way it can force the reader's imagination to explore something different, something uncomfortable, something that challenges the reader's most complacent assumptions about the world. It's easy enough to forget this dialectical tension at the heart of the enterprise, either by keeping the translation so strange it makes no intimate imaginative connection with the reader or by making it so contemporary it ceases to challenge with its strangeness.

Few translators, for example, strive to produce an English text which "fits" exactly the Homeric method of recitation according to ancient patterns of sound or to produce recordings of such translated recitations. Whatever the reason one might have for attempting such a treatment of the *Iliad*, the results would almost certainly be counterproductive because the modern reader simply cannot access the poem in this manner (dealing with art, after all, requires a familiarity with the conventions it uses, and producing something intelligible to readers requires some attention to the conventions familiar to them). To some extent Lattimore's idiosyncratic attempt faithfully to adhere to the original lineation and rhythms of the original (by no means the first attempt to translate Homer in this manner) makes the poem far too awkward and strange for many modern readers (myself included). Whatever language he is using, it is not written in a fluent and easily recognizable form of English (in fairness to Lattimore, one should observe that the enduring popularity of his translations would seem to indicate that for many readers he is clearly doing something right, although I suspect that a good deal of that popularity has to do with the text book choices made by scholars, who tend to value what they feel is the alleged

"Greekness" of the original far more than they do the imaginative accessibility of the English text, especially one written in verse). That comment applies also to Hammond's translation, which is written in such an execrable English style I can think of no other reason why it is still on the market.

Similarly, attempts to modernize Homer, to appeal more directly and obviously to the language of the contemporary reader, can have deleterious effects on the central tension I refer to. Lombardo, for example, is not above injecting contemporary colloquialisms here and there, a habit which instantly collapses my imaginative assent to the fiction. Yes, it's my language, but something in me strongly resists accepting it as Homer's. Of course, different people have different opinions about just how contemporary Homer's poetic diction should sound and different levels of tolerance for a modern colloquial style. However, most would agree, I think, that for them there is a limit of some kind and that, for example, a gangsta rap style would be unacceptably titling the balance in favour of modern sensibilities. I suspect that few people who take some sort of faithfulness into account would consider Eickhoff's recent rendition of the *Odyssey* a "translation," given the extreme liberties he takes with Homer's text and the way in which he freely inserts into Homer all sorts of details, major and minor, which are not in the original in order to give the story the flavour of a modern television drama series.

I mention these points here not in an attempt to discuss thoroughly some complex issues (more about them later) but simply to make the general point that a translation of Homer (and any evaluation of a particular translation) needs to take into account the present world of the reader and the past world of the poem and that the success of a translation depends more than anything else upon the translator's ability successfully to answer the sometimes competing claims of past and present.

POETRY AND PROSE

Homer's original audience had no sense of a written form for a work to which they were listening—and that's true whether we believe it was an oral composition or not—any more than we have any idea about the written appearance of the lyrics of a new popular song we are listening to. Given that the words were organized into regularly

repeating rhythmic units or lines, when a written form did appear, it was organized as poetry (since that sense of a repetitive rhythmic pattern has been, up until modern times, the single most important characteristic separating what we call prose from what we call poetry). Hence, the major tradition in translating the *Iliad* in English has, for the most part, been committed to the production of verse translations, although there have been those, like Thomas Carlyle, who would reject a poetical style as irrelevant: "We want what the ancients thought and said, and none of your silly poetry" (Carlyle, qu. in Preface to W. C. Green's translation of the *Iliad*. In fairness to Carlyle we should be aware that his comment may well be prompted by the quality of English translations of classical literature produced by his contemporaries, rather than by any inherent dismissal of poetry generally).

That, in itself, would be no sufficient reason for declaring that a modern English version of the *Iliad* must be offered to us as poetry rather than as prose. After all, a modern audience is much more familiar with long narrative epics in prose than in any other style, and many prose translations have an enduring popularity (Butler or Rieu, for instance). Still, one has to wonder about which form is more appropriate for modern times, given that the overwhelming majority of Homer's "audience" now consists of silent readers rather than rapt listeners.

Why should this matter? Well, it does if we remember that the experience of reading poetry is (or can be) significantly different from reading prose. For one thing, the reader's eyes move differently, and (in my case at least) reading patterns vary (with poetry I tend to linger more or review particular passages more frequently, with my sensitivity to certain tropes heightened). Then, too, the poetic text presents a different visual appearance (a ragged right hand margin with a significant amount of white space), especially if the translator chooses to add breaks here and there (for example, between narrative descriptions and speeches), and that can significantly affect the way a reader experiences the poem (in marked contrast to page after page of right-justified, proportionally spaced prose, often in relatively small print with few breaks). In addition, of course, to offer a long narrative in the form of a poem in a traditional rhythm is to remind the reader that she is not dealing with an entirely contemporary work; it is, if you like, a way of putting her into a frame of mind more receptive to an encounter with a past sensibility (especially if she

already has some experience of reading traditional poetry). A prose narrative in itself tends to smooth out this difference (that may, in part, account for some of the accusations leveled at Rieu for allegedly turning the *Iliad* into a Victorian novel). What this amounts to one can sum up as follows: To translate the *Iliad* into prose is to invite the reader to read it as a novel or a historical romance; to translate the *Iliad* into poetry is to invite the reader to read it as one would a traditional English epic, and these two ways of reading are not necessarily the same. None of this means that a poetic text is always preferable to a prose version, but it does mean that the decision a translator or reader makes is not without consequences.

[To digress from Homer for a moment, one should note that there are a few works in which the form itself (poetry or prose) is part of the content, a feature which should make the decision I have been discussing somewhat more complex. The best example which comes to mind is Lucretius, *De Rerum Natura*, which is something very rare in the experience of English readers—a long poem on a philosophical and scientific subject. There has long been, it would seem, a decided preference among English translators to render Lucretius in prose, perhaps in response to what readers are used to in treatises of this kind. That is understandable enough. However, Lucretius himself repeatedly calls attention to the fact that we are dealing with a poem and indicates that a very important part of his purpose is to fuse "obscure" and "difficult" ideas with the charms of poetry (he uses the metaphor of rubbing honey around the rim of a cup containing bitter medicine). Hence, the decision to render his work in (often very wooden) prose would seem to me a major violation of the content.]

Back to Homer. Nowadays, since Lattimore's translation (1951), the trend seems to have swung away from prose translations, and we now have a wealth of *Iliads* in English verse (the publication of Hammond's prose version in 1987 came as something of a surprise to me, especially considering the result is so inferior to Rieu's earlier prose version, also published by Penguin). I must say I applaud the trend, although I would be hard put to offer a comprehensive justification for my preference if someone were to produce a startlingly good prose version (in these matters it is always wise to be pragmatic and judge the adequacy of one's principles by exploring particular examples, rather than by writing such principles in stone and applying them rigorously).

Then, of course, there's the matter of the appropriate poetic form, particularly the rhythmic pattern of the lines. Here one basic choice is between hexameters and pentameters. The former is Homer's pattern, but it is relatively uncommon in English verse and thus makes certain extra demands on the reader. There is a long tradition of arguments among English poets, translators, and scholars about the suitability of the hexameter, some people dismissing it completely on the ground that it never will be an English meter (Lord Derby remarked on the "pestilent heresy of the English hexameter") and others urging readers to consider how suitable it is for certain features of Greek metre. The argument is, in my view, largely pointless (although sometimes interesting), because setting up a priori judgments about what will or will not work as a metre in English verse is irrelevant: what matters is the pragmatic test of whether or not anyone has demonstrated that the hexameter works as an English verse form suitable for translating Homer (and even if many of the attempts to render Homer in English hexameters are wretched enough, surely one can point to some modern translations which have succeeded very well).

The pentameter is, of course, the work horse of traditional English poetry and is thus immediately accessible to any reader familiar with the blank verse of Shakespeare, Milton, Wordsworth, or any number of others. Much depends here on how one wants the translation to register with the reader. Everything else being equal, the hexameter tends to be a heavier line, taking more time to read and working against a English reader's familiarity with traditional verse, and thus it can lend a certain weight or gravitas to the poem. Chapman, the first translator of the *Iliad* into English used an even longer (and heavier) line of fourteen syllables:

> Achilles' bane full wrath resound, O Goddesse, that imposd
> Infinite sorrowes on the Greekes, and many brave soules losd
> From breasts Heroique sent from farre, to that invisible cave
> That no light comforts; and their lims to dogs and vultures gave.
> To all which Jove's will gave effect; from whom first strife begunne
> Betwixt Atrides, king of men, and Thetis' godlike Sonne.

The pentameter obviously makes it possible for the reader to move through the poem more quickly (an important element in a work which contains so many impassioned speeches). So to some extent the decision involves making a decision between the relative

importance of weight and speed or between strangeness and familiarity. A comparison of Fagles's hexameters with Fitzgerald's pentameters makes this point clearly enough. *Prima facie*, the most successful and popular pentameter translations are those of the *Odyssey*, a poem which does not demand quite the gravitas of the *Iliad*, at least in the view of many readers.

Parenthetically, I must confess in the case of my own efforts at translating Homer this decision was difficult to make (particularly since I admire both Fagles's and Fitzgerald's translations), so I ended up using both: hexameters (or a roughly 12-syllable line) for the narrative and a pentameter (or a roughly 10-syllable line) for the speeches (where the shorter line is, in my view, much more appropriate, especially given the influence of Shakespeare on the English reader's imaginative response to dramatic utterances). There is, I later found out, a minor precedent for such changes in the basic verse form:

> It remains only to add, that the student of Homer's Odyssey will find much to assist him in the very amusing and suggestive translations which the late Dr. Maginn gave to the public many years ago; first in the pages of *Fraser's Magazine*, and afterwards in a collective volume. They are in every possible variety of metre; but the several metres chosen are admirably suited to their respective subjects, and those who once read them will not fail to remember them. In fact, we do not know a book better calculated than that of Dr. Maginn to inspire a clever youth with a love of the Homeric poems; and for our own part we are not sure that the most perfect plan of translating Homer would not be to employ blank verse for the narrative, and to vary the monotony of its flow by the use of various metres, like Dr. Maginn, according to the subject, in the speeches and other episodes. (*The Gentleman's Magazine*, January-June 1866)

A number of translators of Homer have felt obliged to base their translation on some other traditional English verse forms (e.g., Spenserian stanzas) or on their own vision of what something like a traditional verse form might look like when adapted for Homer. These efforts, which, so far as I can tell, are rarely successful, can produce results which readers find extremely odd, none more so than the astonishing efforts of F. W. Newman, younger brother of the famous Cardinal Newman (although the continuing efforts of a modern American poet to translate the entire *Iliad* as one long sequence of sonnets comes close). Presumably the hope there is that

the unusual verse form will put the reader's imagination in a frame of mind better suited to dealing with a long, traditional poem. In my case, the effect is almost always the reverse—the strangeness in the basic verse form makes the poem too remote, too odd, too idiosyncratic (any reader who would like a rich sampling of the different attempts to translate Homer into English should consult the following link: Published English Translations of Homer).

TRUDITTORI TRADITORI

In dealing with the matter of evaluating translations, Matthew Arnold introduced the useful metaphor of a financial exchange (112). From a translation we want some close attention paid to an exact reckoning, and, even if there are no posted rules, there's a limit to what we will accept by way of tampering with the exchange rate. Christopher Logue's *War Music*, for example, is a marvellously poetic modern "rendition" of Books 16 to 19 of the *Iliad*, and no teacher of the epic would fail to recommend the work to his students. But the book hardly qualifies as a fair exchange for the Homeric text, and few readers, if any, except perhaps Logue himself, would consider it a translation.

Sometimes I like to think of the text as a trampoline and the translator as someone who is trying to move along it. His task is to remain graceful and agile, while keeping his feet in frequent contact with the mesh. He is permitted the occasional leap or somersault, a captivating flourish, but should not let his desire to perform take him too far from the mesh for too long. Decisions about the liberty he has to perform such manoeuvres are best left to the consensus of readers (who will, of course, differ among themselves).

This metaphor is useful because it reminds me that those who try to remain doggedly faithful to the text, who try, that is, to walk firmly along the mesh step by step, often (perhaps generally) tend to move in a very ungainly fashion. The best example that comes to mind is Hammond's prose, which never departs from a dogged contact with the text and turns the experience of reading the *Iliad* into an ungainly plod, useful perhaps to someone seeking a convenient crib for the Greek text, but hardly a stirring rendition of a magnificent poem. There's the constant flavour of an *Anglice reddenda* exercise in which the fluency of the English is consistently sacrificed for scrupulous fidelity to the Greek: ". . . his was the blood more than any that his

heart pressed him to feed full to Ares . . .” and so on. The effect is bad enough in the descriptions but disastrous in the speeches, which, as a result, lack any colloquial rhythm that might convey the sense that particular (and strong) feelings are engaged: “. . . even if I should resent it and try to refuse you their sack, I can achieve nothing by resentment, as you are far the stronger.” And similar objections have been made about Lattimore’s desire to remain faithful to Homer: “to give a rendering of the *Iliad* which will convey the meaning of the Greek in a speed and rhythm analogous to the speed and rhythm I find in the original” (Lattimore 55).[25]

Modern traditions in translation tend to emphasize fidelity to original texts (in marked contrast to translation styles in some earlier centuries when the emphasis was much more on the translator’s performance, on his ability to display his own poetical skills over and above any close adherence to the original, a prominent feature of Chapman’s *Iliad*). The Arrowsmith translations of Aristophanes are some of the best examples of this old tendency in modern translations of classic works. However, such frequent and sometimes sustained vaulting above the text is uncommon in recent translations of Homer. That said, many scholars have excoriated Fitzgerald for the liberties he takes with the Homer’s text (as far as I can tell, criticism of this sort is directed at his work more than at the efforts of any other modern translator of Homer), but there may well be a connection between such “betrayals” of Homer and the most outstanding quality of Fitzgerald’s translation, its nuanced lyric quality, which in many places is far superior as English poetry to any other translation available. And, of course, for most modern readers of an English text of the *Iliad* scrupulous fidelity is not a particularly important issue, since they bring no knowledge of Homeric Greek to the experience.

This notion of “fidelity” to Homer leads some translators to the extremely odd habit of making their translation a line-by-line affair, often with the attempt to keep the same words on the same lines (a tradition which started, as far as I can tell, with the translation by T. S. Brandeth in 1846), and, in extreme cases, offering what the translators claim is an English approximation of the Greek metre (a homometrical translation) and sometimes even a Greek “sound.” Now, I understand why a translator might like to see if he can pull

[25] One prominent reviewer of Lattimore castigated his style, not unfairly, for being full of “misprints, mistranslations, obscurities, or outrages to the English language” (Knopff 275).

feats like these off simply as a challenge, but I've never understood what these demands are supposed to add to the English translation. Brandeth himself confessed that this requirement of the style had "no great merit" but claimed that it had prevented him from adding anything superfluous to the translation. There's no great disadvantage in such a notion of fidelity, I suppose, provided it does not lead to unnecessary awkwardness in the English style. Given that it almost always does, it baffles me why anyone would seek to impose on English verse the requirements of Greek metre or sound. Since the principles of Greek metre in classical poetry are so very different from the principles of traditional metres of English poetry, such a practice simply imposes on the English a rule which virtually guarantees some very odd unidiomatic language. And this point is all the more relevant if the translator claims that this practice makes the poem much easier to recite in the appropriate manner so that we are, in effect, as one gushing reviewer put about Merrill's *Odyssey*, listening to the voice of Homer.

Scholars often greet with rapture some English translation which, they claim, matches the sound or the rhythm of the Greek or both (e.g., the translations of Lattimore, Merrill, and McCrorie, for example). But if I want the sound and rhythm of the Greek, then I'll read the Greek. Why put up with the often deleterious effects of an attempt to "translate" those qualities into another language? And if I don't know the Greek, why should I have to wade through an English style which sounds unnatural (often rhythmically and syntactically awkward and stuffed with unnecessary words in an odd order)? What possible merit is there is such strange attempts? Those who might wish to point to the great popularity of Lattimore's translations as evidence that such isometric translations can succeed need to explore carefully what else Lattimore is doing in his English poetry to render Homer so vividly to so many readers, and a close inspection of Lattimore's verse reveals quickly enough that his notion of "isometric" does not require him to follow Greek metre or sound very scrupulously.

I don't mean to belabour this point, but given the emphasis in some recent translations on the importance of matching or attempting to match the "sound" of the Greek, a few more remarks may be in order.What do we mean by the phrase "sounding like the Greek"? Does this mean that the English should sound something like the Greek text as we teach students to recite it? Or does it mean that the

English should sound something like an original recitation (complete with music), as best we can tell, would have sounded? There is no agreement about the first of these answers (since teaching methods vary), and we have no reason to suppose that, however we teach the recitation of Homer in class, the results bear any similarity to an original recitation. As to that original recitation, here again we have no sure idea what that sounded like, but we can be certain that it would have been something very much stranger than anything we are used to in English. To appreciate this point, try listening to a recent attempt to recreate a "rhapsodic" recitation of Homer in Greek, complete with musical accompaniment, and ask yourself what connection this could possibly have to anything written or recited in English (if you would like to try that now, you might wish to use the following link: Homer recital).

Or does "sounding like the Greek" really mean "sounding the way we would like Homer to sound"? Many readers bring such expectations to a long traditional poem (clearly Matthew Arnold did), and there is no agreement whatsoever among them. Many scholars like something that reminds them of the Greek; other readers prefer an Arthurian, Miltonic, or Biblical flavouring (something old, in any case). Some want "rhetorical" effects to beef up the English (like the alliteration in Fagles) or syntactical awkwardness (as in Lattimore) to bring out the fact that this is an old poem written in a foreign language; others prefer a modern colloquial prose, even with injections of contemporary slang (as in Lombardo). So in addition to the demonstrated problems which come from "sounding like the Greek" we have to deal with the fact that we don't really agree what that means.

In recent years translators have been emphasizing how their version is suitable for public recitation (and there's a growing market for Homer on CDs or available as sound recordings over the Internet). This is an important criterion, especially given the fact that so much of Homer's epics are speeches (often intensely passionate utterances), and one might well set down as an important initial test of any translation the question, "Does this rendition of Homer produce verse and especially dramatic speeches which sound as if they are something someone might actually say?" If it does not, if, that is, the English sounds awkward or padded or flat, then no appeals to this or that sound quality of the original Greek is much help. If the

translation does not work in English, then there's something seriously wrong with it.

Sometimes I get the sense that there is a decidedly odd group of scholarly readers out there who, when they read the English translation, wish for some reason or other to be reminded of the sound of the Greek, no matter how the efforts to please them in this matter may vitiate the imaginative vitality and often the clarity of the English verse (that this group exists seems clear enough from the following remark by Lovelace Bigge-Wither's preface to his translation of the *Odyssey* in 1869: "The aim of this translation is to be literal. In many passages it is almost line for line, and even word for word with the original; so that to persons well acquainted with the Greek this version will readily suggest the very words of the divine old bard himself"). The best response to such folk is probably the following passage from Chapman:

> Custome hath made even th'ablest Agents erre
> In these translations: all so much apply
> Their paines and cunnings word for word to render
> Their patient Authors, when they may as well
> Make fish with fowle, Camels with Whales engender,
> Or their tongues' speech in other mouths compell.

DICTION

The single most important decision any translator (or any reader selecting a translation) must make concerns the complex question of diction, that is, the English idiom basic to the style of the translation. People's likes and dislikes are more clearly shaped by this aspect of a translation than by any other factor, and, not surprisingly, the issues arising from English diction generate the fiercest arguments. The best one can do, I suppose, is declare one's preferences and wait for a response

Given that the purpose of a modern translation of the *Iliad* is to reach and to engage the contemporary imaginations of its readers, I have a distinct preference for a fluent modern idiom in the language of the translation. Hence, I have great difficulty in reading the efforts of those who want to offer Homer up to me in an *olde worlde* vocabulary: "Ah me, my child, why reared I thee, cursed in my motherhood? Would thou hadst been left tearless and griefless amid the ships, seeing thy lot is very brief and endureth no long while; but now art

thou made short-lived alike and lamentable beyond all men; in an evil hour I bore thee in our halls" (Lang, Leaf, and Myers). Does this Babylonian dialect sound like anything anyone would actually say? How is a modern reader supposed to react to this fustian? Well, one common response might be that this language encourages readers to think of the *Iliad* as some sort of romantic historical fantasy, a run-of-de-Mille reworking of the eternally popular Medieval adventure, exciting but quaint and harmless (a number of translators have clearly worked to create this effect by using Gothic script for the heading of the first book, something that puts the reader into an Arthurian or Biblical frame of mind).

Now, it is true that an artificially aged diction seems to strike a chord with many contemporary readers (no doubt the enduring popularity of Arthurian romance has contributed a lot to that). But one has to wonder just how much a language like this is, as it were, protecting the readers from recognizing the immediate connections between the *Iliad* and their own lives (a defense which, to judge from the history of treatments of the Trojan War, has always been popular). This issue is not simply a matter of style. The basic idiom of the poem also shapes its content, in this case turning it into something essentially irrelevant to the modern world. To use the language of old stories about ancient Christian chivalry (in Malory, for example), or, more commonly, to attempt (often rather lamely, as in the above example) to re-create a facsimile of such a language, is to invite the reader to see the *Iliad* as belonging to that tradition. It strikes me that if the use of such an artificial idiom is an attempt to remind us of the strangeness of an ancient poem, the effect is exactly the reverse. The language is not challengingly strange but consolingly quaint, a conventional way to depict historical romance. For a poem in which a valiant monarch on a mighty steed smiteth his foe through a cuirass and lays him low in order to save the damsel is not the same as poem in which a brave leader strikes his enemy on a powerful horse through body armour and slaughters him in order to save the woman.

It may be that this habit of wanting artificially to age the *Iliad* with a particular idiom drawn from chivalric traditions stems, in part, from the misleading notion handed down to us from Matthew Arnold (among others) that the translator has a responsibility to remember that Homer "is also, and above all, noble," that "the *Iliad* has a great master's genuine stamp . . . the grand style" (103, 104). But the idea that nobility through the grand style is best pursued through a quaint

re-invented quasi-medieval diction is clearly misguided. The best response to such a notion is probably Lattimore's comment: "I do not think nobility is a quality to be directly striven for; you must write as well as you can, and then see, or let others see, whether or not the result is noble" (55). Furthermore, any historicist defense of such an idiom is misplaced, since there is no way reliably to ascertain the level of Homer's original diction in relation to the language of his own time. Thus, as Martin Mueller has pointed out, Arnold's criterion reflects, not a legitimate demand arising from the poem, but his own prejudices about what epics ought to sound like.

Inserting obvious reminders of a language from the past can be a tricky business, and different readers will respond in different ways. Any English translator of Homer has a number of idioms available above and beyond Malory—Spenser, Shakespeare, the King James Bible, and Milton being the most obvious—and many translators are not slow to draw from that tradition. Fagles, for example, likes to insert into his text occasional reminders of older times and earlier poets at the expense of a fluent modern idiom: "I'll roil his body," "a bowyer good with goat horn," "armoured in shamelessness," "Achaean battalions ceaseless," and so forth. More seriously perhaps, he adopts the alliterative thump of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, which at times becomes so frequent and over-emphatic that one learns to anticipate it, and thus the sound begins to preempt the sense: "As a burly farmhand wielding a whetted ax,/ chopping a field-ranging bull behind the horns,/ hacks through its whole hump and the beast heaves up . . ." or ". . . belching bloody meat, but the fury, never shaken,/ builds inside their chests though their glutted bellies burst." Here, in my case at least, the adoption of an old style suitable for dramatic recitation long ago becomes something of an impediment to the modern reader. A little more than a little of this is much too much. My antipathy to such artificial ageing led me in my own translation even to eschew almost totally the vocabulary of ancient and medieval armour and weapons (cuirass, greaves, javelin, helm, lance, targe, buckler, and so on).

One intriguing aspect of diction is the way the translator handles the names of people and places. We are, I think, long past the time when using Latin equivalents for the names of Greek gods is acceptable, and a good thing, too. I'm never quite sure why that particular tradition lasted as long as it did. Perhaps it had something to do with an attempt to inculcate sturdy Roman virtues in public school boys or

was simply continuing an old tradition of referring to pagan gods. What's interesting here is the way in which different translators either stick with well-established forms or use alternative spellings to remind the reader of the alien Greekness of the original: Achilles, Achilleus, Akhilleus, and so on. Fitzgerald pushes the foreignness of the names to something of an extreme (with unusual spelling and accents of various kinds), a practice which has the (to me pleasing) effect of making the names (and the people they indicate) more remote and strange. This quality helps to offset the easier familiarity with his pentameter verse form (although I'm not sure if that's his intention). However, the habit does cause problems for student readers and denies them the chance to become familiar with the more common names (e.g., Ajax, Clytaemnestra, and so on).

PARNASSUS AND BEYOND

Quite apart from the various matters discussed above, assessing different translations on the basis of the quality of the English poetry is a notoriously subjective task, bound to generate strong disagreements. And any argument on behalf of a particular text can be carried out persuasively only by a very detailed comparative look at particular examples, something beyond the scope of this essay, although, for what it's worth, my view is that if we're comparing modern translations only on the basis of the quality of the result as English poetry, without taking anything else into consideration, then Fitzgerald's texts are clearly the best available, a claim which does not deny that one might still have a good reason for choosing a rival version.

Whether one agrees with that assessment or not, let me offer at least one criterion that underlies my judgment. Long narrative poems are rarely, if ever, totally even in their poetic quality. The author settles into a basic relatively uninspired style which carries the narrative and then, when inspiration strikes, launches his verse into hitherto unexplored realms of truly moving poetry for a while, before settling down again into the regular style. The greatness of a poem arises, in large part, out of the frequency and the power of these (often quite short) transcendent passages when, to use Gerard Manley Hopkins's useful analogy, the poetry of inspiration seizes us and lifts us high above the Castalian or Parnassian plains (154). Such moments, which are quite familiar to readers of, say, Milton's *Paradise Lost* or Wordsworth's *Prelude*, occur in the *Iliad* as well, and they obviously

present a particularly daunting challenge to the translator.[26] How well do his efforts convey these supercharged moments to his readers (e.g., Achilles' speech to Lycaon, Achilles's response to the news that Patroclus has died, the meeting of Achilles and Priam, and so on)?

Any comparative evaluation of different translations needs to consider this question, because such passages in the *Iliad* are the most powerful moments in the poem, the single most important reason for its continuing vitality. One of my reasons for liking Fitzgerald's translation so much is that his own considerable poetic gifts enable him to meet this particular challenge better than any other modern translation. Other translators (Hammond, in particular) remain as flat and uninspired in these passages as in the rest of the translation.

APPARATUS CRITICUS

One final (and obvious) point, not strictly germane to the quality of a translation: modern readers, especially students, often expect (and require) some critical apparatus along with the text (an introduction perhaps, a glossary, maps, and so on). Here the options range from the Doubleday paperback of Fitzgerald's translation which is remarkably deficient in any such assistance to, at the other extreme, Fagles's translation, which has an excellent introduction (by Bernard Knox), the finest short introduction to the *Iliad* available anywhere, six pages of maps, twelve pages of notes, a bibliography, and a useful glossary. I can well understand someone's selecting Fagles over other possibilities largely on the basis of this supplementary material (especially as a textbook for school use).

CONCLUDING REMARKS

What all this adds up to is, I would suggest, the idea that we should more or less abandon all a priori notions of what a translation must

---

[26] This notion of a Parnassian style (not to be confused with the Parnassian school of poetry) punctuated by inspired moments is useful in any analysis of a long narrative (not simply in poetry). One key notion here is that, while it is relatively easy to parody the basic style (and there is no shortage of parodies of Homer's Parnassian), one cannot do so with the inspired parts, where the genius of the artist is fully at work. The idea is useful for reminding us that the greatness of a work does not always (or even usually) reside in the unvaryingly high quality of the style and that some works of great genius are often written, in large part, in a very bad style (the most obvious example that comes to mind of this point is Moby Dick, although many critics, including myself, would offer up Paradise Lost as an equally good example).

do or of what will or will not work in an English Homer and treat evaluations pragmatically, judging them by their results. Lattimore got it right when he stated that one has to write as well as one can (following whatever principles one thinks appropriate) and then let the readers decide on the basis of the results. In this process, we might do well, too, to remember Dr. Johnson's dictum (in the "Life of Milton") that no precedents can justify absurdities—scholarly appeals to the characteristics of Greek metre or to the traditions of English folk songs, for example, are no defense against a wretched English style which interferes with the reader's imaginative response to the English poetry. If we must have rules, then let's limit ourselves to the demands that the translation should be more or less faithful to literal sense of Homer's text and that the English poetry should have the energy, clarity, and imaginative power we demand of our own poetry. Even with those two "rules" in place, we will still leave plenty of room for energetic arguments.

LIST OF WORKS CITED

The following titles identify works referred to in the eight *Essays on Homer's Iliad* and do not constitute a detailed bibliography of works on the poem.

Arnold, Matthew. "On Translating Homer." *Matthew Arnold: Selected Essays*. Ed. Noel Annan. London: Oxford University Press, 1964.

Atchity, Kenneth John. *Homer's Iliad: The Shield of Memory*. Carbondale and Edwardsville: Southern Illinois University Press, 1978.

Auster, Al and Dan Georghkas. "The Warriors: An Interview with Sol Yurick." *Cineaste* 9.3 (Spring 1979): 22-24.

Bespaloff, Rachel. *On the Iliad*. Translated Mary McCarthy. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947. Rep. 1970.

Blackie, John Stuart. *Homer and the Iliad*, Volume I: Homeric Dissertations. Edinburgh: Edmonston and Douglas, 1866.

Boswell, James. *Life of Johnson*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965.

Bowra, C. M. *Tradition and Design in the Iliad*. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1930. Rep. Westport: Greenwood Press, 1977.

Burnett, John. *Early Greek Philosophy*. New York: Meridian, 1957.

Cahill, Thomas. *Sailing the Wine-dark Sea: Why the Greeks Matter*. New York: Doubleday, 2003.

Carne-Ross, D. S. "The Beastly House of Atreus." *Kenyon Review* NS 3.2 (Spring 1981): 20-60.

Clarke, Howard. *Homer's Readers: A Historical Introduction to the Iliad and the Odyssey*. Newark: University of Delaware Press, 1981.

Clausewitz, Carl von. *On War*. Edited and Translated by Michael Howard and Peter Paret. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1976.

Dodds, E. R. *The Greeks and the Irrational*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973.

Dryden, John. *The Essays of John Dryden*. Selected and edited by W. P. Ker. In 2 vols. New York: Russell & Russell, 1961.

Fitzgerald, Robert. "Heroic Poems in English." *Review of The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richard Lattimore. Kenyon Review 14.4 (Autumn 1952): 698-706.

Else, Gerald F. "The Old and the New Humanities." *Daedalus* 8.3 (Summer 1969): 803-808.

Grant, George. *Technology and Empire: Perspectives on North America*. Toronto: Anansi, 1969.

"Four Shots at The Deer Hunter." *Film Quarterly* 32.4 (Summer 1979): 10-22.

Gould, John. "On making sense of Greek religion." *Greek Religion and Society*. Edited P. R. Easterling and J. V. Muir. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985. Rep. 1986: 1-33.

Griffin, Jasper. *Homer*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1980.

Griffiths, Trevor. *Comedians*. New York: Grove Press, 1976.

Hadas, Moses. *A History of Greek Literature*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1950.

Herodotus. *The Histories*. Translated Aubrey de Selincourt. Revised A. R. Burn. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1972.

Herr, Michael. *Dispatches*. New York: Avon Books, 1980.

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fagles. New York: Penguin, 1990.

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Robert Fitzgerald. New York: Anchor/Doubleday, 1974.

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Margin Hammond. Bungay: Penguin, 1987.

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by E. V. Rieu. Bungay: Penguin, 1950.

Homer. *The Iliad of Homer*. Translated by Andrew Lang, Walter Leaf, and Ernest Myers. New York, Random House, 1950.

Homer. *The Iliad of Homer*. Translated by Richard Lattimore. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951.

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Stanley Lombardo. Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997.

Homer. *The Iliad*. Translated by Ian Johnston. http://www.mala.bc.ca/~johnstoi/homer/iliad_title.htm.

Hopkins, Gerard Manley. Letter to A. W. M. Baillie (10 Sept. 1864). *Poems and Prose of Gerard Manley Hopkins*. Ed. W. H.Gardner. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1967.

Howard, Michael. *War and the Liberal Conscience*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1978.

Hughes, Robert. "God of the Nomads." *Time*. 21 April 1975: 54.

James, William. "The Moral Equivalent of War." *War and Morality*. Edited by Richard Wasserstrom. Belmont Wadsworth, 1970: 4-14.

Jaynes, Julian. *The Origins of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

Kael, Pauline. "The God-Bless-America Symphony." *When the Lights Go Down*. New York: Holt Reinhart and Winston, 1980: 512-519.

Kirk, G. S. *The Songs of Homer*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962. Rep. 1977.

Knight, Douglas. *Pope and the Heroic Tradition A Critical Study of His Iliad*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1951.

---. "Homer." *The Cambridge History of Classical Literature: I: Greek Literature*. Edited by P. E. Easterling and B. M. W. Knox. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985: 42-91.

---. *The Iliad. A Commentary*: Volume I: Books 1-4. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985.

Lawrence, D. H. *Kangaroo*. London: Heinemann, 1923. Rep. 1974.

Lenson, David. *Achilles' Choice: Examples of Modern Tragedy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1975.

Logue, Christopher. *War Music: An Account of Books 16 to 19 of Homer's Iliad*. New York: Farrar, 1987.

McCary, W. Thomas. *Childlike Achilles: Ontogeny and Phylogeny in the Iliad*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982.

Michalopoulos, Andre. *Homer*. New York: Twayne, 1966.

Mueller, Martin. Review of Robert Fitzgerald's translation of *The Iliad*. *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature 6* (1979) 428-35.

Myres, Sir John L. *Homer and His Critics*. Ed. Dorothea Gray. London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1958.

---. "Knowledge and Delusion in the Iliad." *Essays on the Iliad: Selected Modern Criticism*. Ed. John Wright. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1978: 105-123.

Paley, F. A. *The Iliad of Homer*, with English Notes. In 2 vols. London: George Bell, 1866.

Redfield, J. M. *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975.

Schein, Seth L. *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Scott, John A. *The Unity of Homer*. New York: Biblo and Tannan, 1965.

Silk, Michael. *Homer: The Iliad*. Cambridge Cambridge University Press, 1987.

Smith, Geoffrey S. "Vietnam Without Fear." *Queen's Quarterly* 90.4 (Winter 1983): 972-982.

---. "Vietnam Post-Mortem." *Queen's Quarterly* 94.2 (Summer 1987):

415-426.

Swerdlow, Joel L. "To Heal a Nation." *National Geographic* 167.5 (May 1985): 555-573.

Turner, James. "Recovering the Uses of History." *The Yale Review* 70.2 (Winter 1981): 221-233.

Vivante, Paolo. *The Homeric Imagination: A Study of Homer's Poetic Perception of Reality*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1970.

West, M. L. "Homeric and Hesiodic poetry." *Ancient Greek Literature*. Ed. K. J. Dover. Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1980: 10-28.

Whitman, Cedric H. *Homer and the Homeric Tradition*. New York: Norton, 1965