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**The Tragic Affirmation of Rage in
Homer's *The Iliad* by Wayne
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Homer sings of actions and actors, the heroic and the not so heroic, of the origins and consequences of human transgressions, of prophecies and fates, of the struggles of war and its aftermath, of the irruptive brutalities and rapaciousness of revenge and plunder, of the delicacy and decency of family and the fragility of city walls, of blindness, of wrath and insight and humaneness. And behind all these things, he sings of, and makes visible, the forces that activate and shape, aid and beguile human affairs. Often, in the midst of the catastrophes that befall them, men and women cannot comprehend why they act as they do, and they (sometimes truly, sometimes falsely) ascribe their behaviors to the gods. But the most powerful of the gods, Zeus, who himself is constrained in his actions by the fates, knows that men and women frequently blame the gods for the disasters which are purely of their own making.

While philosophy is driven by the aspiration to let a rational understanding of the nature of the world, of the human, the polity, the soul and the gods dictate how we act, the Homeric epic is a celebratory depiction of the great forces of life. Homer portrays a world in which people are too little in control (albeit more than we are willing to take responsibility for) for anything other than participating courageously or weakly, brutally or humanely, victoriously or submissively, measurably or

intemperately, in the cyclical rhythms of war and peace and justice and injustice.

Hephaestus forges the pictorial representation of the rhythms of war and peace, justice and injustice on to the shield that Achilles will arm himself with, a shield made at the imploring request of Thetis, Achilles' mother. The engraving is a remarkable and shimmering reminder to Achilles, and to those who hear of Achilles, of what life is. After forging earth, sky, sea and the heavens Hephaestus depicts two noble cities. In the one he moves from a wedding scene to a murder scene to a judgment. The other city is surrounded by a "divided army / gleaming in battle-gear, and two plans split their ranks: / to plunder the city or share the riches with its people" (18. 593–5).¹ We then move to a scene of the cities' inhabitants, "armed for a raid," marching off to war, and then to a description of the attack upon the besiegers' flocks that is followed by all-out war. The depiction of war gives way to that of the rural life and then to a king's estate. It is a picture of plenty and peace, of innocence and dancing. But even in this harmony, violence is present, as lions seize a bull calf, while dogs give chase. Then we see the peace of shepherds and dancers in the field,

rapturous dancing
 A breathless crowd stood round them struck with joy
 and through them a pair of tumblers dashed and sprang,
 whirling in leaping handsprings, leading on the dance.
 And he forged the Ocean River's mighty power girdling
 round the outmost rim of the indestructible shield (18. 704–9).

Life is the great dance that is encircled by the Ocean River's mighty power. Ultimately, as Nietzsche says of the tragic view of the Greek spirit generally in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the depiction is a celebration of life, a celebration that does not shirk from life's torments and terrors. It is an admixture of what Nietzsche identifies as irrepressibly violent Dionysian intoxicants and the more stable civilized shapes of Apollo. Nothing better exhibits how the Homeric affirmation of life is bound up with the appreciation of suffering and terror than Homer's depiction of war itself. On the one hand, war is an evil, as is evident from the negative references to the god of war, Ares. "I hate you most of all the Olympian gods" (5. 1030), says Zeus. And Hera says that Ares has "no sense of justice" (5. 874). Homer also takes delight in Athena's and Zeus' punishing of Ares. They call him a lying and two-faced god. The evil of war is also evident in the great many passages dealing with the mourning and grief that it has caused. Yet, for all its evil, war is also a source of joy. "But now," says Achilles, intent on returning to battle, "quickly, call up the joy of war at once!" (19.178–9). As Richard Onians observes, the etymological connection between the yearning for battle (*charmê*), and joy (*chairô*)

springs from the fact that what is being spoken of here is an energy:

charmê will be the 'battle lust' or 'joy' that comes with free play of the warrior's energies, when like the war-horse he 'smelleth the battle far off.' Then 'warring becomes sweeter than returning home' and battle—to sweep over the field with instincts and energies free—is 'joy' indeed, the supreme realization of the pride of power.²

For Homer, men must accept the ways of fate, the gods, the world and themselves within it. Even if those ways are sometimes painful, grievous and deadly, life is also full of gifts and joy. Even the gods, whose lives are so much more free from anguish than humans, have their sufferings and regrets. Joy and destruction, as with war and peace, cannot be completely extracted from each other. It is all part of the great process of life. Thus *The Iliad* concludes in a moment of peace, on the eve of the final phase of the war, and *The Odyssey* concludes with a slaughter that is the precondition of the peace that is to follow.

This unity of the contradictory forces of joy and destruction is embodied in the main subject of the epic, the hero. The poet re-members the tales of bygone heroes for succeeding generations, who recline at banquets and receive their inspiration from the great deeds of their heroic forefathers. They experience the thrill of re-living the agonies and triumphs of the hero. When a people is at peace, the epic reminds them of the conditions that made the peace possible. The audience is also reminded of the terror of war and of the glory that comes to the heroes through being immortalized in song. That is, in peacetime the epic poet stirs the emotions and energies that can transform citizens into heroes in times of war. In this respect, the Homeric world-view stands in stark contrast to Plato's philosophical idealism. Plato insists that the poets beginning with Homer are a danger to civilization because they make "role models" of men who are caught up in the turbulences of life, rather than being able to control their passions and live a life of justice, moderation and wisdom.³ It has been plausibly argued that in spite of the antagonism Plato's philosophy bears toward poetry, the epic sows the seeds for the possibility of philosophy.⁴ Nevertheless, it is also true that Homer offers an alternative to the Platonic way of seeing reality. Homer's epic vision follows the flow of events. It is an inherently dynamic approach to events and thus is indifferent to the more logically consistent constellations of representations which Plato calls ideas. That *The Iliad* dwells upon a part of a process, that is a particular period of time, does not alter the fact that what precedes and follows it is essential to its existence. Unlike philosophy, epic does not distinguish between primary and secondary qualities. We must face things as they are, not separate them into those elements which are palatable and those which are not.

Thus the unstable combination of war, hero and civilization is not seen

as an opportunity for a philosophical critique of war and the immoral behavior of the hero as in *The Republic*. Rather, by recounting the Greek armies' plight after Achilles' withdrawal from battle, Homer demonstrates how reliant Greek civilization was upon its most unstable, most dangerous, and yet most vital hero. What is true of the hero is also true of the particular force that dominates *The Iliad*—rage. In the Greek, to which Robert Fagles' magnificent translation is faithful, *The Iliad* opens with the word "Rage": "Rage—Goddess, sing the rage of Peleus' son Achilles." Throughout *The Iliad* we observe the movement of rage from destruction to creation. By so strongly taking hold of Achilles, rage almost destroys the Greeks. But when, finally, Achilles is able to channel his rage, directing it at the enemy, no longer allowing it to be driven by his wounded pride against his own, he becomes a more complete hero than he was prior to his possession. The same force that caused so much devastation is, in turn, responsible for bringing the war to an end. It is not the force that is bad, but how one cooperates with it, how one "rides" it. As for Achilles himself, his step into the darkest and most inhumane regions becomes the very source of humane regeneration.

Blind Rage

The first book of *The Iliad* is packed with rage. Before Achilles' rage, there is another force at work, a divine force, a divine rage that precedes and sets up in its train the human rage: "What god drove them to fight with such a fury?" (1. 9) asks the poet. "What god?" We no longer ask such questions. But in the context of the huge field of colliding forces that make up Homer's world that is the question that must be asked. Bernard Knox's Introduction cites Simone Weil's essay *L'Iliad ou le Poème de la Force* where she writes that the "true hero, the true subject, the center of *The Iliad* is force...The human soul, in this poem, is shown always in its relation to force."⁵ The point is well made. This is indeed what *The Iliad*, with its epic sweep, teaches. It is not the single individual, nor the rational mind, but the forces of life impacting upon men and women as they learn through the suffering brought about by destruction. The forces that overpower human beings are, for Homer, inevitably divine in origin. Thus the relevance of the question "what god?" And much later Agamemnon, after he has woken up, blames Zeus, Fate and the Furies for his rash and unbending decision to punish Achilles' impudence by confiscating Briseis. "A god," he says ruefully, "impels all things to their fulfillment" (19. 105), and "Ruin, eldest daughter of Zeus, she blinds us all, / that fatal madness—she with those delicate feet of hers, / never touching the earth, gliding over the heads of men / to trap us all...even Father Zeus! Hera deceived him blind" (19. 106–112). Thus also, personal attributes or powers are not just our creations, but gifts of the god (note e.g. Agamemnon on Achilles' fighting

prohesis 1. 211).

Prior to the philosophical demand for consistency about what is good, beautiful, just, wise and divine (a consistency that led an earlier philosopher than Plato, Xenophanes, to decry Homer and the common view of the gods), the divine forces were seen as divided amongst and within themselves. It is not simply that there is no guarantee that the gods will all concur about what is right, but—and this is even more at odds with the philosophical mind's construction of the nature of divinity—a single god can change his or her mind. The capriciousness of the gods means that they cannot be completely trusted.⁶ Fate, however, is inexorable. It is something that even the gods can't change or escape from. Thus, when Zeus agonizes over the imminent death of his own son, Sarpedon, at the hands of Patroclus, and longs to save him, he is reproached by Hera, who says that if he does this, all the gods will demand that their sons be spared from death. Sadly, he knows Hera is right and that he must yield to Fate.

There is, in Homer's world, no place of transcendence, not even for the gods. There is just relative position and power. Between gods and human beings there is a fatal entanglement of responsibility, as each reacts to the other. The difference between gods and human beings, unlike the difference that a Platonic theology introduces, is essentially one of degree not of kind. In particular, the emotional range of the gods is identical to the range of humans, but the scale of effects is magnified in the case of the gods. In addition, the superior force of the gods means that the human will must yield. What humans do to offend the gods returns to them as enlarged and more violent forces extracting from them the sacrifice that gods require as payment for human transgressions. This is the case with the rage that moves through *The Iliad*. It is initiated by a god—Apollo. But Apollo's rage is itself a response to Agamemnon and Menelaus' refusal to release the daughter of the priest of Apollo, Chryses. The impiety of that refusal is exacerbated by Agamemnon's rebuke and humiliation of the old priest, as he taunts him about the fate that awaits the girl:

old age will overtake her in my house, in Argo,
far from her fatherland, slaving back and forth
at the loom, forced to share my bed (1. 34–36).

The treatment of an old man and a priest to boot also suggests the degradation that has overtaken the leader of the Achaeans. He has been so long out of civilization that he is like a brigand, more concerned with trophies than with the honor that is due not only to an elder, a father and priest, but more importantly, to a god. It is, then, Agamemnon's initial heartlessness, selfishness and impiety that causes Apollo to "cut down" the men "in droves," as the "corpse-fires burned on, night and day no end in sight" (1. 59–60).

Agamemnon's rage has, in turn, fanned the far more destructive rage of

the god. The hero is the most god-like of men, and there is some commensurability between the rage of Apollo and the rage of Achilles. When we first see Achilles, he is calm and thoughtful, pious, and a natural leader. He has no idea of what will come from his proposal to have the seer Calchas find out why "Apollo rages so, / whether he blames us for a vow failed, or sacrifice" (1. 74–75). Achilles' appearance is one that immediately suggests authority and an understanding of how things are ordered. He who will become the least civilized of men in *The Iliad* is, at the beginning, by far the superior man to Agamemnon in terms of civilized behavior, as well as his fighting qualities. When he first appears, he is portrayed as an honorable and strong man ready to respond to the needs of the weaker man. When Calchas divines the reason for Apollo's wrath, he fears for his safety, knowing that Agamemnon is blind and foolish. Calchas has Achilles swear that he will defend him because "there is a man I will enrage—I see it now—a powerful man who lords it over all the Argives. / One the Achaeans must obey. A mighty king, / raging against an inferior, is too strong" (1. 91–94). Achilles' willingness to support Calchas is indicative of a depth of insight that shows his nobility, for while he recognizes Agamemnon's authority over the expedition, he makes it clear that he has Agamemnon's measure. In a sentence that carries as much irony as any Socratic barb, he says no one will be able to harm him, "Not even if you mean / Agamemnon here who now claims to be by far, / the best of the Achaeans" (1. 106–8).

Whereas Achilles heeds and responds to subordinates, Agamemnon refuses to consider, let alone respond to, the urgings from "all ranks of Achaeans" that he respect the priest and accept the ransom. Agamemnon is the one affected by Apollo's rage, the one consumed by the energy that the god has unleashed on him. Hearing Calchas' divination he is depicted as "furious, his dark heart filled to the brim, / blazing with anger now, his eyes like searing fire" (1. 121–122). As furious as Agamemnon is, as much as he would dearly love to kill the messenger, as much as he wants to keep Chryseis, he knows that when a god and a mortal collide, the latter has no chance. His deferral to the god's demand, though, is reluctant, and he can only obey the god by passing on the rage. Agamemnon's lust (to use the term in a manner that has little or nothing to do with Christian or moral philosophical opprobrium, but in the most basic sense of complete recklessness in the choice of his "object"), pride, greed ("the most grasping man alive" says Achilles [1. 142]), impatience, petulance, and indifference to the code that has evolved among the plunderers for the distribution of booty, enrage Achilles. There is also the monstrous ingratitude that Achilles rebukes him with. In taking Helen, the Trojans hurt only the honor of Agamemnon and Menelaus, yet all Greece has followed them, and good men have sacrificed themselves only to be treated like dirt (1. 187–190). All of these behaviors feed into the greatest of all Agamemnon's

transgressions as far as the rest of the plot of *The Iliad* is concerned—his humiliation, misjudgment and revenge upon the man he himself addresses as "godlike" and "the most violent man alive" (1. 172).

After his incendiary outburst, Agamemnon, who has threatened to take a prize for himself from Achilles, Ajax or Odysseus, so that they can take on the rage that engulfs him (1. 164), demands that Achilles hand over his prize trophy, the slave-girl Briseis "so you can learn just how much greater I am than you / and the next man up may shrink from matching words with me, from hoping to rival Agamemnon strength for strength" (1. 219–221). The insult and injury underscore his insistence to Achilles, "You are nothing to me—you and your overweening anger!" (1. 213).

Rage moves from god to man to man to men and then there is the attempt by divine forces to contain the rage, to find some way out, some way to dissipate what is feeding off itself—this raging fire of rage itself. Hera sends Pallas Athena to intervene. With sweet persuasion and the power of truth she calms Achilles, as he tells him that Agamemnon will pay with his life. Again the contrast between Agamemnon and Achilles is highlighted. Because of his wrath, Agamemnon resisted Apollo's command until he was left no alternative but obedience. Achilles, on the other hand, knows immediately that he must obey, even though his heart is breaking with fury (to be sure, he has no idea of how much further the pain of the breaking heart can go.) Thus Achilles refrains from killing Agamemnon. He pours out the truth of Agamemnon's cowardice and greediness, a "King who devours his people!" (1. 270), and then he prophesizes the destruction that will come from the Trojans, a destruction that is the result of his own prayer and of the divine intervention from his mother to Zeus.

The attempt by Nestor to restore harmony between Agamemnon and Achilles is the repetition at the human level of what a god has done. But the harmony that he, "the man of winning words", a man whose voice is "sweeter than honey" (1. 292), wants to restore is impossible. Already the rage has taken on a new significance through its transfer from Agamemnon to Achilles. Agamemnon's sense of proportion is starting to return and he responds to Nestor, "true old man—all you say is fit and proper" (1. 335). Achilles, however, is "blazing." Even Agamemnon's self-serving appeal to his own rightful authority contains an order-preserving truth. But Agamemnon cannot readily disengage from the tumult his fury has caused. His own self-image, his inflexibility, and his lack of magnanimity incite him to publicly follow through with his decision to humiliate Achilles. Homer emphasizes his culpability: "But King Agamemnon would not stop the quarrel" (1. 374), and, as the couriers come for Briseis, Achilles calls him an "unbending, ruthless king" (1. 402). This is true, but it is Achilles who will suffer more in the fury that has engulfed him. Agamemnon will have Briseis, and having proved his point will have his honor restored. Further, the rage has departed completely from Apollo. The sacrifices and

songs appease him; his god's heart is warm with joy. Achilles now has all the rage. He "raged on", says Homer. Apart, brooding, "he ground his heart out" (1. 585).

As the war continues, Agamemnon's heart too will be crushed by the slaughter of the Achaeans. He realizes that Zeus has betrayed him, and believing there is no chance of victory, he orders the men to sail home. But unlike in book 1, where we saw Agamemnon in his pride defy all sense and all good advice, and hence bring his men into ruin, in book 9 his order is challenged. His men all raise their voice in desire to fight on, and he listens to what his commanders have to say. This time Nestor plainly tells Agamemnon:

you went and took from his tents the girl Briseis,
and not with any applause from us, far from it:
I for one urged you against it, strenuously.
But you, you gave way to your overbearing anger,
disgraced a great man the gods themselves esteem
you seized his gift of honor and keep her still.
But even, so late as it is, let us contrive
to set all this to right, to bring him round
with gifts of friendship and warm, winning words (9. 126–135).

Agamemnon's response is that of a man whose lesson has been engraved on his soul through suffering. His former overweening pride, selfishness, pettiness, and inconsiderateness depart, as he admits his wrongdoing and seeks to rectify it. Now he can see how wrong he was in his treatment and estimation of Achilles. Having lost his rage he can say:

That's no lie, old man—a full account you give
of all my acts of madness. Mad, blind I was!
Not even *I* would deny it.
Why look, that is worth an entire army,
the fighter Zeus holds dear with all his heart—
how he exalts him now and mauls Achaeas' forces!
But since I *was* blinded, lost in my own inhuman rage,
now, at last, I am bent on setting things to rights:
I'll give a priceless ransom for friendship (9. 137–146).

He goes on to detail the generous ransom which includes the seven women from Lesbos that he had handpicked for himself, as well as returning Briseis, adding: "and I will swear a solemn, binding oath in the bargain: /I never mounted her, never once made love with her" (9. 159–160). He then offers Achilles, after the sacking of Troy, as much gold and bronze as he likes, as well as the twenty most beautiful Trojan women and the hand of one of his three daughters in marriage. To top that off, there will be a dowry the likes of which no man has ever offered. He will

give Achilles his daughter's seven citadels, "filled with people," and "all the face of the sea at the far edge of sandy Pylos / and the men who live with them." All that Achilles must do is "end his anger." "Let him bow down to me! I am the greater king, / I am the elder-born, I claim—the greater man" (9. 193–4). The last condition, from Agamemnon's perspective, is not overweening, but the reminder to Achilles of the respective rank that has been allocated to each of them.

In spite of the about-face and the offerings, Achilles is still enraged by the stench of Agamemnon's pride. He rebukes the deputation of Ajax, Odysseus and his former teacher, Phoenix, who bring Agamemnon's message. To no avail, Phoenix begs him to cast his rage to the wind and defend his friends, pointing out that "even the gods themselves can bend and change" (9. 603), and that "it's wrong to have such an iron, ruthless heart" (9. 602).

Achilles' ruthless heart is touched as he watches the battle from a hill and sees the wounded Machaon. He sends Patroclus to ask Nestor about him, an act that Nestor sees as only highlighting the pitilessness that has engulfed Achilles—of what importance is this or that man when the entire army is experiencing such slaughter? In book 16, Patroclus, whose heart is breaking at the suffering, only to be mocked by Achilles for being a crybaby, reproaches Achilles for his iron heart. He prays that "such anger never seizes me" (16. 34). "He was not your father, / the horseman Peleus—Thetis was not your mother. / Never. The salt gray sunless ocean gave your birth / and the towering blank rocks" (16. 37–40). Finally, Achilles' heart starts to thaw, and even he seems tired of repeatedly dwelling on the wrongs he has suffered at the hands of Agamemnon, and he cries out in mid-stream of his self-pity: "Enough. / Let bygones be bygones now. Done is done" (16. 68–69). But, because of his pride, he is unable to overcome his stubbornness and remains adamant that he will not fight. The best he can do is give Patroclus his blessing, in the form of his armor, and his permission to lead his men into battle. His commands to Patroclus reinforce the selfishness that has engulfed him in his rage. Patroclus is told to fight the Trojans so that he can win "great honor, great glory for me / in the eyes of all the Argive ranks, and they / they'll send her back, my lithe and lovely girl, and top it off with troves of glittering gifts" (16. 97–100). What he really hopes is that all Argives and Trojans would die in battle on the plain, and that he and Patroclus alone would stand victorious over Troy.

Even at this moment, where Achilles begins his turn, he is more monster than man, a monster created out of the forces of rage and pride. Yet the scene brilliantly captures just how much Achilles loves Patroclus. Achilles is a man surrounded by love. There is the deep love between him and his mother; between him and Phoenix—"I who love you", he says to Phoenix (9. 749)—; between him and Briseis; and between him and

Patroclus. The genuine grief that irrupts from the women that he and Patroclus had captured (18. 35–38) provides a powerful picture of the lovingness that Achilles has built around him in his life. Although pride has turned his heart into iron, his pride is not as strong as his love. His tragedy is that he only realizes this when it is too late.

Pride is a noble thing when it is an act of recognition of the gifts that the gods have bestowed upon one. Then, pride is gratitude that is bound up with a love of life in general, and a love of one's capacities, achievements and responsibilities in particular. Pride, in this sense, opens up the eyes and the heart. It is an essential ingredient of magnanimity, of the greatness of soul that Aristotle in his *Ethics*, depicts as belonging to the superior man. Both before his fight with Agamemnon and after Patroclus' death, Achilles is a model of greatness of soul. And his pride is indistinguishable from his noble bearing; his pride is healthy and balanced.

The magnanimous man knows how to forgive because he is large enough in spirit not to become a slave to his pride. The refusal to forgive the mistakes of lesser men is itself a sign of deficiency of spirit, a pettiness of character. After his humiliation by Agamemnon, Achilles' spirit shrinks and he becomes full of rancor and self-pity. Before that, Achilles always knew, as did everybody else, that he was the superior man to Agamemnon. The fact that Agamemnon had acted like a spoilt child by wanting to humiliate Achilles only highlights the vast gap between them. But because Achilles is the greater man, he is expected to be magnanimous enough to understand the weaker man's deficiencies. By allowing his pride to take over so that he is blinded and controlled by rage, Achilles loses all sense of proportion, including all sense of his own worth and responsibilities. Unable to surmount his pride, he acts with that same "furious self-absorption", to use Knox's wonderfully perceptive phrase, that characterizes the behavior of the gods.⁷ Because he is not a god, he will be forced to come back to the reality of his limitations, the defining horizon of which is established by his mortality. To be sure, Achilles' heroic qualities elevate him in many ways above other mortals, as does the semi-divine nature of his genealogy. Being so close to the gods, yet still human, he is more susceptible to overreach and its devastating consequences than lesser mortals.

Amongst Achilles' god-like qualities is his fearlessness in the face of death. When he becomes blinded with rage this fearlessness turns into inattentiveness to the need to care for the mortals he loves. Being so caught up in his own grievance he fails to consider the danger facing Patroclus. He treats it as if it were a foregone conclusion that Patroclus would survive and that together amongst the pile of dead Achaeans they would be victorious. His rage and pride have made him quite mad. He acts as if Hector were a matter of no significance and thus, at the very moment he is most needed on the battlefield to fight alongside the man he loves, he has

reduced himself to being a mere spectator.

Having prayed to bring destruction on his fellow Achaeans, Achilles has become caught up in his own prayer. In the grip of blind rage, and unable to see with clarity, he mistakes himself for a god. Paradoxically, this has only made him less, rather than more, of a human being. The terrible nature of his blindness and the pathos of his subsequent trauma are accentuated by the fact that when Patroclus is killed his rage has begun to dissolve. Vengeance has already been extracted and Agamemnon has apologized and promised to return Briseis and reward Achilles handsomely. Homer suggests that an energy such as rage can take over even the best of men. Yet, its presence had so corrupted Achilles' judgment that he no longer had the capacity to act at the right time in order to preserve himself from tragedy. On the other hand, Achilles' suffering does have a positive side. It becomes the means for the transmutation of a now blunted and blinding energy into an active and creative force. Its transmutation is what makes the difference between mere destruction and creative destruction. The tragic nature of this transmutation lies in the fact that it requires the sacrifice of precisely that which made life worth living for Achilles.

The Channeling of Rage and the Return to Civilization

In Achilles we have the human war machine, a man born to do battle, a man who more than any other may be thought to be hardened by the toils of war, but when Nestor informs him of Patroclus' death:

A black cloud of grief came shrouding over Achilles.
Both hands clawing the ground for soot and filth,
he poured it over his head, fouled his handsome face
and black ashes settled onto his clean war-shirt.
Overpowered in all his power, sprawled in the dust,
Achilles lay there, fresh fallen (18. 24–29).

War has touched Achilles in a way that he had refused to let it touch him before. Being fearless, fear could not touch him; being proud, love of his comrades could not touch him. But Patroclus's death makes him experience a degree of agony he had never imagined possible. It is the sheer depth of his agony that forces him to return to the warrior that he is. That Homer chooses here to have Thetis in her own agony—"I am agony" (18. 62), she says—summon the sea nymphs, with their charmed beautiful names, which are all suggestive of the beauty of life's swirl, neatly juxtaposes the delightful sparkle of the world and its overpowering anguish.

There is only one way for Achilles to return to life, and that is by killing. This deepest of paradoxes that stands behind the most ancient face of justice, the blood-lust, the life-line that moves through the death of the

enemy as a means of re-vitalization of a life that no longer can continue is powerfully captured by Homer: "I've lost the will to live, / to take my stand in the world of men," says Achilles, "unless, / before all else, Hector's battered down by my spear / and gasps away his life, the blood-price for Patroclus" (18. 105–109). The fact that Achilles knows he will die, that the vitality he will extract from the process of revenge will be short is not the point. The hero's proximity to death has long instructed him in the inevitability of death and the greater desirability of a meaningful life. (Once dead, as in *The Odyssey*, Achilles will think differently, but that is another matter). At the moment of greatest agony, there is only one reason left to live—to avenge Patroclus. Neither his desire for Briseis, nor his pride has any importance any more. Moreover, the only force that can lift him from his fallen state is the very force that has carried him since the dispute with Agamemnon—his rage. But it will be a transformed rage; not a blind rage that assists his enemies to destroy his comrades, but a rage that is now sharply focused upon his enemies. With that union of vengeance and rage comes the glory that is the zenith of the heroic code.

As Achilles becomes more focused, Hector's lack of measure becomes more pronounced. Hector's treatment of Patroclus—his attempt to prevent a proper burial for Patroclus, his desire that Patroclus be left as carrion for predators—shows that even he, the most civilized man in *The Iliad*, has been swept up in war's ferocity and he has transgressed the codes of gods and civility. This offence against Patroclus and Achilles completes his earlier offence against Zeus, by killing Zeus' son, Sarpedon. His fate is sealed. That we are all sinners is, of course, not a Greek concept. However the Homeric division of the gods according to their loyalty to either Greek or Trojan (a division that leads to the gods warring against each other in book 20) indicates that merely being alive will inevitably lead to offending (sinning) against a god. In times of peace we may have some control over our transgressions, but in the blaze of war the very energy that makes men warriors is what leads them to transgress.

Until Patroclus' death, Homer focused upon the blindness of the Greeks, initially Agamemnon, then Achilles, but with Hector's treatment of Patroclus, Homer turns his attention to the wave of blindness that descends on the Trojans. Polydamas, understanding the winds of change of battle, urges a tactical retreat behind the city walls. But Hector, wrongly, insists that now is the time to stand and wait. The Trojans who assent to the display of Hector's leadership are "lost in folly. Athena had swept their senses (18. 362)." At the moment when the Trojans lose their senses, with the death and tending of the body of Patroclus, Achilles has returns to his senses. His suffering has restored his perspective. Thus Achilles says to Agamemnon:

Agamemnon—was it better for both of us, after all,
for you and me to rage at each other, raked by anguish,

consumed by heartsick strife, all for a young girl?
If only Artemis had cut her down at the ships—
with one quick shaft—
that day I destroyed Lyrnessus, chose her as my prize.
How many fewer friends had gnawed the dust of the wide world,
brought down by enemy hands while I raged on and on.
Better? Yes—for Hector and Hector's Trojans!
Not for the Argives. For years to come, I think,
they will remember the feud that flared between us both.
Enough. Let bygones be bygones. Done is done.
Despite my anguish I will beat it down,
the fury mounting inside me, down by force.
Now by god, I call a halt to all my anger—
it's wrong to keep on raging, heart inflamed forever (19. 64–78).

The speech is, however, somewhat misleading. Certainly, the rage towards Agamemnon is assuaged—something Odysseus and Agamemnon go to great pains to ensure, by their insistence that Achilles take the ransom and participate in a feast, while hearing Agamemnon again swear that he never laid a hand on Briseis. But the rage has not gone. The pact between Achilles and Agamemnon acts to conduct the rage so that it is now directed solely at the enemy. Hence, as he arms for battle, Achilles is described thus by Homer: "A sound of grinding came from the fighter's teeth, / his eyes blazed forth in searing points of fire, / unbearable grief came surging through his heart / and now, bursting with rage against the men of Troy" (19. 431–4) and in book 20 he is described as "inhuman fire raging on through the mountain gorges" (555). Now Achilles orchestrates all the powers that make him a warrior and the rage fuels the inhuman fire that he is, all to the singular purpose of battle. For Achilles it is time "to call up the wild joy of war at once (19. 179)!" Ransoms and booty are now completely irrelevant, as Priam's son, Lycaon, gruesomely finds out when he pleads for Achilles to spare his life in return for a giant ransom. Instead of mercy, he is given a lecture by Achilles on the inevitability of death before he slashes him through the collarbone and throws him into the river, assuring him as he does it that he will have no burial rites.

Achilles' rage must rage on. Killing Hector will not be enough to satisfy it. He threatens Hector that there will be no funeral rites. But denying Hector funeral rites is also not enough to satisfy his rage. The rage reaches its zenith in the "outrage" (a brilliant translation choice by Fagles at 23. 28) that he perpetrates by dragging Hector's mutilated body around the walls of Troy to the accompanying grief of the horrified Trojans. The grief that devours Achilles begins to find its release in the hearts of the Trojan onlookers. But their grief is simply a prelude to the grief that will be felt by the unsuspecting Andromache, who hears the wailing from her loom, dashes out of the royal halls "like a madwoman" and looks on, from the rampart, at Achilles' performing his bloody work. As she stands there

in horror we are invariably reminded of the portrait that Homer had painted in book 6 of Hector and Andromache, these two good and loving people undeservedly caught up in the fires of war, standing on that rampart contemplating her future as a widow and slave. Now as she watches Achilles' savagely butchering Hector she faints, knowing that a life of humiliation and endless tears awaits her. That Hector's family must suffer so terribly is the tragic price of Achilles being able to free himself from the rage that has possessed him.

The desecration of Hector does not in itself dissolve Achilles' grief. He must build the funeral pyre, and perform the last ablutions on Patroclus. He must build the mound for the urn that will eventually contain his as well as Patroclus' bones, in compliance with the latter's wish that both heroes be placed together in death. In an earlier scene, Zeus himself says, as he looks down on the battling men, "there is nothing alive more agonized than man / of all that breathe and crawl across the earth" (17. 515–6). Homer creates layer upon layer of agony and accentuate the pitiable lot of human existence by having Achilles drag himself around the pyre choking with sobs.

Yet, in the midst of all this grief, games are held. That Homer will extract something life-affirming from this agony, and do it in such a way that we know it to be the calm before the inevitable destruction of Troy and the death of Achilles, demonstrates the fundamental fusion of suffering and joy, destruction and creation which the Homeric epic captures.

The contrast between the greedy dispirited mob in book 1 and the civilizing solidarity of men in book 23 is reinforced by the transition from Achilles the implacable proud rager of book 1 to the despairing, re-humanized, magnanimous leader of book 23. After all the violence he has committed, Achilles is, at the games, a man who exudes peace and good spirit. He tames Ajax's fury. He insists that a prize be given to Eumelus who comes in last in the chariot race. He is now self-assured rather than blindly and insecurely proud, as he admires Antilochus for his courage in standing up to him. He is generous. He says to old Nestor: "I give you this prize, a gift for giving's sake" (23. 691), and he willingly fetches an extra gift from his tent to give to Eumelus. His stout heartedness is infectious. Thus Menelaus abandons his anger at Antilochus who had cut him off in the race, pardons him and willingly returns the prize that he initially demanded. In the wrestling match between Ajax and Odysseus, Achilles declares a draw, a decision both gladly accept. And on it goes. The book concludes with Achilles acknowledging the superior excellence of Agamemnon as a spear thrower: "you are the best by far!" (23. 988). Reconciliation is complete: all rancor is vanished; greed has given way to generosity; men once divided are at one and their spirits are full and overflowing. All of this turns the burial of Patroclus into a celebratory and civilizing moment. The civilization of Troy is about to fall as the Greeks

rediscover their own civility. Yet for all that, the rage has not completely evaporated, as Homer makes clear in the final book (24. 26) when he shows that Achilles' heart with its sorrow is a human heart, and the pity that the god Apollo eventually feels overflows, and helping to heal the world of men, as much as his earlier rage had brought havoc upon it.

The Iliad is finally a tale not of the victory of rage and destruction, but of the momentary triumph of pity, love and the insight that comes from gazing into the face of the enemy. Just as Priam looks into Iris' face, "I looked straight at the goddess face to face" (24. 266), Priam, with divine assistance, goes into Achilles' tent and looks at him face to face. The zenith of the poem is not the battle between Hector and Achilles, but the peaceful encounter between Priam and Achilles. "I have" says Priam, underscoring the humanistic achievement of the encounter, "endured what no one on earth has ever done before— / I put to my lips the hands of the man who killed my son" (24. 590-91). Priam stirs Achilles' heart, just as Hermes says he must, and he triggers off memories in Achilles of his own dear father. Each is no longer imprisoned in his own agony, as together they weep and find consolation in the common recognition of the hardships of life.

Homer's epic may be full of gods and all manner of charmed and wondrous events, but there is a strong current of realism in his work. Priam and Achilles are at war, and Achilles, touched as he is, is still Achilles, that is, a man with little time left, a man driven by the imperative to destroy his enemy. If this were a fairy tale, or a depiction of a less violent world, this act of mutual recognition would lead to peace between Greeks and Trojans. But that is not Troy's fate; there must be more blood, and Troy must fall.

Achilles has been re-humanized, but he warns Priam not to tempt his rage, and not to go too far lest he kill him there and then. Achilles is calm enough to understand the difficult balance of forces existing at that moment. Thus, having given consent to Priam to take Hector's body, he insists that Priam not see it, lest, overwhelmed by grief, he fly into a rage sparking off in turn his own rage. Taking control of the situation, Achilles and Priam feast together and the admiration that Priam had shown earlier for his heroic enemy, when Helen had reviewed the Achaeans, is elevated to a higher level, as:

Priam the son of Dardanus gazed at Achilles, marveling
now at the man's beauty, his magnificent build—
face to face he seemed a deathless god...
and Achilles gazed and marveled at Dardan Priam,
beholding his noble looks, listening to his words. (24. 740—745).

The Iliad concludes with the grief of the Trojans and the burial of Hector, which is appropriate given that they are really grieving for the loss of themselves as a civilization.

Conclusion

Homer's depiction of the fall and rise of Achilles is a depiction of the movement of the energy of rage. Tracing its movement he shows how it shaped the fate of Greece's greatest hero and how, while nearly destroying the Greeks, it was central in bringing a war that had lasted ten years to its completion. The war against the Trojans had brought together all the Greek armies. And in the great naming of the armies of book 2, Homer shows that he is laying down for all posterity the common cause that led the Greeks to think of themselves as one people and one civilization. When that civilization, several hundred centuries later, found itself torn apart in internecine wars, the philosopher Plato blamed Homer and all the poets who had taken succor from him for the lack of consistency about ideas of virtue and the general immorality exhibited by gods and heroes. Homer's riposte would be: first, that were it not for the forces he describes and men such as Achilles, the very civilized activities which a Plato engages in would not exist; and, secondly, that the forces of life cannot be neatly compartmentalized and assembled into logically rigorous contrasting orders, as Plato holds. If Homer contradicts himself, as Plato argues, it is because Homer sees that the same power can be simultaneously a curse and a blessing, just as life itself is.

¹There are many great translations. My favorite contemporary translation is by Robert Fagles. Its combination of fidelity and poetic power, of majesty and music is unsurpassable. It also contains Bernard Knox's brilliant introductory essay written on Homer. *The Iliad* (Penguin: New York, 1990). That essay also contains a section on the shield of Hephaestus.

²Richard Onians, *The Origins of European Thought: About the Body, the Mind, the Soul, the World, Time, and Fate* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1951), p. 21. Cf. Knox "Introduction", *Ibid.*, p. 28.

³See books 2, 3 and 10 of Plato's *Republic*.

⁴A very strong case for the epic foundations of philosophy can be found in Bruno Snell's classic *The Discovery of the Mind: The Greek Origins of European Thought*, trans. T.G. Rosenmeyer (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1953). Rosenstock-Huessy makes an important point about Homer's role in the linguistic opening for philosophy: "Homer's favorite word is of course the little word 'as'. But 'the one and the other', 'someone else', 'somehow', 'somewhere', 'anybody' and above all 'something' are his real words of disenchantment. These words transform the god of this city or the rites of this clan, into 'a' god and into 'a' rite. From Homer on the entire Greek philosophy and science received the new words of comparison, which contain the 'someone', 'something', 'how' and 'a'." Eugen Rosenstock-Huessy, *Die Soziologie*, vol. 2, *Die Vollzahl der Zeiten* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1958), p. 225. Laslo Versényi's *Man's Measure: A Study of the Greek Image of Man from Homer* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1974) is another work that suggests the connection between epic and philosophy. Versényi argues that the epic innovation in elevating the importance of the need for visibility both in its form and its content results from the need for episodic clarity in oral recitation: "all that matters is the present event. It must be presented vividly, firmly, directly, and laid fully open to sight so that it shines forth with a dazzling flash of light." *Ibid.*, p. 7. Plato develops the epic's demand for episodic clarity by insisting that the mind have a visible measure of the truth of an action.

⁵Knox, p. 29.

⁶Perhaps nothing better shows how Homer constructs the gods than a passage of magnificent irony from book two. While using deceit to test his men's resolve, Agamemnon cries out (without any objections from his troops): "Zeus is a harsh cruel god" (2.131) who has "plotted brutal treachery." He says this after Zeus has signaled his favor toward Agamemnon and he has no idea at this instance that his words are true, that Zeus is giving him false signals in order to help the Trojans. (The charge of cruelty and treachery is repeated at 9.21 and 24). And Asius cries out "Father Zeus— / so even you are an outright liar after all," (12.189–90) while Menelaus exclaims: "Zeus, Father Zeus, they say you excel all others... / all men and gods, in wisdom clear and calm— / but all this brutal carnage comes from you" (13.727–29). And in his fight against the river, Achilles feels abandoned by the gods, blaming even his mother for lying to him (21.312).

⁷Knox, p. 44.