

THE EDUCATION OF ACHILLES: THROUGH A GLASS DARKLY (1)

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Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey* seem to have sprung full blown out of nowhere, perfectly formed, deeply insightful, reminding one of the birth of Athena, full-grown, from Zeus' head. It is only in the 20th century that we have come to understand something of the gestation process of those Greek epics: grounded in generations of oral poetry, probably reflecting historical events of a much earlier age, transposed and transmuted and collated in a way which will never be understood completely; and finally reaching the clear light of the Greek day sometime in the latter half of the 8th century B.C., attributed to the paternity of the blind poet, Homer. One of the greatest contributions of the Greeks to the development of Western culture is the idea of moral choice, of cause and effect, of tit-for-tat: so Zeus had to have a headache before the birth of Athena, and so Homer was traditionally thought to have paid the price of his sight for the gift of inner vision about the human condition which permeates his epics. The *Iliad* especially is pervaded with the sense that nothing in life is free, that there are choices to be made, prices to be paid, and that it is man, not the gods, who must and does make these choices and pay these prices, the greatest of which is life itself. From here develops the concomitant idea of the worth of human life, not in general but in particular: an individual's life must itself be valuable if it is to be worthy of the choice made to surrender it.

At the beginning of the third book of the *Iliad*, Paris in a moment of exuberance says to his brother Hector (III.65-66):

Never to be cast away are the gifts
of the gods, magnificent, / which they
give of their own will, no man could
have them for wanting them. (2)

But as Achilles and Priam in particular, and readers of the *Iliad* in general, discover, the gifts of the gods are never quite what they seem, or what men expect them to be. Listen to what Achilles says to Priam in the magnificent

final scene of the epic (XXIV.527-36, 538, 540-43, 547-48):

There are two urns that stand on the
door-sill of Zeus. They are unlike /
for the gifts they bestow: an urn of
evils, an urn of blessings. / If Zeus
who delights in thunder mingles these
and bestows them / on man, he shifts,
and moves now in evil, again in good
fortune. / But when Zeus bestows from
the urn of sorrows, he makes a failure
/ of man, and the evil hunger drives
him over the shining / earth, and he
wanders respected neither of gods and
mortals. / Such were the shining gifts
given by the gods to Peleus / from his
birth, who outshone all men beside
for his riches / and pride of possession,
and was lord over the Myrmidons ...
/ But even on him the god piled evil
also ... and I give him / no care as he
grows old, since far from the land of
my fathers / I sit here in Troy, and
bring nothing but sorrow to you and
your children. / And you, old sir, we
are told you prospered once ... / But
now the Uranian gods brought us, an
affliction upon you, / forever there
is fighting about your city, and men
killed.

After this sombre assessment of the vagaries of human life, Achilles continues with a startling admonition (XXIV.549-51):

But bear up, nor mourn endlessly in
your heart, for there is not / anything
to be gained from grief for your son;
you will never / bring him back; sooner
you must go through yet another sorrow.

Here is the clearest affirmation of life, because it is voiced by a man who has made his choice, who has finally realized that there are causes and effects, that a choice of action leads ineluctably to a consequence, for which the chooser is ultimately responsible. This is what the *Iliad* is about:

the education of Achilles, the son of Peleus. Achilles, in the most painful way possible, through the death of his dearest friend, Patroclus, comes to realize that his actions have consequences, that he has to accept those consequences, as his leader Agamemnon does not and will not, and that this is what the Will of Zeus really means. The opening word of the *Iliad* is "wrath", a wrath which causes Achilles to take certain actions, which in turn will have far-reaching consequences, eventually involving all of those fighting before Ilion; thus the epic takes its name not from one man but from the city itself, encompassing all those there fighting and dying.

We accept without question now, I think, that A leads to B, that there is cause and effect operative in the world. But I suggest that Achilles did not, in Book I, realize that, and we painfully watch him acquiring that knowledge during the course of the epic. I further suggest that Achilles' great antagonist, Hector, never acquires that knowledge, perhaps because Hector is so totally human, and knowledge of the full content of the Will of Zeus can only first be intuited by one who shares a part of the divine nature.

Let us look briefly at the structure of the *Iliad* before examining Achilles and Hector. The *Iliad* begins with the quarrel of Achilles and Agamemnon, and then some forty-odd days and hundreds of deaths later, it ends with the burial of Hector. The hero, after an initial appearance in the first book, disappears from view, although not from thought, until the ninth book; we catch occasional glimpses of him in Book XI, again in Book XIV, but it is not until Book XVIII that Achilles emerges to dominate absolutely the action until the end. Again, although Homer starts from the narrow and specific scene of the altercation between Achilles and Agamemnon, he widens the action into an enormous drama with a huge cast, most of whom leap into individuality at the very moment of death, a few of whom are featured players in the story. Nor is Homer dismissive of women, as his story would seem to demand, for he deliberately allows us a glimpse of those women whose lives are forever changed by what happens before Troy. This is not all: the poet's tapestry intricately interweaves the divine and the human, the world of nature and the world of man, the world of war and the world of peace, into a kind of contrapuntal harmony which is unparalleled in literature. Here is an awareness that all of life is intertwined in a seemingly mysterious

but ultimately rational way. It is the power of rational thought, and its outward expression, language - **logos** in Greek - which the Greeks recognized as essential, for it is this, and this alone, which allows us to order our experience, to live our lives in some meaningful way, to make sense of what happens to us; otherwise we would be like the Sumerians or the Egyptians, defining life only in terms of its cessation, death. The richness, the depth of human existence woven for us in the *Iliad* makes us aware of the value of life itself, and hence of the worth of the moral choices which Homer realizes man must make.

Now to look more carefully at the pilgrim's progress, as it were, of Achilles. When we first see him, he is everything the aristocratic hero ought to be: brave, boastful, proud of his valour and prowess, jealous of his dignity, fully cognizant of the rules of the game by which he and his compatriots live, enraged when he thinks he is being slighted by Agamemnon's high-handed treatment of him (and remember that this assessment is shared by his fellow warriors until Book IX), rather petulant and so child-like that he runs crying to his mother, Thetis, when he can't get his own way. It is a stroke of genius on Homer's part to include Thetis in his epic: the warm and sympathetic mother who does what her son asks of her, but who at the same time, because she is a goddess, knows that it will entail the death of her son. Achilles' request that the Achaeans suffer in battle seems simple and springs from the universal thought: They'll be sorry they were nasty to me! But Achilles' wish comes true because he is a goddess' son, and here begins his education.

The immediate consequence of his prayer is obvious to all the Achaeans, even to the obtuse Agamemnon, who realizes he must do something about his quarrel with Achilles. And so he apologizes, as such apologies are made in the world of Troy: gifts beyond measure, material tokens to assuage the injured **amour propre** of the warrior. According to the code of conduct prevailing among the Greek and Trojan fighters, such gifts are acceptable and suitable recompense for the insult given to Achilles; all agree on this, except Achilles himself. During his withdrawal from battle, Achilles has been thinking about his world and its values, and its way of assessing cause and effect. He does this in anger, of course, which does not usually lead to clear thinking, but in his angry and passionate outburst in reply to Odysseus' diplomatic presentation of Agamemnon's apology, Achilles

voices some hard truths and asks some difficult questions. To ask questions is the first step in learning more; answers only come later, as Achilles will learn to his cost (IX.314-22, 400-403, 408-409):

But I will speak to you the way it seems
 best to me: neither / do I think the
 son of Atreus, Agamemnon, will persuade
 me, / nor the rest of the Danaans, since
 there was no gratitude given / for fighting
 incessantly forever against your enemies.
 / Fate is the same for the man who
 holds back, the same if he fights hard.
 / We are all held in a single honour,
 the brave with the weaklings. / A man
 dies still if he has done nothing, as
 one who has done much. / Nothing is
 won for me, now that my heart has
 gone through its afflictions / in forever
 setting my life on the hazard of battle
 ... / For not worth the value of my
 life are all the possessions they fable
 / were won for Ilion, that strong-founded
 citadel, in the old days / when there
 was peace, before the coming of the
 sons of the Achaians ... / But a man's
 life cannot come back again, it cannot
 be lifted / nor captured again by force,
 once it has crossed the teeth's barrier.

Achilles is here asking himself "Why live this way?", and in effect answering "Don't." For this is surely what he means by announcing that he will go home on the morrow and by advising others to do the same (IX.415-16):

the excellence of my glory is gone,
 but there will be a long life / left for
 me, and my end in death will not come
 to me quickly.

Phoenix, *in loco parentis mortalis*, offers Achilles advice which is sensible within the framework of the heroic world which Phoenix thinks they both inhabit: heroes should accept gifts, they should listen and be persuaded. This is the moral of his long story about Meleager and the Aetolians: do what others have done, learn by example. But Achilles cannot

learn this way; he must learn from his own experience, he just make his own choices, he must move outside the heroic world of tradition and example in order to assess for himself the value of life.

He does this with startling rapidity as soon as he hears the news of Patroclus' death. Consider how Homer has constructed this scene: Patroclus was sent out into battle by Achilles, rather reluctantly and with many caveats, at the suggestion of another, so that by wearing the armour of Achilles he might fool the Trojans or at least gain some time for the hard-pressed Achaeans. Then Patroclus is killed by Hector, and Achilles instantly recognizes his own responsibility for his companion's death (XVIII.79-81, 8893):

My mother, all these things the Olympian
brought to accomplishment. / But what
pleasure is this to me, since my dear
companion has perished, / Patroklos,
whom I loved beyond all other companions
... / As it is, there must be on your
heart a numberless sorrow / for your
son's death, since you can never again
receive him / won home again to his
country; since the spirit within does
not drive me / to go on living and be
among men, except on condition / that
Hektor first be beaten down under my
spear, lose his life / and pay the price
for stripping Patroklos, the son of
Menoitios.

Notice how Achilles phrases his choice: "Only if Hector dies shall I be willing to live." Thetis instantly apprises him of the consequences of his choice (XVII.95-96):

Then I must lose you soon, my child,
by what you are saying, / since it is
decreed your death must come soon
after Hektor's.

Just as quickly, Achilles rejects any conditionality and accepts the consequences. He baldly states (XVIII.98, 114-16):

I must die soon, then ... / Now I shall
go, to overtake the killer of a dear

life, / Hektor; then I will accept my
own death, at whatever / time Zeus
wishes to bring it about, and the other
immortals.

Achilles here moves beyond the usual triteness of saying that the price of life is death; he rather affirms the paradoxical opposite, that death is but a small price to pay for the affirmation of life as a moral choice. Patroclus' life is so valuable to Achilles and his own part in the extinguishing of that life so clear to him that Achilles hesitates not a moment in accepting his own responsibility. Death is for him at this moment absolutely unimportant; and despite reminders from everyone, even his talking horse, it assumes no significance for him until after he has killed Hector. Again, consider how Homer has shaped this scene in Book XXII. Hector is wearing Achilles' armour, which he has earlier stripped from Patroclus' body. Achilles is in some sense witnessing and even participating in his own death. A traumatic experience for anyone, even a Homeric hero; and it leads Achilles momentarily to forget what he has learned and so to exalt death rather than life, as he does every time he drags the body of Hector behind his chariot while he careens across the windy plains of Troy.

His final acceptance and understanding of life come in Book XIV, in his confrontation with the father of Hector, Priam, who says (XXIV.505-506):

I have gone through what no other mortal
on earth has gone through; / I put my
lips to the hands of the man who has
killed my children.

It is now that Achilles' vision extends to those two urns of Zeus: a recognition that life, however tragic, is more important than death. This is symbolized by the homely sharing of food and drink by these disparate men, each of whom had before eschewed this life-giving act in his own concentration on death (XXIV.627-32):

They put their hands to the good things
that lay ready before them. / But when
they had put aside their desire for eating
and drinking, / Priam, son of Dardanos,
gazed upon Achilles, wondering /at

his size and beauty, for he seemed like
an outright vision / of gods. Achilles
in turn gazed on Dardanian Priam /and
wondered, as he saw his brave looks
and listened to him talking.

A marvellous scene: Achilles looks on Priam and thinks sadly of his own father; Priam looks on Achilles and thinks sadly of his own son. They are joined like father and son in a common bond of sorrow and grief, but also in recognition of the value of life. This is what Achilles learns in the course of the *Iliad*, and what the Greeks learned too: that the very act of accepting the consequences for one's action is in itself an affirmation of life, that from the recognition of the underlying moral framework of the world springs a necessary belief in the worth of individual choice. Not an easy lesson, to be sure, but one that must be learned if we are ever to accomplish the Will of Zeus.

Hector, despite his nobility and very human qualities, never is faced with the necessity of learning this lesson. Hector does not have to make the stark choice of Achilles; he is never vouchsafed that moment of anguished insight which Achilles faces in Book XVIII. Hector does what he has to do because he is the son of Priam, the brother of Paris, the father of Astyanax, the champion of Troy. He is the very embodiment of the heroic ideal expressed so succinctly by Sarpedon to Glaucus (XII.322-28):

Man, supposing you and I, escaping
this battle, / would be able to live on
forever, ageless, immortal, / so neither
would I myself go on fighting in the
foremost / nor would I urge you into
the fighting where men win glory. /
But now, seeing that the spirits of death
stand close about us / in their thousands,
no man can turn aside nor escape them,
/ let us go on and win glory for ourselves,
or yield it to others.

And this is exactly what Hector does, in his final confrontation with Achilles (XXII.303-305):

But now my death is upon me. / Let
me at least not die without a struggle,

inglorious, / but do some big thing first,
that men to come shall know of it.

Note for Hector the questioning, the moral choice, the acceptance of consequences of an Achilles. For Hector, glory, the winning of a fair reputation, is sufficient, and in this he is the quintessential representative of the society that for Homer is the touchstone by which to measure the uniqueness of Achilles. One remembers Hector's prayer for his son, Astyanax, in that poignant farewell between Hector and his wife (VI.76-81):

Zeus, and you other immortals, grant
that this boy, who is my son, / may
be as I am, pre-eminent among the
Trojans, / great in strength, as am I,
and rule strongly over Ilion; / and some
day let them say of him: "He is better
by far than his father", / as he comes
in from the fighting; and let him kill
his enemy / and bring home the blooded
spoils, and delight the heart of his mother.

Here is the fullest expression of the heroic credo: valour, courage, strength, steadfastness, continuity of tradition - all values which Achilles rejects in his driving desire to understand **why**. Hector's greatest desire is to be the best of his kind: Achilles' is to assert his uniqueness, once he feels that he can no longer understand or be a functioning part of the society whence he came. Hector is probably the most appealing character in the *Iliad*, because Homer has made him entirely human. We see him in all the roles we humans commonly assume: child, parent, spouse, sibling, in-law, leader. These are familiar and comfortable roles, and Hector is a comfortable person to be with. Achilles is not, however, and this is not because of his low flash-point to anger, nor his quixotic behaviour nor his overpowering strength, but rather because of his insistence on fully understanding the terms of human existence and, just as fully, accepting the consequences of that knowledge.

A red-figured vase painter of the mid-5th century B.C. has visually caught the essence of Achilles: an isolated figure, standing alone against a black background, in the full glory of his youth and prowess, tragically yet triumphantly aware of his brief but morally significant existence (3). However

clear may be Homer's vision of man in the **Iliad**, it is also one of darkness, of the tragic dilemmas which confront man. Yet from this tragedy comes triumph. Achilles, like Oedipus, is most noble in his darkest hour and affirms the triumph of the individual human will in the densest tangles of human experience.

NOTES

1. An earlier version of this paper was given at the 1985 Institute on the Classical Humanities held at Dartmouth College, U.S.A. This was the first of a series of three lectures entitled "From Homer to Herodotus".
2. All translations are by Richmond Lattimore, **The Iliad of Homer** (Chicago, 1951). Lattimore retains the Greek spelling for the more familiar Latinized forms which I have used in the body of the text.
3. See P. Arias, **Greek Vase Painting** (New York, 1961), Plate XV.