

## СТАТЬИ / ARTICLES

# ACHILLES' CHARACTER AS AN INTERNAL CRITIQUE OF WARMONGERING IDEALS IN THE *ILIAD*

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**ABSTRACT.** In this paper, I show how Achilles' faults work as a lens through which we more readily see the problematic nature of ideals that cast war – and especially an aggressive war of conquest – in a poeticized and desirable light. I argue that in Homer's *Iliad*, idealized images of war, which promise super-human glory, in the end, serve to undo and waste human life. I do not mean to say that in this archetypal war epic we find an outright critique of war. However, I argue that the *Iliad* holds its poeticized images of war in tension with the gruesome, life-negating violence to which these idealized representations give way.

Keywords: Anger, egotistical self-love, psychology, solipsism, shame.

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### 1. Introduction

To illustrate the fact that the *Iliad* contains an internal criticism of war aggression, I examine the character of Achilles and argue that in him we find reflected or symbolized the insidious nature of ideals that glorify war. Achilles draws to himself powerful poetic images of extraordinary military prowess, victory, and valor. However, the *Iliad* problematizes these very same images and the ideals they hold up for human beings.<sup>1</sup> In my analysis, I emphasize the inhumanity of Achilles – his

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<sup>1</sup> On the philosophical relevance and importance of poetic images in the *Iliad*, see Sergey Shevtsov 2020, 104–142. Shevtsov argues contra Hegel who “полностью отрицает философское начало у Гомера, он даже противопоставляет его философии” or “completely rejects a philosophical foundation in Homer, and even opposes [Homer] to philosophy” (127). Translation by the author. See, also, analyses of the poetic elements in the *Iliad* by Sheppard 1922; Hoffmeister 1995; Whallon 1961; Muellner 1990; Becker 1990; Stein 2016; Schironi 2018, 124–170.

unhinged rage, his exceptionalism, and his egotistical self-love – in order to show how these elements of his character reflect the *Iliad's* critique of the life-negating power of warmongering ideals.

In Part 2, I offer a critique of Achilles' rage (μῆνις), which both guides his actions and accompanies his desire for victory and undying fame (κλέος ἄφθιτον, 9.413).<sup>2</sup>

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As far as literature on the *Iliad* as the work that problematizes ideals of war is concerned, Simone Weil 1965 largely sees the *Iliad* as a critique of war. However, Gary Wills 1997 in his introduction to Christopher Logue, takes it to be the case that “Weil could not admit the fierce joy in battle, which means that much of Homer was a closed book to her” (xvii). I think Wills misses Weil's point, which is that “the fierce joy in battle,” as Wills puts it, has an extraordinarily high price. The *Iliad* attests to the swiftness of the retribution that falls upon the warriors for their desire to experience such “joy.” Closer to Weil's take on the epic, Marion Tait 1943, goes as far as to say that “[t]here could scarcely be a sadder commentary on human life than that of the last book of the *Iliad*. The dominant motif is pessimism, pointed and relieved by irony. Achilles and Priam review the waste and futility of all high effort and all human anguish over the bodies of Patroclus and Hector” (53). Markedly, both Weil (who composed her piece in 1940) and Tait (her essay was published in 1943) who problematize the war-time valor, and expressions of militaristic force in *Iliad* are offering their interpretations of the epic during the darkest years of WWII. Also, Peter Lowe 2014, reflecting on Keith Douglas' “*Iliad*” and “the near-mechanised slaughter of the Western Front” of the WWII, shows how critical Douglas is of the idealized presentations of war that the *Iliad* offers. Lowe summarizes Douglas' position and claims that “[f]or the twentieth-century war poet, talk of grand ideals, aims, and motives is more likely to draw out disdain than agreement, accompanied in poetic terms by a distrust of anything that seeks to make war sound more elevated than it is” (301). See also an earlier work, by Adam Parry 1966, which questions the cogency of seeing the *Iliad* as glorifying bellicose ideals.

<sup>2</sup> Where the translation of the *Iliad* differs from Richmond Lattimore's 2011 or Augustus T. Murray 1924, it is by the author. On the difference between κλέος and κῆδος, see Émile Benveniste 1969, II.57–6.9. On κλέος ἄφθιτον, see for example, Finkelberg 1986 and also Volk 2002. On Achilles' rage or wrath, see a careful study by Leonard C. Muellner 1996, complete with etymology of “μῆνις.” The book offers a nuanced view of Achilles' rage and documents appearances of “μῆνις” in the *Iliad*. Specifically, Muellner is clear on the point that the first victim of Achilles' μῆνις (and as early as book one) is Achilles himself (137–138). In regard to the broader relationship between rage and conquest, Muellner thinks that, for example, “in book I3 of the *Iliad* (624ff.) Menelaos effectively characterizes the Achaean expedition against Troy to retrieve Helen as an expression of the *ménis* of Zeus Xenios” (47). William V. Harris 2001 concludes that “Homer's Achilles can sometimes seem thoroughly unstable” (64). Paul Friedrich and James Redfield 1978 see “a certain theatricality in Achilles' self-presentation [as]; he plays himself to the hilt. He thus becomes the victim of his own feelings” (277). The Friedrich and Redfield piece is also reprinted in Irene J. E. de Jong ed. 1998. See also a focused study of madness in relation to Achilles' psychology

Achilles fulfills this desire despite having been warned about the consequences that the satisfaction of the said desire would have for his life (9.410-15). The annihilation that Achilles' rage sows in its wake represents the destruction that humans suffer when their lives become captive to perilous ideals.<sup>3</sup>

In Part 3, I argue that Achilles' megalomaniacal rage covers over the fact that he is an internally divided character. Achilles' extraordinary prowess places him incommensurably above his fellow comrades, and it instills in Achilles a feeling of his superiority. However, this same feeling stands in the way of Achilles' acceptance of the military rank and conventional chain of command, and in the words of Dean Hammer, turns him into a "vagabond."<sup>4</sup> I also explain how Achilles' outcast status causes him to embody certain militaristic ideals, which if they are taken to the extreme, place the exemplary warrior outside of the very community on behalf of which he is meant to fight.

In Part 4, I show that even Achilles' love for Patroclus is a destructive passion, because in the end, Achilles sees in Patroclus a reflection of himself or more precisely of his own egotistical self-love. For the sake of precision, in this essay, I will focus on Achilles. However, by way of a brief, but indicative comparison, Achilles' egotistic passion can be seen as a fantastical desire that Helen (if not the woman and person Helen, then "Helen" understood as a symbol of the erotic passion that men have for war) symbolizes and which she herself presents in a negative light.<sup>5</sup> Helen, seen as the eroticized muse of war, embodies the war-mongering ἔρως.<sup>6</sup> This

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by Stephen Fineberg 1999. On Achilles' obstinance as a vehicle of social change, see Elton Barker 2004.

<sup>3</sup> However, see Anthony T. Edwards (1985). Further, and also contrary to my view, Oliver Taplin 1979 thinks that "Iliadic Achilles is the heroic model, and he is at his greatest when he gives way and feels pity, even for his enemy" (124).

<sup>4</sup> See Hammer 1997.

<sup>5</sup> On Helen as a symbol of war and her self-proclaimed blameworthiness, see Marella Nappi 2015, esp. 47; Mary Ebbott 1999; Ruby Blondell 2010; Karol Zieliński 2021; Hanna M. Roisman 2006; See, also, earlier studies of Helen in the *Iliad* by Georges Tronquart 1953; Kenneth Reckford 1964; F. J. Groten Jr. 1968; S. Farron 1979.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Davis's 2011 remarks somewhat cut against my claims about eroticized desire for war. Davis writes that "in Homeric Greek, *erōs* may mean something as neutral as desire. Only later does it come to mean exclusively sexual love. The real transformation ... points to a real transformation in the meaning of erotic love" (194). Simon Goldhill 2000 in his review of Claude Calame 1999 also flags the fact that there is an apparent "rarity of reference to sexual eros in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*" (359). However, this does not prohibit us from seeing Helen as symbolizing a hyper-eroticized passion, which transcends an erotic longing for a single person and manifests as an all-consuming desire for glory and victory in war. For a detailed study of eros in Greek literature, see Paul W. Ludwig 2002.

passion is egotistical in so far as it seeks to glorify and elevate the attacking warriors through conquest (not through a war of self-defense) and at the expense of annihilation of human communities.<sup>7</sup> Likewise, Achilles' passion for Patroclus turns out to be Achilles' rageful, menacing desire for himself – or for the glory and immortal fame of his own superhuman person. In this paper, my goal is not to portray Achilles as a despicable person. Instead, I aim to offer an analysis of his character that will serve as a lens through which we can see the *Iliad's* internal criticism of the life-undermining character of warmongering ideals. To build my case in a focused manner, I engage with the literature that presents Achilles in the anti-heroic light in the body of the paper. However, in order to offer a balanced assessment, in the notes I also discuss authors whose analysis of Achilles runs counter to my view.

## 2. Achilles' Rage

In this section, I provide an analysis of the aggressive elements of Achilles' character and show how Achilles' wrath informs the meaning of the militaristic, glory-seeking ideals in the epic. It is readily apparent that the *Iliad* has to do with rage. The rhapsode proclaims, “[t]he rage of Achilles, Peleus' son, sing o Goddess” (Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος, 1.1), and thus μῆνις – rage – looms large as the first word of the war epic. By the time that the events of the *Iliad* are all but said and done, Homer tells us that “Achilles has destroyed pity, and he cannot experience any shame [or awe - αἰδώς]; which harms men greatly but profits them also” (Ἀχιλεὺς ἔλεον μὲν ἀπώλεσεν, οὐδέ οἱ αἰδώς γίγνεται, ἢ τ' ἄνδρας μέγα σίνεται ἦδ'

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See, further, studies of ἔρωσ in ancient Greek literature and, specifically, in Homer by Janet Lloyd 1999; Kenneth J. Dover 1978.

<sup>7</sup> Thucydides 1876, 1951 will later present this ἔρωσ of conquest in a critical light in his account of the Peloponnesian War (*History* 6.24.3). On Thucydides and the problematic character of erotic passion that drives the desire for conquest see Gloria Ferrari 2020; Steven Forde 1986.

ὀνίνησι, 24.44-45).<sup>8</sup> Pity belongs to human beings, but Achilles being a son of a nereid, Thetis, and a grand-grandson of Zeus,<sup>9</sup> was not entirely a mortal man. Although, as we see, for example, in his interactions with Patroclus (“seeing him, he – Achilles, felt pity,” τὸν δὲ ἰδὼν ᾤκτιρε 16.5), Achilles was not altogether incapable of pity. Nonetheless, he is more readily described in terms that express his heartlessness.<sup>10</sup> Patroclus puts the incontrovertibility of Achilles' inhuman resolve in accusatory terms when commenting on Achilles' indifference to the suffering of the Greeks. Patroclus calls Achilles “ruthless” (νηλεὲς 16.33) and says that Achilles' “father was not Peleus, the driver of horses, or his mother, Thetis. Rather [he] ... was

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<sup>8</sup> Achilles' character brings into a stark relief the relationship between humanity and shame. See James M. Redfield 1994 who discusses “awe” or “shame” (αἰδώς) as “a socializing emotion, or rather the characteristic emotion of the social” (158) human being. Douglas L. Cairns 1993 surveys the usages of shame and awe and notes that in the corpus of the lyric poet, Theognis of Megara (6 century BC), we have “the first instance of the noun *aischunē*” (175, fn. 100). The word, αἰσχύνη, appears at line 1272, in the first Book of Theognis' 1999 *Elegiac Poems* (368). Cairns 1993 goes on to comment on Theognis' use of αἰσχύνη and says that “[h]ere it appears in the objective sense, but later it will also be found in a subjective sense, as the reaction to or mental picture of disgrace and so as equivalent of *aidōs*” (175). Although, it is important to differentiate αἰσχύνη and αἰδώς, we should also be aware of the fact that the terms, as Cairns 1993 suggests, are capable of expressing interchangeable meanings. Hence, the context in which a given term appears, should be consulted carefully. However, in the context of *Iliad* 24.44–45, Achilles' lack of shame points to the monstrosity (in passions, views, or ideals) that ultimately destroys human life. We do not find in Achilles' character an embodiment of a desire for the kind of life that exhibits the traits that support and perpetuate community of prudent, thoughtful humans. See, further, Eric R. Dodds 2004 who presents the *Iliad* as a testament to the prevalence of shame in Greek culture. See, also, Bernard Williams's 1993 examination of shame as it pertains to Achilles.

<sup>9</sup> Achilles is a grand grandson of Zeus, grandson of Aeacus, and a son of Peleus.

<sup>10</sup> Lucia Prauscello 2010 takes note of Achilles' pity (200 fn. 8). However, see James A. Arieti's 1985 reflections on the reason why Achilles would not have felt pity. As Arieti 1985 sees it, “one is guilty when one violates a code; one feels guilty when one violates a code that one personally accepts. The code of obligation to a comrade is a new thing in the poem, first given voice to by Achilles himself in words addressed to Thetis; and Thetis, a goddess, approves of it. We must not” Arieti goes on “confuse this feeling with pity, which the Greeks in Homer well knew. Pity is the basis of Nestor's plea to Patroclus. But pity is what one feels for an inferior” (200). Consider, also, Mary Scott's 1979 remarks about pitiless treatment that Achilles gives to Priam and the reason why, according to her, Achilles finally relents and acquiesces to Priam's request (7). See, also, Grace M. Ledbetter 1993 who focuses on showing why it is the case that “Patroclus represents his [Achilles'] compassionate side” (483).

a child of the gleaming sea and of the towering rocks. Such is [his] ... mind –unbending” (οὐκ ἄρα σοί γε πατήρ ἦν ἱππότηα Πηλεΐς, οὐδὲ Θέτις μήτηρ: γλαυκῆ δέ σε τίκτε θάλασσα, πέτραι τ’ ἠλίβατοι, ὅτι τοι νόος ἐστὶν ἀπηγής 16.33-35). In his longing for Patroclus, his dead companion, Homer tells us that Achilles was “like a lion who ... goes among the flocks of men, to devour them” (24.41, 43). This line about the effects of Achilles’ wrath – about the unfulfilled or perhaps implacable desire for revenge – is telling.<sup>11</sup> Achilles is inconsolable because the Fates “put in mortal men the heart of endurance” (τλητὸν γὰρ Μοῖραι θυμὸν θέσαν ἀνθρώποισιν, 24.49), but Achilles’ heart does not grow gentler with suffering that weds the common mortals to their lot. Even (or perhaps especially) after the death of Patroclus, and as Max Pohlenz puts it, “Achilles is filled only with the drive for revenge, which snuffs out all pity.”<sup>12</sup> The closing moments of Homer’s epic portray the monstrous wastefulness of such a callous heart when Achilles’ slaughter of the twelve Trojan youths for Patroclus’ funeral pyre (23.15) stands as a poetic counterpoint to the slaughter of the sacrificial animals whose flesh will then be eaten by the Achaeans (23.30). Although Achilles is nearly megalomaniacal in his single-minded desire for revenge, his character, nonetheless, presents a consciousness plagued by division.

### 3. Achilles as an Outsider

Achilles is the greatest warrior and yet he refuses to fight. He is more than just human but he is supposed to act as a subordinate to a human chieftain, Agamemnon. In his choice of everlasting glory, Achilles exchanges the very condition of earning it – his life – for the shadows of Hades. Achilles’ character represents an opposition between ideals and actuality. That which we long for, that which we idealize may guide and shape our lives, but these ideals cannot be brought into life unproblematically. The inner dividedness of Achilles’ character represents this problematic relationship between idealized visions of reality (be they glorified prowess of an extraordinary warrior, or the magnificent fame earned through this prowess) and life.

Hammer’s study of Achilles points in the direction of a schism that Achilles represents.<sup>13</sup> Hammer works against the tradition of scholarship that he claims tends to take “one of two positions: Achilles either remains a part of the Achaian warrior

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<sup>11</sup> Eric T. Owen 1989 refers to Achilles’ killing spree as “ruthless brutality of his revenge” (155). See, further, a study of the “lion” simile in the *Iliad* by Michael Clarke 1995.

<sup>12</sup> In the German original, Pohlenz 1956 writes, “ist Achilles nur von dem einen Drang nach Rache erfüllt, der jeden ἔλεος erstickt” (“Furcht und Mitleid? Ein Nachwort” (54). Translation by the author.

<sup>13</sup> See Hammer 1997.

culture, even as he refuses to participate in it, or he is seen as rejecting Achaian culture and entering some non-cultural, unearthly realm, even as he continues to occupy earthly space and interact with others."<sup>14</sup> Instead, as Hammer sees it, in Achilles "Homer presents a challenge to the prevailing conceptions of warrior society by inverting best and worst. To Achilles, the best of the Achaians, Homer gives the voice of the vagabond, a person normally of broken descent without standing in the community."<sup>15</sup> To a large extent, Achilles' isolation from the community of his comrades is self-imposed. Achilles refuses to be placated because of how deeply he is insulted by the treatment he receives when Agamemnon claims Briseis for his own.<sup>16</sup> Even after Achilles is promised to have her back (9.274) along with many other precious gifts from Agamemnon, he remains steadfast in his choice not to join the ranks of those who fight against the Trojans. As James A. Arieti observes, it is "[a]t the assembly [or], in that most civic of Greek contexts [that], Agamemnon humiliates him; he not only threatens to take away Achilles' prize, but also he scorns him, and treats him with contempt. In short, he does not treat him like a fellow citizen, like a member of their society."<sup>17</sup> Having been excluded in this way, Achilles does not wish to accept Agamemnon's word or his superiority as a kingly chieftain. Achilles does not want to be made subject to the same structure of military rank and subordination as the rest of the warriors. Meanwhile, his extraordinary capacity in battle and his partially divine origin already set him apart.<sup>18</sup> Thus, when responding to Odysseus' request that he resume fighting, Achilles puts his refusal to do so in terms that question the validity of convention and of his own place in the chain of command.

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<sup>14</sup> Hammer 1997, 341.

<sup>15</sup> Hammer 1997, 345. However, see Gregory Nagy 1998 who works to uphold Achilles' heroic stature and the desirable status of "the extraordinarily renowned *kléos* of Achilles" (41).

<sup>16</sup> This very well known and much discussed moment in the *Iliad* – Agamemnon's taking of Briseis – which provokes Achilles' anger, is broached, for example, by Waller R. Newell 2016. Newell writes "The feud between the younger man and his elder is over who should rightfully be given the captive Trojan woman Briseis as a trophy of war. Achilles believes she is his by right because he has been by far the bravest warrior on the Greek side. But Agamemnon claims her for his own because he is not merely a king, but the King of Kings, the commander of the entire Greek force including Achilles" (18). I am less interested in external "causes" or pretexts of Achilles' outbursts, and more concerned with the internal psychology of this character, who on my reading, is an epic personification of rage. On the psychology of Achilles' anger see, for example, Nicolas Evzonas 2018.

<sup>17</sup> Arieti 1986, 12.

<sup>18</sup> On Achilles' exceptionalism, see Elton Barker 2004.

I will not persuade Agamemnon, nor you the other Danaans, for there is no grace in fighting battles constantly against men. For the same fortune meets the one who stays put and the one who would wage great war. And both the bad and the good are honored. Likewise, both the idle and the man of many deeds perish.

οὐτ' ἔμεγ' Ἀτρεΐδην Ἀγαμέμνονα πεισέμεν οἴω  
 οὐτ' ἄλλους Δαναούς, ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἄρα τις χάρις ἦεν  
 μάρνασθαι δηΐοισιν ἐπ' ἀνδράσι νωλεμές αἰεὶ.  
 ἴση μοῖρα μένοντι καὶ εἰ μάλα τις πολεμίζοι:  
 ἐν δὲ ἰῆ τιμῇ ἡμὲν κακὸς ἡδὲ καὶ ἐσθλός:  
 κάτθαν' ὁμῶς ὁ τ' ἀεργὸς ἀνὴρ ὃ τε πολλὰ ἐοργῶς.  
 οὐδέ τί μοι περὶκείται, ἐπεὶ πάθον ἄλγεα θυμῷ (9.315-20).

From the absolute point of view – in the fulness of all time – Achilles' statement makes sense. In other words, both human actions and human inaction are vastly insignificant in the face of eternity. However, human life is finite. It is, precisely, not absolute and not eternal. Therefore, those things which Achilles equates as indifferent (waging war or refraining from going into battle; the good and the bad; idleness and action) make all the difference. In Achilles' position, we get a glimpse of the inhuman nature of ideals that outstrip a merely mortal human life and that beckon with eternal glory. The call and the draw of such ideals may be powerful, but it is impossible to manifest them in one's own life. Thus, even Achilles must die in order to “live up” to them.

This irresolvable opposition at the heart of Achilles' character manifests as a force of destruction; as a power that stamps out human life and disrupts the possibility of its continuation. Hammer also argues that Achilles represents a disruptive figure within the community of warriors and opposing cultures that the epic portrays. He casts this disruptive power in a more positive light than I do and claims, that “we can identify in Achilles' words and actions in Book 9 ... a cultural bias of autonomy, a set of values that is in reaction to and ultimately destabilizing of the hierarchical culture of Achaian society as portrayed by Homer.”<sup>19</sup> However, on my view, these contradicting characteristics (i.e., of being an outsider to the ideals of the militaristic culture, on the one hand, but also being a paragon warrior or even an embodiment of the very ideals and structures he rejects, on the other) indicate an insidious duality within Achilles.

Achilles as a warrior – paradoxically – is someone who is infinitely better than the rest of the Achaeans, and at the same time, he is someone who cannot be unproblematically included as a rightful member of the community. This feature of

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<sup>19</sup> Hammer 1997, 341.

Achilles' character highlights the issue with idealizing militaristic prowess, which if it comes into its own and to fruition, places the one to whom it belongs outside of the very community that ostensibly is meant to be protected, benefited, and saved by the exceptional warrior. Or to take it a step further, the idealized, or extraordinary warrior has to commit such actions and be possessed of such a nature, passions, and views that place this warrior outside of the human community altogether. Thus, the ideals that glorify war and fame that comes with victory in conquest hold a vision of life that, in the final analysis, undermines human life.<sup>20</sup>

In taking this position, I do not seek to impose a pacifist interpretation upon Homer's epic. However, I aim to problematize the outright, unexamined, and simplistic acceptance of those ideals, which seek to venerate military conquest, prowess, and the alleged benefits of war. Although the said ideals beckon with all of the power of poetic genius, this does not mean that the *Iliad* lacks self-awareness, and is not critical of the life-negating power of the very ideals it so aptly portrays. The epic lends itself to being read as a work that shows the terrible beauty of war-mongering ideals, and that – simultaneously – plays up their problematic nature. Beneath the valorizing and self-aggrandizing veneer, these ideals contain the kind of wrathful passion that ends up destroying life – not only the lives of those who are considered to be one's "enemies," but also and perhaps even more readily, the lives of those who hold such ideals dear. Achilles' character embodies the ruinous, and yet powerfully seductive, nature of such ideals.

#### 4. Achilles' Desire for Patroclus as Achilles' Egotistical Self-Love

As a representation of our longing for idealized images beneath which lies the gruesome reality of war, Achilles longs for and loves himself. As I will argue in this section, even Patroclus, whose death unleashes Achilles' fury, turns out to be only an occasion for Achilles to achieve his own immortal glory. The path to this fate, which the gods foretell (18.95-96), ends up being woven out of awful pain, which Achilles' anger sows in its wake.<sup>21</sup> In the aftermath of Hector's slaying of Patroclus, Achilles' rage feeds on the fear and suffering of those he murders or causes to feel pain. His wrath does not subside but grows deeper and more terrible. Seth Benardete paints a stark picture of Achilles isolated by his all-consuming rage, when he writes that "he becomes his sole object. He no longer has anything beyond

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<sup>20</sup> Andromache sees this sort of life-negating power in Achilles, who in her eyes embodies the fury of the violent death itself (6.407-439).

<sup>21</sup> P. V. Jones 1996 claims that Achilles has foreknowledge of his own death as early as Book 1 (115).

himself, on which he can vent his fury, but must always be reminded, and yet remain always unsated, by the past. ... He can never escape from his own hell.”<sup>22</sup> In book 24, we really have a hellish vision of Achilles tormented by the pangs of his furious, ghoulish rage. He can’t stop at taking Hector’s life, but he must inflict further punishment upon Hector’s body. The scene in which Achilles can’t find peace in sleep describes him thinking of Patroclus but lashing out against and desecrating the body of Hector.

Remembering [Patroclus]..., Achilles cried mightily. Lying down now on his side, now on his back, now with his face down, now springing upright and deeply unsettled he wondered along the seashore. Neither did the shining dawn escape his notice as she appeared over the shore. But he yoked his speedy horses and bound Hector to the chariot and dragged him about tied behind. When he passed the mound of Menoetius’ dead son thrice, he would take pause in his tent, but he would suffer Hector to be stretched out with his face down in the dust.

τῶν μιμησκόμενος θαλερόν κατὰ δάκρυον εἶβεν,  
 10 ἄλλοτ’ ἐπὶ πλευρὰς κατακείμενος, ἄλλοτε δ’ αὖτε  
 ὕπτιος, ἄλλοτε δὲ πρηγῆς: τοτὲ δ’ ὀρθὸς ἀναστὰς  
 δινεύεσκ’ ἀλύων παρὰ θῖν’ ἀλός: οὐδέ μιν ἠὼς  
 φαινομένη λήθεσκεν ὑπεῖρ ἄλλα τ’ ἠϊόνας τε.  
 ἀλλ’ ὅ γ’ ἐπεὶ ζεύξειεν ὑφ’ ἄρμασιν ὠκέας ἵππους,  
 15 Ἐκτορα δ’ ἔλκεσθαι δησάσκετο δίφρου ὄπισθεν,  
 τρίς δ’ ἐρύσας περὶ σῆμα Μενoitιάδαο θανόντος (24.9-18)

This is the image of Achilles unhinged by his desire for revenge, which Achilles could not satiate even after he took countless lives and the life of the man who unbeknownst to himself slew Patroclus. This is an image of implacable fury that consumes the one who feels it, tightening the solipsistic circle in which Achilles finds himself to start. Bernard Knox sees Achilles’ character in similar terms. Comparing Helen and Achilles, Knox writes that “[a]t the beginning of the *Iliad*, Helen has already broken out of the prison of self-absorption, but this is the point at which Achilles enters it. The *Iliad* shows us the origin, course and consequences of his wrath, his imprisonment in a godlike, lonely, heroic fury from which all the rest of the world is excluded.”<sup>23</sup> The *Iliad* shows the aftermath of Achilles’ murderous

<sup>22</sup> Benardete 1955, 2005, 131.

<sup>23</sup> Knox 1990, 130. Although Helen, as Knox holds, may have worked her way out of self-absorption and had an insight into herself as a person, “Helen” as a symbol of conquest and a cause of war maintains the hold over men and gods of the *Iliad*. At the end of the epic (24.25-30), Paris-Alexander’s choice of Aphrodite is directly connected to his desire

rage, unmitigated by the abiding spirit of humanity.<sup>24</sup> The first word of the *Iliad* that invokes Achilles' μῆνις, and sets the stage for the affective tenor of the epos, also inscribes an inhuman passion into the fabric of all of the events that transpire at Ilium. The *Iliad*, as much as it is about war, that is, about something that humans pursue ubiquitously, raises sharply the question of inhumanity. Achilles' implacable rage is the ground from which this question springs up in the *Iliad* – the question of the proximity between the human and the inhumane.<sup>25</sup>

Just as Achilles' fury, also his erotic desire, is totalizing in a sense of being solipsistic. Achilles' eros closes the world of genuine relationships off for him, instead of opening it up. As Knox argues, with Achilles, it has never really been about Patroclus. It has always only been about Achilles. As Knox sees it, “[c]learly what he [Achilles] really wishes for is a world containing nothing but himself and his own glory, for Patroclus, whom he now sends out in his own armor, he regards as a part of himself. This solipsistic dream of glory” is what defines Achilles' character and propels his actions.<sup>26</sup> Patroclus' death is an occasion for Achilles to fulfill his wish,

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for Helen, and to the subsequent grievances that Hera, Athena, and Poseidon have against him and the Trojans. Thus, Helen – to a large extent – remains the symbol of desire, which breeds faction not only among men, but also among gods. Chris J. Mackie 2013 offers a contextualized reading of “the single reference to the Judgement of Paris within its context in the final book of the *Iliad*” (15).

<sup>24</sup> On Achilles' rage, violence of war, and dehumanization as well as and in relation to pain see Elaine Scarry 1985; Brooke Holmes 2007; Seth L. Schein 1984 (esp., 128–167). For a thorough study of the problematic heroic psychology in the *Iliad*, see Christopher Gill 1996.

<sup>25</sup> One of the ways in which inhumanity is played up in the epic and tragic literature as well as in philosophy (e.g., Plato) and myth, is by means of a comparison that is drawn between a human being and an animal. This is not to say that animals, somehow, are monstrous but rather that humans lose critical features of their being when they begin to act in ways that are characteristic of certain kinds of animals. For example, Christian Wolff 1979 claims that “Achilles, mourning his failure to save Patroklos, is like a lion who has returned too late to his lair and found his cubs stolen (18.318ff.)” (145). On attributing the image of a lion to an enraged Achilles, see further, Alessandra Abbattista 2018.

<sup>26</sup> Knox 1990, 137. Knox sees the *Iliad* as containing Achilles' journey that eventuates in his “return to human stature” (130). However, from my point of view, Achilles does not truly reflect on the import and consequences of his actions while being alive. This kind of reflection only becomes available to Achilles after his death and in Hades. We have a confirmation of this transformation that Achilles undergoes in Bk. 11 of the *Odyssey*. See also Arieti 1985, whose analysis of Achilles' character runs counter to my view. Arieti argues instead that Achilles experiences guilt and that, moreover, it is the inaugural instance of guilt, which signifies the birth of consciousness in the classical world. In conclusion, Arieti

which Benardete says is a desire “to be absolute.”<sup>27</sup> Furthermore, Benardete continues, “the loneliness of Achilles’ guilt and the vastness of his grief, ... has nothing to do with the everyday world, but corresponds to the fantasy he himself has made.”<sup>28</sup> Especially, when he learns of the death of Patroclus, Achilles exemplifies this description of being encircled within a self-made, fantastical vision of the world. The following lines express the self-enclosing character of Achilles’ relationship to the other – his dearest other – which ends up being just the same as himself:

I held Patroclus above all other comrades and even as dear as my own self. He is the one I lost. Hector chanced to kill him and strip this mighty, beautiful armor, wondrous to behold, that the gods gave as splendid gifts to the son of Peleus.

Πάτροκλος, τὸν ἐγὼ περὶ πάντων τῶν ἐταίρων ἴσον ἐμῇ κεφαλῇ; τὸν  
ἀπώλεσα, τεύχεα δ’ Ἐκτωρ δηώσας ἀπέδυσε πελώρια θαῦμα ἰδέσθαι καλὰ:  
τὰ μὲν Πηληϊῆ θεοὶ δόσαν ἀγλαὰ δῶρα, 81-85.

Thus, letting Patroclus wear his armor and fight in his stead, Achilles has not only condemned Patroclus to death (as the rhapsode tells us in line 16.47), but he also made a choice to die; he already has let go of that person he loved most, that is, Achilles himself.<sup>29</sup>

The poetic, imagistic form of the *Iliad* matches the flight of fantastical passion. The passion that Achilles represents is a furious, rage-filled desire to outstrip one’s life and to become larger than life; to substitute one’s mortal self for a self that has attained to immortal glory. A life in a community with others, a life shared with friends, a prudent, thoughtful life gives way to a ruinous quest for immortality. Achilles is an embodiment of this idealized image of conquest-seeking war. It beckons with extraordinary hubris. It promises undying fame, but for mortals to fall prey to this idealized vision of war, means to substitute life for a phantom; it means to agree to take lives and to lay down one’s life for the sake of an egomaniacal fantasy.<sup>30</sup>

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writes about Achilles that “he alone confronts a higher moral dilemma, a moral dilemma which raises the poem to a monumental level in the history of humanity, and begins the search for a morality not based on public opinion, but on individual responsibility” (203).

<sup>27</sup> Benardete 1955, 2005, 101.

<sup>28</sup> Benardete 1955, 2005, 132.

<sup>29</sup> On the death of Patroclus as a substitute for Achilles’ death, see Nadia Van Brock 1959.

<sup>30</sup> As Ledbetter 1993 sees it, “[b]eginning with book 16, then, Patroclus can be seen as the alter ego of Achilles, and ultimately his substitute in death” (482, fn. 2).

### 5. Conclusion

Achilles' fantastical vision of the world and of himself as well as his rage are the images that help us see the *Iliad's* internal criticism of military ideals that propel aggressive, conquest-oriented war. When stripped of their allure, these ideals loosen their hold on our imaginations. We begin to see that not only are they less than deserving of admiration, but also that while we are enraptured by them, we are flirting with inhumanity – be it expressed as adoration of eternal glory or as blind worship of extraordinary military power.<sup>31</sup> The *Iliad* contains this critique of perilous ideals, while also presenting us with overpoweringly beautiful images that poeticize war. The epic does not offer a pacifist critique of war. However, it raises questions about the human propensity to be swayed and inspired by ideals that, in the final analysis and in earnest, undermine human life. The retribution for the actions committed in accordance with and for the sake of these ravenous ideals, as Weil puts it, “has a geometrical rigor, which operates automatically to penalize the abuse of force.”<sup>32</sup> The relationship between retribution and the hubristic exercise of power was “the main subject of Greek thought” and “[i]t is the soul of the epic.”<sup>33</sup>

The truth of the warmongering ideals is that if pursued, they lead to terrible suffering, gruesome violence, and senseless annihilation of life. The idealized, terrible attractiveness of war – in reality – has an ugly side, which the *Iliad* expresses in Achilles' solipsism and his choice to destroy himself through the destruction of countless others, including the other who he claims to love as himself. The others, for Achilles, are merely an occasion to exit this life in order to become larger than life. Likewise, military ideals that celebrate and promote the love of glory earned through conquest devalue human life. If we act according to these ideals, then we turn human life into a means of self-aggrandizement and we do so not for the sake but at the expense of life.

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<sup>31</sup> For a somewhat different understanding of idealization in poetry and in life, see Michael Davis 1999, 40.

<sup>32</sup> Weil 1965, 14.

<sup>33</sup> Weil 1965, 14.

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