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ETHICAL ANXIETY AND ARTISTIC INCONSISTENCY: THE CASE OF ORAL EPIC

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“If the study of the past is in no way relevant to our present lives, the past is not worth studying. But if we impose our prejudices and presuppositions on the past, it will not speak to us.”

—John Ferguson¹

Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* contain a famous crux which, I shall argue here, has come into being because of a deep contradiction in the heroic ethos.² My investigation of these cruxes has led to the rather surprising conclusion that the “inconsistencies” are a kind of consistency, namely of poetic representation with ideological reality, since these inconsistencies resonate, effectively, with a potential cognitive dissonance in the culture to which they speak. Like the x-ray portrait of a machine, they reveal underlying flaws in the culture’s construction of reality—probably, we may assume, to relieve tensions without exactly exposing their underlying causes. Anthropologist A. Godelier has recently said of Mbuti (Pygmy) usages that in ritual they are “acting both physically and symbolically upon the contradictions in their social relations while not actually eliminating them,” and that “these religious practises represent the limit of all political activity directed at the system’s contradictions.”³

Similarly, about a much later genre and social world than Homer’s, Nicole Loraux concludes:

“the most official civic *logos* [the *epitaphios*] was specifically unable to take into account the material structures that enabled the *polis* to function, but ... against the background of that silence, it *worked to preserve from tension* the city of the citizens.”⁴

In the translucent narrative texture of traditional epic in particular the “nods” of a highly skilled performer, like the paradoxes of poets sophisticated by writing, can reveal, and in some sense are perhaps intended to reveal, contradictions difficult to discuss in the public arena, perhaps indeed difficult for an individual to acknowledge consciously. One other feature of oral traditional genres must be considered by way of introduction. Since the oral

theory was developed we have learned a great deal about the provenience, deployment, and—though this is always up to personal interpretation—the meaning of inherited [226]elements of an oral performance in traditional societies, and while little has been gained that is not free from controversy, nothing has changed the sense, shared by every generation since antiquity, that a generic meaning always looms behind the vivid particulars of Homeric narrative. Modern speculation on the etymology of the very name Homer may be taken as an example. From the odd theory of A. Holtzman in the middle of the nineteenth century to the much more sophisticated work of Gregory Nagy and Walter Burkert in our own day,⁵ the prevailing, and I think correct, view is that the name is somehow typological. Even those whose “Homer” is very much a real person regard him as the voice of an enduring moment in Greek cultural development and his poems, as did the ancients themselves, as a textbook of Greek values.

Against this background we may turn to the most celebrated inconsistency in the *Iliad*, the apparent mishandling of various odd details in a clearly crucial scene, the reconciliation mission to Achilles in Book 9. Setting aside other inconsistencies (they fall into place if the present discussion is acceptable), let me concentrate on the notorious detail that for a space of some 17 lines (182-98) both Achilles and the poet’s *vox propria* use the dual number, rather conspicuously, to refer to three ambassadors and two heralds. This is the more puzzling when we realize, as Page pointed out some time ago,⁶ that this pivotal episode is not otherwise ill-managed. The scene reveals “exquisite ... characterization,”⁷ and indeed the suggestion of some unusually elusive subtleties: once outside Agamemnon’s quarters Nestor “looks (keenly?) at” each of the emissaries in turn (*δενδίλλων*, 180), especially Odysseus, who in fact “leads” the embassy in some sense although Nestor has publicly appointed Phoenix (192; cf. 168). Sure enough, when Ajax nods to Phoenix to begin the speeches Odysseus interrupts him and makes the first speech himself (223-24)—an interchange which we shall shortly be able to explain.

This odd inconsistency of the duals has been explained very variously, and with great ingenuity.⁸ While no one explanation (including an earlier attempt of my own) has met with universal approbation, the cumulative gains of some of them edge toward a new conclusion, one which the recent interest in semiotics and text theory helps bring into view.

The key discoveries for the present purpose are: (1) There are not one but two embassies, which are somehow conflated.⁹ (2) The text embodies a traditional *νεῖκος* (*neikos*, “quarrel”) between Odysseus and Achilles. (3) This quarrel has to do with something much larger than the personalities of the two men; it is a typological conflict between two styles of warcraft, cunning and forthright prowess, rooted in heroic age tradition.¹⁰ (4) As many scholars are agreed, the embassy scene touches on core values in the ideology (if one may continue to use Dumézil’s influential restoration of that Marxian term) of epic conflict.¹¹

Another fact which to my knowledge has not been connected with the anomaly but bears crucially on it and on the meaning of the episode is (5) that the embassy sets in motion a crucial transition between two stages of the hero's anger. The theme of the epic is "the wrath of Achilles,"¹² but in fact there are two objects or phases of that wrath and the difference is again typological within the traditional descriptions of conflict dynamics. What is more, this is [227]the scene where "μῆνις α," Achilles' anger against Agamemnon, his own chief, engages the chain of events that will inexorably issue into "μῆνις β," his revenge fury against Hector—and the scene where the difference between them is most articulately explored.¹³

The argument thus far would make it suggestive, though a little odd, that there might be a connection between the twofold meaning of the scene and the duals—especially since the latter seem to be used without a clear contextual reference. And if we change our angle of vision to that of Achilles himself it becomes clear that that is precisely the case.

From Achilles' viewpoint the embassy is a crisis, or the beginning of the crisis caused him by the conflict between two roles, Hero as helper-of-his-friends and Hero as harrower-of-his-enemies. Normally, of course, these two roles are but sides of the same coin; the heroic ethos largely depends on that fact, and ἀλκῆ ("strength, prowess"), the supreme heroic value term, connotes both the (etymological) defensive and (by extension) aggressive modes of heroic behavior. Trouble comes, as I have argued elsewhere, at critical but inevitable moments when "friends" and "enemies" cannot be clearly distinguished.¹⁴ This is precisely what the embassy represents.

The hero's commitment to socially derived honor, which lies at the heart of his heroic character, impels Achilles on the one hand to return to battle, the field where κλέος (*kleos*, "renown") is won or lost, and on the other to shun Agamemnon, the leader who has become his internal enemy. Out of this double bind emerges a double embassy, the structure of which implies—and "implies" is a key term here—a return of the hero that would help his friends *and* his enemies—an offense to heroic values even as stated. But it can be stated more typologically as the submission of the individual warrior, the important "actor" in Archaic war, to a *basileus* with aspirations to central authority.¹⁵

Ironically, Odysseus presents the most effective claim on Achilles' obligation (and opportunity) to return to his friends, namely by reporting to the hero that Hector is experiencing λύσσα (*lussa*, "madness, fury") and thus represents an extreme danger not only to the Achaeans but himself: those whom *lussa* overcomes she throws, as Dumézil has evocatively put it, *dans le piège du destin*.¹⁶ Apparently, and we will soon see reasons for this, Homer spared no pains to make the contradiction here between repugnance and temptation intense, and deeply felt.

Seen in this light, each embassy has a complete "staff": an elder (to communicate maximum solemnity and persuasion), a heroic "colleague," and—if we wanted to press the symmetry—one herald:

| | “Agamemnon” embassy | “Achilles” embassy |
|-------|---------------------|--------------------|
| γέρων | Nestor | Phoenix |
| ἥρως | Odysseus | Ajax |
| κῆρυξ | herald | herald |

Yet in the event the two embassies are conflated, partly by the “nonaligned” character of the heralds, but much more importantly in the fact that only one elder actually goes. Nestor, who is Agamemnon’s man for these purposes,¹⁷ stays back in the main camp, while Achilles gets Phoenix to stay on in his, as if understanding Nestor’s gesture and responding in kind.¹⁸ This [228]attempt on the hero’s part to manipulate the narrative symbolically is an important clue, in fact, to the reading of the whole episode. It is not just that Achilles wants to snub Agamemnon and his party; in effect he tries, and to some extent succeeds, in getting the two embassies to come apart,¹⁹ as it were to make symbolically clearer for himself a situation which has caused him almost a panic of confusion (375-76). Phoenix may appear to represent “wise counsel” while he is travelling as the γέρων (“elder”) of the embassy; once Achilles has pulled him out of that role and into symmetrical opposition with Nestor he represents “friend” for one side and “enemy” of the other. Not incidentally, his counseling role is overridden by that of friend/enemy, and in fact by getting him to remain with himself Achilles imposes his own agenda over Phoenix’s advice. This does not bode well. Like all mortals caught in a dilemma, Achilles will succumb to the temptation of trying to have it both ways, with disastrous results. Then, Patroclus having been sacrificed, the obligation to *philo* (“friends”) in its most negative form, revenge, will carry beyond the community the hostility Achilles felt towards his nearer enemy.²⁰

This interpretation of the episode’s underlying logic gains support, and poignancy, from the embassy of Book 24. When the book opens Achilles has extended the categories “friend” and “enemy” to operate even beyond the barrier of death. Curiously, though his feelings about the bodies of Patroclus and of Hector run to opposite extremes, he treats them similarly, withholding from both alike the γέρας θανόντων (“reward of the dead,” i.e., burial), and thus the natural transmittal of their *psuchai* to the death realm.²¹ The gods act to break the stranglehold he has placed on the narrative with this self-centered and impossible agenda. But—and here an *ad hominem* rather than typological approach is fruitful—Homer’s psychological development of the story is striking: when Achilles fails to confront and resolve his tendency to polarize relationships in Book 9, he is forced to solve it later, at a higher, more intimate cost.

This intensification of the theme is not unparalleled; in fact it rests upon, or at least parallels, another, which might be considered decisive for the view that a conflation of *philo* and *echthroi* underlies the tragedy set in motion at the embassy scene. The embassy is a device operated by Nestor to bring Achilles back into the battle, and he does this by as it were “packaging” Agamemnon’s agenda in an entourage of Achilles’ *philo*. In Book 16 Nestor again sues Achilles for reentry, this time without going through the formalities of a council

or a group of representatives, but by an impassioned appeal that is transmitted *through Patroclus himself*. Thus Nestor finds a way to embed the supplication even more deeply in the motives and the person of the hero's friends, in the closest circle of his *philoï*, and in this way—though as a personal character we may imagine Nestor does not intend such a result—traps the hero in an inescapable but typical disaster of warrior destiny.

To return to the unusual features of the dilemma in Book 9, many times in Homer heroes have to decide between two courses of action: to stand or take flight (11.404-406), to stay in hiding or take shelter at the knees of an unknown maiden (*Od.* 6.141-44). Even Zeus faces a decision of this kind in Book 16, when he has to decide whether or not to rescue Sarpedon from heroic death [229](16.433-38). For such situations Homer has a rough and ready instrument in early Archaic psychological theory; for example, a hero's battle-*thumos* can tug him in one direction while the other course seems better to him. Here, however, we do not have a choice between two actions, since Achilles gives the impression that he has already decided not to go back to the fight (though later he claims to have said, or at least intended, something else, cf. *ἔφην*, 16.61; and then proceeds to do a third, i.e., send Patroclus in his stead, which will render the issue moot). The real choice, if there is one, has to do with what the same action will *mean*:²² if (or rather, when and however) Achilles gets back into battle, will he be helping his friends or capitulating to his enemies? This is a question of interpretation with the highest stakes, and the hero's erratic behavior shows that he is experiencing confusion and an Archaic equivalent of inner conflict. That the plot should hinge on what an action means, rather than what it is, is to the best of my knowledge unique in the Homeric representation of decision, and it is easy to imagine that unique means of expression were called forth to represent it.²³

We should be wary of concluding, however, that in contrast to the "traditional" depiction of choices about behavior, with a refined system for expressing them, the unique (if I am correct) interiority of the drama here is an "innovation" for which traditional modes of expression are inadequate. Seductive as such an argument may seem, we really have no theoretical warrant for that kind of qualitative distinction between traditional and original in oral poetics, nor would we always know how to tell them apart if we did.²⁴ Without prejudging the case as to traditional or original, then, let us consider the collection of facts that await convincing explanation in the embassy scene: a somewhat exposed ideological contradiction, a unique interior focus, and an apparent compositional flaw at the level of grammar, on the narrative surface.

We have described Achilles' difficulty as a deep conflict within his nature, which impels him on the one hand to return to battle and on the other not to gratify Agamemnon. But as Snell says, "what happens to [Achilles] is greater than any personal decision," and in fact this conflict is (also) caused by the self-contradiction inherent in the very logic of competition which informs the heroic code in which, as Redfield so aptly says, "the community is secured by combat, which is the negation of community."²⁵ The costly resolution of the

impasse by Patroclus' death, too, has typological rather than accidental features, since the displacement of Achilles' wrath onto the community's external enemies could not be more typical of group conflict dynamics, ancient and modern, and the release of frustration through sacrifice is, again, typical of the ideology of war-poetry in this period.²⁶ Achilles' personal career, with its two-staged, shifted *mênis*, embodies the most pervasive conflict dynamic in all culture, as Girard has shown: a dynamic of displacement rather than of resolution, a dynamic that does not transcend the ubiquitous self-contradiction of conflict, namely that its legitimacy (and whatever possibility it may offer to assert rights and create order) depends on an uncertain, shifting, and ultimately arbitrary distinction between in and out, enemy and friend. Achilles' dilemma is indeed rooted in his nature, but not his nature as a person (though he has vivid individual characteristics) but insofar as his nature is that of the idealized [230]competitor-fighter who embodies traditional warrior values and all that comes in their wake.

But recent work has shown something else of particular importance to the representation of the episode, namely the peculiarly effective identification the text strikes between "Homer," the composer's own voice or his persona, and Achilles.²⁷ Thus it is open to us to assume, indeed we can hardly avoid the assumption, that Homer himself felt the contradiction that his hero embodies and so acutely feels here at a crux of the poem's action. I propose that this is the reason the scene has a glaring illogicality on the surface. What I have in mind, however, is more than this consideration might lead to, namely that the contradiction caused a "flaw," e.g., by making Homer unsure of himself.

In *The Language of Heroes* Richard P. Martin brings his argument about the identity of Homer and "Achilles" to bear precisely on the question of the duals: in Achilles' mind, Phoenix is already on his side, is "there," so that he unconsciously greets only the other two heroes who are approaching him. This ingenious explanation adds support to the increasingly accepted view that the embassy contains representatives of two sides, or agendas, his own and Agamemnon's. Furthermore it is a short but interesting step from here to Martin's conclusion that the narrator's duals, not only those put in Achilles' voice, must be accounted for by the same reason, for "Homer" and "Achilles" are almost indistinguishable at a deeply affecting level of the verbal performance we now call the *Iliad*: the poet imagines his way into the mind of Achilles as he does with no other character.

This reading has the advantage of working with, and indeed bringing out quite effectively, the Janus-like immediacy of oral performance, when the narrator strikes up a close imaginative identification between himself and his characters, or at least with some of them, and on the other hand with his living audience.²⁸ It explains the duals ingeniously, but not quite their anomalous employment. Why here? Granted that the poet is intensely identified with Achilles, why has it caused a syntactic anomaly at this juncture?

The anomaly shows up here because it is here that the dissonance of the underlying code of values comes to the surface. Achilles, no less than Hector,

is being manoeuvred into a trap that comes near to revealing that “friend” and “enemy” sometimes refuse to stay separated. Here, as the demands of *kleos* which underlie Achilles’ decision have become contradictory, Achilles becomes irrational, or at least inconsistent in his stated intentions; Nestor resorts to behind-the-scenes manipulations which are half concealed and totally unexplained even by the omniscient narrator (an almost unexampled form of subtlety even in this subtle genre); Odysseus breaks into the speech protocol with a half-hidden agenda of his own; odd words crop up; and, finally, both “Achilles” and Homer slip into a mode of discourse which subtracts Phoenix from the embassy. We may well be left unsure how to regard all this, duals included—as a nod or a brilliant creation of affect. Let me back up slightly to suggest an answer, if it is not already obvious.

Gregory Nagy’s explanation of the typological conflict between Achilles and Odysseus, valor versus cunning, is close to the truth, but by itself would yield an interpretation of the poem whereby two sorts of fighting skill, engaged [231] in an allegorized quarrel, happen to collide in such a way that Achilles is trapped into staying out of battle too long. This would set up his tragedy quite plausibly, but on an element of chance—and leave the text irrelevant to the large problems of conflict and order with which the Archaic world, like all human worlds, had to deal. For there is no *necessary* conflict between the two styles of fighting; Achilles can be the impetuous spearman, Odysseus “master of the ambush,”²⁹ and there can be room for both of them, as there is for the contrasting styles of a Diomedes and an Ajax.

The real conflict lies not between Odysseus and Achilles, or even between Agamemnon and Achilles; it is *within the hero*, and that is true because it lies deep in the value system of the heroic code which he, more than any other warrior before Troy, represents and, as an individual, has internalized.³⁰ That is the beauty of what Homer has created here: the impossibility of resolving the dilemma is represented by housing it, so to speak, in a single actor.

We are led to conclude, then, that even the “inconsistency” is a gain. At this juncture of the narrative, when the plot turns toward the inevitable destruction of its protagonist, the poet attempts, and in my view achieves, a *tour de force* of representation. Our intense attraction to his narrative brings us to an unusual degree imaginatively into his mind, which is that of “Achilles,” as it experiences the latent tragedy of the tradition. *Ethopoïia* and idea are fused; and this fusion is accomplished in the texture of the narration itself. The ultimate mimesis in the text, Achilles’ story, is that it cannot come out right because key values within the tradition it represents, especially the fatal dissonance within the logic that Gouldner has described—the impossibility of basing a social order on individual competitive enterprise—cannot be harmonized.

Modern scholarship on the embassy has already come very close to this conclusion, except for the final twist: all previous attempts to account for the irrational use of the duals have basically tried to explain the oddity away; the present approach attempts, by contrast, to explain why the oddity is there, and

on a certain level must be there. The very inconcinnity of the scene is part of its message. To explain it away would be to participate in the masking of a critical ambiguity in the value system of which this poem is an ideal expression. Therefore, whether attempts to explain it away be on grammatical (Gordesiani), artistic (Boll, Segal), traditional (Nagy) or analytic grounds, they should be resisted. They would gain for us some consistency in the surface of the presentation, but in the process would lose some *authenticity* for all audiences who had not solved the dilemma of competition—as which culture has?

* * * * *

Since the idea that inconsistency itself expresses poetic intention is bound to strike us as a little bit beyond familiar bounds (though I am not claiming that the intention was conscious on Homer's part or was recognized consciously by his audience), I would like to try to show briefly that the *Odyssey* too offers us representational inconsistency as a reflection of ideological uncertainty, and does so in a larger and, if anything, more notorious crux, the conclusion of the poem.

[232]Even if one accepts the Alexandrian view that the *Odyssey* reaches its *peras* (“end”) with the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope (which may strike us as too romantic for epos), one is left with the problem of why the performance went on, and relatively lamely. Why, as Bury pointed out in 1922, does part of the section after 23.196 read more “like a table of contents” than a poetic narrative, while part seems “perfunctory [and] ... gives the impression that ... Homer was impatient to get to the end of his task and was not feeling the joy of creation”; or, in short, “if Homer wrote it [sic] ... his hand had lost its craft”?³¹

I propose that the triumphant return of Odysseus is soured by the same thing that fouls Achilles' triumph when his friends/enemies are forced to sue for his cooperation in Book Nine of the *Iliad*. If anything, it is clearer that the fundamental problem making the plot, and—I would add again—the artistic representation of plot, turbid at the end of the *Odyssey* arises from the essential, unresolvable contradiction in the poem's complex ethos.

As many scholars would agree today, the *Odyssey* is an attempt to represent the restoration of order that has been lost under the extreme war conditions of the *Iliad*; and here I would focus not so much on the obliteration of Troy as on the deterioration of social values in the Achaean men, as they sustain the relations and the mentality necessary for such a destructive project. As Pietro Pucci says very accurately, “The *Iliad* is the poem of total expenditure of life and the *Odyssey* is the poem of a controlled economy of life.”³² In this plot, success for Odysseus is quite simply his progressive withdrawal from everything that his participation in the destruction of Troy entailed: the battle-frenzy, the supplanting of *eleos* (“pity”) by remorseless, individualistic *kleos*, and of a productive by a purely raiding economy, the abandonment of family values and loyalties for those of the male fighting sodality, or *Männerbund*.³³

The last phase is, of course, to restore his model *oikos* to its former order—and to accomplish this task the hero undertakes a punitive slaughter of his own community, setting in motion a revenge cycle which, as we know from Girard’s work, is the most dangerous source of disorder in prelegal societies. Fortunately (if that is the right word), miraculous interventions (including literally a bolt from the blue) and opportunistic responses by Odysseus combine to effect Athena’s order that they “stop the *neikos*!” (531-32, 542-44).

There is no need to rehearse here the ethical difficulties with which readers of the *Odyssey* have wrestled since antiquity.³⁴ Of particular interest, though, at the very end are, first of all, the savagery of Odysseus’ use of war-power to restore order, such that large numbers of Ithacans and their closest neighbors “would have been rendered *ἀνόστους*” (“without return home,” 528; an amazing irony); and, secondly, the “overlay” of Odysseus on Athena, the war goddess of the *Iliad*, as master of the war cry (which was Achilles’ role in that poem),³⁵ and in general as heroic representative of her “peace through strength” function.

The end of the *Odyssey*, then, like the embassy of the *Iliad*, presents us with a sense of artistic letdown and of ethical turbidity. The problem goes far beyond what so many readers perceive as an unnecessary *degree* of violence employed by Odysseus on the side of order; in the context of a narrative where success means extrication from the revenge values of the *Iliad*, what can we [233]make of a conclusion that depends on reintroducing them? The “Iliadic” character of the last section of the epic means in effect that Odysseus relapses into the very conduct that he has worked throughout the poem to put behind him; and while there are many signs of Homer trying to deal with this,³⁶ the biggest “sign” is the very fact that the effort does not, in the last analysis, come off. In the end, violence is not a successful way to achieve stable order; but it is the only way that society after society has come up with,³⁷ and Homer’s text establishes divine sanction for this traditional oddity, not without discomfort.

We have not encountered any grammatical oddity like the flagrant duals of the embassy scene, but there is a very curious narrative anomaly which to my knowledge no one has noticed: Why does Odysseus put himself and Penelope through the song-and-dance of the bed-trick to prove to her his identity? Why not flash his old hunting scar, which worked so well with Eumaeus and Philoetius, and which she of all people should instantly recognize? To be sure, the secret of the bed, though we hear nothing about it until it is out, is a happy device for this level of the poem’s resolution. Through it Homer establishes Odysseus’ typological identity as *τέκτων* (“woodworker, craftsman”), along with his personal identity as the-only-other-person-who-knows-the-secret. In some cultures, a prospective husband has to prove himself worthy by building a bed-chamber; so from that perspective also the craftsman symbol fits perfectly the *swayamvara* or (re-)marriage structure of interpretation upon which scholars have long recognized that this scene is built.³⁸ The geographical symbolism of the living thing rooted in the earth, shaped but not killed, at the very center of the *oikos*, could not be happier. Moreover, as Albert Lord

demonstrated at the dawn of modern oral poetic studies, what is important requires elaboration. We would not want Penelope to go downstairs and say, “Nurse tells me you have an interesting scar on your leg; could I see it?” because that would “shorten the song”—something only done by amateur singers who are poor custodians of tradition—and the opportunity to combine the perfect symbol of their relationship with the sign and venue of their reunion would be sacrificed for a false efficiency. Yet utterly to ignore the scar once anyone has thought about it is a rather glaring omission; and in fact Eurycleia has told Penelope she saw it with her own eyes, only minutes before the latter agrees to go down and speak to the strange guest in the megaron (23.73-74, note *σῆμα ἀριφραδέες*).

Since the scar and the bed are equally effective as tokens of Odysseus’ *personal* identity, the answer to this question (once we realize that there is a question) must lie once again in the realm of theme or typology. Recent work has in fact shown us why the scar-sign would have been an artistic disaster for this climactic moment, the reunion of man and wife, the repatriation of a husband won back from warfighting for the reconstruction of the *oikos*: Nancy Rubin and William Sale have convincingly demonstrated that the story relating how Odysseus got the scar, a story we hear in one of the most arresting moments of the return narration, namely when Eurycleia discovers it, unmistakably identifies it as a hunting-initiation token.³⁹

For any Greek male, initiation meant the transfer of his affiliation from the nuclear family to the society at large, and in particular to military life. We can infer from later Athenian practise that the transfer was often effected by [234]enrollment of the youth in an all-male fighting sodality—that is, some thinly disguised version of a *Männerbund*.⁴⁰ Could anything be more inappropriate at this climax of family reunification than to flaunt before Penelope an arch-symbol of military values, implying as they do the sacrifice of family structure to the all-male *comitatus*, the renunciation of *oikos*-centered existence for life at the margins of civilization?⁴¹ It would reintroduce everything that Odysseus has been struggling throughout the poem to put behind him.

This interpretation gains force from the recognitions for which Odysseus *does* rely on the scar, namely with Eumaeus and Philoetius just before he enlists them as warrior allies for the destruction of the suitors, and with Laertes just before issuing forth with him to fight their relatives (24.331-35; note again *σῆμα*, 328).⁴² Clearly the scar is used when the time comes for the hero, amid his resumption of other insignia of authority, to reconstitute his *laos* (“people”). What is more, the interpretation makes much more understandable the violence with which Odysseus prevents Eurycleia from revealing the scar-token when she accidentally discovers it at Odysseus’ homecoming bath—the very moment when we hear, through flashback, its encoded significance.

We can imagine Penelope (at least, Homer’s version of her) listening to an account of Odysseus’ adventures with Circe and Calypso (23.321-37) with a certain wry tolerance; we cannot imagine Penelope, who cannot even

pronounce the name of Ilium without sickening, seeing the reminder of his “ephebic” initiation here without causing the whole structure of the poem’s imagery to collapse.

The real question is, then, why does Eurycleia *mention* the scar that Odysseus was at such pains to conceal and the poet will likewise be at pains to avoid? The question brings us back to the major compositional problem at the end of the *Odyssey*, for the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope is an interlude situated between the slaughter and the revenge confrontation, the two major intrusions of “Iliadic” behavior, symbolism, and values into the heartland of the domestic *Odyssey*. Several things combine to show that the return of Odysseus from the world of combat and of exotic adventure is in fact incomplete, and is fated to remain so. One is his awkward impulse (“some god,” Penelope calls it, 23.260) to blurt out, before they have even completed trading the credentials of his recognition, that his destiny is to leave again.⁴³ But the most disturbing is surely the fact that he goes to bed with Penelope on their first night together after twenty years—a night artificially prolonged for their reunion—with a huge problem of revenge still hanging over them. This problem too, as we have seen, is unsatisfactorily resolved; and it is most telling that *kleos*, the supreme Iliadic value, which in most of the *Odyssey* is only passively sought or “heard,” is actively produced (and concealed) in the last three books.⁴⁴ The “savior of the *oikos*” (2.59; 17.538) uses the very forces that destroy social cohesion, and society itself, in order to save it. He is needed, but intolerable; which is a way of saying that his society has not discovered the way to banish violence.

One way in which Homer demonstrates this is through the symbolism of the scar, the traditional mark of warrior initiation. We sense its presence beneath the disguised Odysseus’ rags; we sense it beneath the splendid *chiton* he wears after fighting his way into his own megaron over the bodies of so many [235]young men of his own *ethnos*. That Athena should shed glamorous appearance over Odysseus while the maids are hauling out the bodies and applying sulphur to the megaron (23.156-63) is disquieting in a way that her earlier disguises of him were not; and what is most interesting is that the poet himself does not let us forget the token when he so easily could have.

Homer has not only, perforce, brought the *Iliad* back into the megaron, but in a sense smuggled it into the very bedchamber of the family, as a concealed sign on the hero’s body. And he has done so, I would argue, because of the supreme value he places on artistic authenticity. Instinctively drawn to the trouble spots in his culture’s construction of reality, he has nonetheless no way to resolve the conflict of ideologies between family and military values or, on a larger scale, the impossibility of building what we would call today a positive peace system by violent means. He has no way because (as we ourselves are beginning to realize) there is none. That is an ulterior message of the epics.



NOTES

1. "A Classicist Looks at Peace Studies," in *Peace Studies: the Hard Questions* (Oxford Peace Lectures 1984-85, London 1987) 46.

2. See M. N. Nagler, "Toward a Semantics of Ancient Conflict: *Eris* in the *Iliad*," *Classical World* 82 (1988) 81-90. The present article's development from that study owes much to conversations with my graduate students, Natalie Melas and Matthew Kramer, whom I take this opportunity to thank, along with the editors and the anonymous referee. The latter helped me improve the presentation of this article immeasurably, while not always agreeing with its contents. W. G. Thalmann, "Thersites: Comedy, Scapegoats, and Heroic Ideology in the *Iliad*," *TAPA* 118 (1988) 1-28, reached me too late to be incorporated into the present study. Thalmann adds considerable support to the theory of inconsistency offered here.

3. A. Godelier, "General Problems in Evolutionary Theory," in J. Friedman and M. J. Rowlands, eds., *The Evolution of Social Systems* (Pittsburgh 1978) 6. Cf. also Bruce Lincoln, *Myth, Cosmos, and Society* (Cambridge 1986), esp. p. 164 for an excellent description of the way myth can be used to veil, mystify and strategically distort aspects of the social process. Lincoln seems to attribute more conscious manipulation to that kind of use than I am implying here, but the use remains evident.

4. *The Invention of Athens*, tr. Alan Sheridan (Cambridge, Mass. 1986) 335 (emphasis added). Similarly in connection with the *Iliad* itself, cf. M. I. Finley's gently ironic observation that "Societies, even civilized ones, have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to survive for long periods with such tensions and contradictions": *Ancient Slavery and Modern Ideology* (New York 1983) 117. Cf. also Walter Donlan in Thomas Figueira and Gregory Nagy, eds., *Theognis of Megara* (Baltimore 1985) 215 for an excellent discussion of another key social contradiction (involving *eris*) in Theognis, and René Girard in R. G. Hamerton-Kelly, ed., *Violent Origins* (Stanford 1987) 102 for direct reference to Greek sources.

[236]5. A. Holtzman, "Vyâsa und Homer," in *Zeitschrift für vergleichende Sprachforschung* 1 (1852) 483-91: *homêros* = Skt. *samâsa*, "synoptic narrator." Cf. Gregory Nagy, *The Best of the Achaeans* (Baltimore 1979) 5 and 8-9; Walter Burkert, "Kynaihos, Polycrates, and the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo*," in G. W. Bowersock, W. Burkert, and Michael Putnam, eds., *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies Presented to B. M. W. Knox* (Berlin 1979) 57.

6. Denys L. Page, *History and the Homeric Iliad* (Berkeley 1966) 297-315.

7. Agathe Thornton, "Once Again, the Duals in Book 9 of the *Iliad*," *Glotta* 56 (1978) 3.

8. The studies of particular interest for this argument, in addition to Page (supra n. 6) and Thornton (supra n. 7), are: William F. Wyatt, "The Embassy and the Duals in *Iliad* 9," *AJP* 106 (1985) 399-408; Rismag Gordesiani, "Zur Interpretation der Duale im 9. Buch der *Ilias*," *Philologus* 124 (1980) 163-74; A. Köhnken, "Die Rolle des Phoinix und die Duale im I der *Ilias*," *Glotta* 53 (1975) 25-36 and "Noch einmal Phoinix und die Duale," *Glotta* 56 (1978) 5-14; Judith Rosner, "The Speech of Phoenix: *Iliad* 9.434-605," *Phoenix* 30 (1976) 314-27; M. N. Nagler, *Spontaneity and Tradition* (Berkeley

1979), chap. 3; Gregory Nagy (supra n. 5) 71-75; Charles Segal, "The Embassy and the Duals of *Iliad* 9," *GRBS* 9 (1968) 101-114; M. D. Reeve, "Two Notes on *Iliad* 9," *CQ* 22 (1972) 1-4; and now Richard P. Martin, *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad* (Ithaca 1989), esp. Conclusion.

9. The originator of this view is Page (supra n. 6), who is driven to the neoanalytic conclusion that there were two poets; Köhnken (supra n. 8) sees two levels in the work on this epic by one poet. Thornton's observation that duals can refer to two groups as well as two discrete things or persons is helpful here.

10. Cf. Nagy (supra n. 5).

11. Cf., despite their other disagreements, Adam Parry and David B. Claus in, respectively, "The Language of Achilles," *TAPA* 87 (1956) 1-7; and "AIDOS in the Language of Achilles," *TAPA* 105 (1975) 19.

12. B. A. Van Groningen, "The Proems of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*," *Med. der Kon. Akad. van Wetenschappen, Afd. Letterkunde* 9: no. 8 (1946) 279-94.

13. Cf. Nagler (supra n. 2), and Stephen Scully, "The *Polis* in Homer," *Ramus* 10 (1981) 15.

14. Cf. Nagler (supra n. 2), and "On Almost Killing Your Friends: Aspects of Violence in Early Epic and Ritual," in John Miles Foley, ed., *Current Issues in Oral Literature Research: a Memorial for Milman Parry (Slavica, Columbus 1987)* 395-433. That the conflation of friends and enemies is an essential contradiction in all Greek moral theory before Socrates (and for that matter most moral practice even after him) is obvious; see for example Cephalus' speech at the beginning of the *Republic* (329eff.), and, especially, in Sophocles' *Ajax*—a play which depends heavily on the *Iliad* and the embassy scene—the famous gnome, "Never hate your enemies so much that they cannot become your friends—or love your friends so that you forget they can become your enemies" (679-82). The chronological depth of the problem can be glimpsed in E. Benveniste's discussion of IE **swe* and **arí* in *Vocabulaire des Institutions Indo-Européennes* (Paris 1969) vol. 1 s.vv.

15. I am implying—and the evidence does not warrant more than an implication—that the tension between *oikos*- and *polis*-values, which becomes clearer in the *Odyssey*, is detectable here. If so, Achilles represents the enemy of the *oikos* as the idealized warrior, and the opposite of the emerging "*polis* ideology" as supreme individualist (cf. 16.99f.).

16. Georges Dumézil, "'Fouge' et 'rage' dans l'*Iliade*," in *La Courtisane et les Segneurs Colorés* (Paris 1983) 189. I do not agree with Dumézil against Bruce Lincoln that *lussa* has no parallels in the more primordial IE warrior-transformation prototypes (*berserksgangir*, etc.). The significance of that possibility for the present argument is [237]that, in reaching the state of "wolfish rage" which (Lincoln and others argue) *lussa* entails, Hector becomes a kind of rival to Achilles (see infra, pp. 228-29).

17. Wyatt (supra n. 8) 406n. comes close to saying this: "Phoenix ... is to Achilles as Nestor is to the *Iliad* as a whole." But "the *Iliad* as a whole" is coming apart here.

18. Martin (supra n. 8) points out that by his criteria of effective speech performance, among others, Nestor was the person to undertake this mission (the term Wyatt prefers, incidentally, to "embassy"): this arrangement might have prevented the tragedy. I would be inclined to see a slight but fatal weakness in Nestor, who in his desperation to keep the host together does not face Agamemnon down but goes along with the deception, fatefully relying on Achilles' inexperience and lack of perceptiveness to make it work. (Note the more obvious weakness of Priam, with equally dreadful results: 3.156-58, 305-307; these weak father figures are the equivalents of Dhritarashtra in Indian epic.) Almost more important is Martin's discovery that "Achilles uses the

conventions normal for speaking about relations with outsiders when he talks about his own commander.” He in fact seems to characterize himself as “raided.” How dangerous is the sensitivity of warriors!

19. Note ἄλλους Δαναούς (“the other Greeks,” 316), in which Achilles hints that the other heroes should detach themselves as he has done. Here it is important to note too that he rather peremptorily declares that Phoenix will stay the night on his side but leaves it up to him to decide about returning to Phthia with him in the morning (429, cf. 619, 690-92). The fact that Phoenix is an adoptive father to Achilles (cf. Benveniste [supra n. 14] *s.v. atta*) further intensifies the struggle.

20. Sacrificial logic operates throughout heroic narrative: Stephen Lowenstam, “The Typological Death of Patroklos” (diss. Harvard 1975), Richard P. Martin, *Healing, Sacrifice, and Battle* (Innsbruck 1983). What I am suggesting here, that sacrifice is necessary to reorganize the friend- and enemy-relationships so that *alkê* can be expressed against the original enemy community, Troy, is central to heroic ideology; cf. Nagler, “On Almost Killing Your Friends” (supra n. 14).

21. Cf. *Spontaneity and Tradition* (supra n. 8) 159-61, James A. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad* (Chicago 1975) 170-71.

22. On “Achilles’ choice,” cf. Bruno Snell, *Scenes from Greek Drama* (Berkeley 1964) 17-20; on Achilles’ impulsive character and its development throughout the text (a useful background for the heightened interiority of this scene), cf. Stephen Scully, “The Language of Achilles: the ὀχθήσας Formulas,” *TAPA* 114 (1984) 18.

23. The structurally paired embassy in Book 24 would most invite comparison. In fact, from the point of view of conflict theory one could reach opposite interpretations of Priam’s action in that scene (see M. N. Nagler, “The Kiss of Priam: Towards the Development of a Peace Concept in the West,” in U. Goebel and Otto M. Nelson, eds., *War and Peace: Perspectives in the Nuclear Age* [Lubbock, Texas 1988] 125-36); and by any reading Achilles clearly demands of him an emotional and social commitment parallel to his own. This commitment, symbolized by taking a meal in Achilles’ bivouac and becoming his *xenos*, is not without ambivalency (cf. Plutarch *Moralia* 235B-C, on *doruxenos*). Yet neither Priam nor Achilles betrays a sense of inner conflict about what they have to do; on the contrary, they set about it without involving others and with much involvement of divine agency. Both these contrasts to the earlier embassy return this scene to the normal framework of epic decision.

24. Cf. *Spontaneity and Tradition* (supra n. 8) and F. M. Combellack, “Homer the Innovator,” *CP* 71 (1971) 44-55, esp. 49. Much modern criticism of Homer does assume that “marked” usages can be distinguished from what we might call “background” usages of one feature or another; indeed this is one of our most useful critical principles. We cannot, however, slip into the assumption that this distinction lines up with [238] “traditional and original,” “correct and incorrect,” as Parry’s earliest technical work with the formula might lead one to do.

25. Cf. Snell (supra n. 22) 20, Redfield (supra n. 21) 101; and for the contradictions of competition, Alvin W. Gouldner, *Enter Plato* (New York 1965), *passim*.

26. For the first point, cf. Nagler (supra n. 2); for the second, Martin (supra n. 20). That the ideology of sacrifice, not necessarily accompanied by ritual, still operates in modern group conflict is shown by Kenneth Boulding, *Stable Peace* (Austin 1978) 101-102.

27. Cf. Martin (supra n. 5), who builds in part on Scully (supra n. 21).

28. Martin himself provides extensive ethnographic and philological citations *ad loc.*

29. Cf. A. T. Edwards, *Achilles in the Odyssey* (Königstein 1985), which is actually about ambush and open fighting in the Homeric ideology of combat.

30. Nagy comes to exactly the same conclusion by studying Achilles' *biê*, (supra n. 5) 319-20. Achilles' often-noted tendency to want to fight alone is relevant here (16.100). The definitive studies of the tensions in the warrior ethos by Georges Dumézil are excellently summarized by Jaan Puhvel in his introduction to the former's *The Stakes of the Warrior* (Berkeley 1983) and continued by Nagy. What I am suggesting, however, is that beneath the typology of the warrior, whether Edwards', Dumézil's or any other, lies the problematic ethos of competition, as Gouldner has described it for Greek culture in particular. On this see also Hamerton-Kelly (supra n. 4) 9.

31. J. B. Bury, "The End of the *Odyssey*," *JHS* 62 (1922) 2-3.

32. Pietro Pucci, "The Proem of the *Odyssey*," *Arethusa* 15 (1982) 42.

33. Discussion and bibliography in Nagy (supra n. 5) 83. On the hominid origins of this major cause of violence in human societies see K. F. Otterbein, *The Evolution of War* (New Haven 1970), with discussion now in Bruce Knauft, "Violence in Simple Societies," *Current Anthropology* 28:4 (1987) 471. The contrast of *eleos* and *kleos* is best treated by Marilyn Arthur, "The Divided World of *Iliad* 6," in Helene Foley, ed., *Reflections of Women in Antiquity* (New York 1981) 19-43; for similar approaches, cf. Claus (supra n. 11), David Schaps, "The Women of Greece in Wartime," *CP* 77 (1982) 193-213.

34. For example, Jenny Strauss Clay, *The Wrath of Athena* (Princeton 1983). I pursue this in a forthcoming paper, "Odysseus: the Proem and the Problem."

35. Cf. Francis Vian, "La Fonction Guerrière dans la Mythologie Grecque," in Jean-Pierre Vernant, ed., *Problèmes de la Guerre en Grèce Ancienne* (Paris 1968) 53-68.

36. Two noteworthy devices here are the purification simile applied to the dead suitors (22.384-89) and the elaborate (but groundless) pretense that Odysseus has killed only the right ones (372-73).

37. Cf., respectively, Hannah Arendt, *On Violence* (New York 1970) esp. 4, 79-80; and Yvon Garlan, *War in the Ancient World* (London 1975) 85, 185.

38. For the bed trick, see M. N. Nagler, "Dread Goddess Revisited" [forthcoming], citing Gunter Dietz, "Das Bett des Odysseus," *Symbolon* 7 (1971) 9-32 for the marriage customs, and Denys L. Page, *Folktales in Homer's Odyssey* (Cambridge, Mass. 1973) 107-108 for the *swyamvara*.

39. N. F. Rubin and W. M. Sale, "Meleager and Odysseus: A Structural and Cultural Study of the Greek Hunting-Maturation Myth," *Arethusa* 16 (1983) 137-71.

40. Here, of course, I am relying on the influential studies of later Epeheic institutions by P. Vidal-Naquet, *Le chasseur noir* (Paris 1981) and "The Black Hunter Revisited," *PCPS* 212 (1986) 126-44.

41. Agamemnon's sacrifice of Iphigeneia at the start of the Trojan War is perhaps the most stark symbol in the tradition of subordination of family values to war-fighting.

[239]42. The use of the scar token is, on the literal level, gratuitous in Laertes' case because he also passes the orchard-recognition test—similar to the test of the olive tree-bed which seems to apply to both Odysseus and Penelope.

43. At this point the configuration of Odysseus' career overlies the interesting narrative template of the hero, god (and/or sacrifice victim) who comes into the distressed community, restores it to order, and then leaves (or is persecuted or sacrificed). For later Greek reverberations, cf. Gregory Nagy, "Théognis et Mégare," *Revue de l'Histoire des Religions* 221 (1984) 248-50; and for much later American ones, Will Wright, *Six-guns and Society* (Berkeley 1975).

44. Cf. Charles P. Segal, "KLEOS and its Ironies in the *Odyssey*," *L'Antiquité classique* 52 (1983) 22-47, esp. 46.