

Tatum – Mourner's Song

Mourners and Monuments

Mourning inspires the poetry of war. The Iliad begins with Rage and ends with a funeral. The bare outline – rage leads to killing, which leads to funeral rites. This is the basic idea of war, and the Iliad connects the plot of war with the plot of life. It is an autopsy of war. The use of ring composition, in say, Glaucus's genealogy speech, emphasizes the linear and chronological sequence of death, but also the circularity, one without beginnings or ends. The ordering of names on the Vietnam Memorial uses a similar ring technique.

Daughters of Memory

The Muse tends to get passed over, as a dispensable part of ancient poetry. We think it better to venerate memory than Muses. But this loses something. Memory is not just a construction, but a retrieval of facts, and this is what the Muse is about. The Muse is crucial for the artist who would conjure up war. The Muse is a distancing effect, giving the poem a timeless quality.

No skill is more important for a poet than metaphor. Aristotle points out that it depends on being able to see similarities in dissimilar things. In Iliad 4 Menelaus is wounded by the archer Pandarus (this is a simile). It compares the blood staining Menelaus to a woman dying a piece of ivory purple. It connects war to an artisan woman at work. And when Athena brushes it away, she is compared to a mother brushing a fly from a child. It is a conflation of war and peace, and while Menelaus and Agamemnon can't appreciate it, the staining of his clothes is really an art, a beautiful wound. There are erotic overtones, and the spreading stain of the dye on the ivory shows how close Menelaus came to becoming an artifact himself.

The death of Patroclus is treated like the work of a slaughterhouse. Tugging at a dead man and a slaughtered ox-hide become one and the same thing. Dignity is gone. Elsewhere, works of war come from works of peace, as when Simoeisios is killed like a tree being chopped down. Even the lyre of Eetion that Achilles plays in book 9 is an artifact of war, and would have a very different meaning for Andromache.

Rage for Order

The Commanders of a war are its first poets. But the Iliad focuses on commanders. The catalog of ships is a commanders' poem. Strangely, the Iliad has rarely been read as a war poem, partly because it was seen as such a great example of pure poetry. Rage told us more than war. But the theme of rage goes right to the heart of war – the desire to kill, whether calculated or uncontrolled.

Achilles is caught in a world without past or future. Whatever the reasons for war in the beginning, they have been superseded but other aims and by war itself. But Achilles is not criticizing Agamemnon's war aims, but his injustice and hypocrisy, and the sense that he is fighting a war for others. The Greeks knew this but kept fighting anyway. The Iliad builds on the conflict between what leaders desire and the unforeseen of war.

Agamemnon has generally gotten bad press. To appreciate him you have to think like a general. He is like other commanders in war. Everything that happens at Troy is part of Zeus's plan, and it leads to Agamemnon's ultimate success. Achilles can sulk until it is time to kill Hector. Lots of casualties are suffered, but these are part of the plan. Ultimately both Achilles and Agamemnon are good examples of incompetence too. Achilles, the brilliant leader, brings about lots of destruction among his allies. Achilles isn't concerned with winning, but with having everyone acknowledge him as the best. Agamemnon is even more incompetent, as his "ploy" at the beginning of Book 2 shows. Agamemnon seems more incompetent than most because Achilles stands up to him. This sort of incompetence is seen throughout military history.

One thing all commanders love is good spectacle. Xerxes reviewed his massive army at the Hellespont in 480. The catalogue of ships is of course one long song of military organization. Its purpose is to show the reintegration and redirection of the commander's instrument of war that Achilles has come close to destroying. The poem turns into a celebration of a commander's powers. The catalog is introduced with Muses, but a far more vivid introduction than at the beginning. Five similes follow. Homer moves from elemental forces in nature, to humans exerting their control over nature, finally winding up in a pastoral scene. Agamemnon is completely reestablished as commander, after Achilles's revolt and his own incompetence and Thersites. The catalogue is an important reminder of everything and everyone besides Achilles.

Often in war the commander will hit upon the strategy by chance. Nestor is the effective strategist in the Iliad, who sees the way out of the Greeks' dilemma. He is on a completely different level from Priam. His strategy is rooted in persuasion to turn the audience to his point of view. It is Nestor who inspires Patroclus. Nestor doesn't bother with Achilles, but his influence on Patroclus can be seen in the way Patroclus urges on other warriors, and converses with Achilles – he quotes Nestor!

There is a comparison here with Agamemnon. Both are described as weeping in near identical formulae (Ag in 9, Pa in 16). But Agamemnon is weeping for himself in self absorption – Patroclus weeps for the Greeks in toto. Yet it is Patroclus who will resolve Agamemnon's dilemma, but he is inspired to do so through a personal, private moment full of pathos. This joins the commander's experience to the intensely personal experience of the soldier. They share both the same and different emotions.

The Words of the Sea

On sea and in the air, war leaves no traces. Even on land things can be fleeting. But fame does not die because of Homer. Poetry is needed most when landscapes vanish.

A pivotal part of the middle books is the wall the Greeks build to defend their ships (book 7). They forget to sacrifice to the gods, and Poseidon is angry. Zeus promises that after Greeks are gone the wall can be destroyed, as if the war had never happened. The wall is the center of action for the next couple of books, but we already know how transitory it is. The wall shows how both sides in war have another enemy - the passage of time.

Comparison with the disappearance of Battery Wagner off Charleston. The island has long since been engulfed by the sea due to work on improving the Charleston harbor.

The Companion Seen But Not Heard

There is a marriage of sexual passion and lust for battle – look at Achilles and Penthesilea. But everything love brings can be lost in an instant in war. There is a contrast between love at home and love on the battlefield. Hector knows the desires of love, but has none of it on the field of battle, comparing everything bad to femininity. He cannot turn away from war for love. He wants Andromache's sphere wholly separate from his. Aristophanes turns these precepts into an example of men's stupidity in *Lysistrata*. In the *Iliad*, Andromache knows all too well Hector's fate. Hector too knows he is doomed, but he can't do anything about it because he is so locked into the heroic type.

The death of Patroclus is a cardinal event in the poem. Through the loss of Patroclus Achilles discovers what love truly is. Patroclus seems to dote on Achilles like a wife. Phoenix for instance plays on this. The relationship of Achilles and Patroclus is like that of Hector and Andromach – love, not lust. In the *Iliad*, love is articulated only when it is about to be lost. Achilles doesn't realize how much Patroclus meant to him until he dies.

The Poetry is in the Killing

The Trojans tend to suffer more at the hands of the Greeks (it is a Greek poem after all) but the final focus of the poem is on the funeral of Hector. The battle scenes themselves are described in extreme detail. Half the poem is occupied with battle, yet the descriptions of death are noteworthy for variety of ways of killing and the extreme minute detail. The same basic questions are usually answered – Who was killed, Who killed him, what weapon was used, how and where was he killed (wounded).

Fire from Hephaestus

The Shield of Achilles is the ultimate piece of weaponry. It turns an instrument of war into poetry. Made by a god, it's a cosmic vision no human can experience. The arms of Achilles bring him into conflict with nature itself. In book 17 the organized armies of the Greeks have disintegrated. Even the similes show this – the Greeks are likened to a captured city being burned.

The shield is the most significant object for understanding the appeal of war. Shields are ambiguous – weapons of war, but only for defence. The shield of Achilles seems to be as alive as Achilles is and it allows us to see war's spectacles in inverse proportion to the way they are experienced.

Achilles grows in anger as he looks on the armor. His eyes blaze in the same way as the arms. He understands the divine artistry and its limits better than other mortals – mortal body and immortal object. And he thinks of the dead Patroclus and takes care for his body. We lose sight of our mortality confronted with the shield. It shows pastoral visions juxtaposed with war, a common theme. It also emphasizes the circular nature of existence. As with the genealogies, this contrasts infinity with the brief life of the warrior.

Toward the Autumn Night of Oguma Hideo

The Iliad captures the uncertain leap from war to peace. The story at the end is inconclusive, with the deaths of Priam and Astyanax and Cassandra alluded to. We do not hear these events so much as we dread them. The poem stops on the knife edge of the future.

The tomb of Patroclus is necessary for honoring the dead, but alien to us. The funeral games are what reconstitute the Greek army that has been destroyed. Achilles sacker of cities turns out to be an impressive builder of military society. He moves from homo necans to homo ludens. His actions are infectious, and he sees to it that everyone gets a prize. He even flatters Agamemnon. And he does this when it no longer matters to him, but helps recreate the society. But Achilles is focused on a far deeper level.

The funeral games contrast greatly with the mourning in Troy. Priam and Andromache know that everything can be undone by war. It is difficult to say who is more bereft and grief-stricken at the end, Andromache or Achilles. Priam as father reminds Achilles of his own father, bringing Achilles back to his mortal side rather than his immortal side. Both will die soon, and they know it. What unites them is the recognition of the suffering each endures – Priam weeps for Hector, Achilles for Patroclus and Peleus. But it is a temporary reconciliation. Achilles's last words are "I will hold our attack as long as you require." Inspiring as it may be, compassion in war does not last.

The Iliad ends god-free. All that is left are the mortals, with no illusions about the reality of their situation.