THE *HELDENTOD* IN HOMER: ONE HEROIC IDEAL

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τὸ καλῶς θνῄσκειν ἀρετῆς μέρος ἐστὶ μέγιστον
—Simonides(?) frag. 118 D. = 8 P.

satis diu vel naturae vixi vel gloriae
—Julius Caesar ap. Cic. *Marcell.* 25

THE *Oxford English Dictionary* begins its entry for the word "hero" with the following two definitions: "1. *Antiq.* A name given (as in Homer) to men of superhuman strength, courage, or ability, favoured by the gods; at a later time regarded as intermediate between gods and men, and immortal. . . . 2. A man distinguished by extraordinary valour and martial achievements; one who does brave or noble deeds; an illustrious warrior." Similarly, the first two entries in the *OED* for the adjective "heroic" give corresponding definitions, although in the reverse order: "A.1. Of or pertaining to a hero or heroes; characteristic of, or suitable to the character of a hero; of a bravery, virtue, or nobleness of character, exalted above that of ordinary men. . . . 2. Of or pertaining to the heroes of antiquity. *Heroic age* or *time:* that during which the ancient heroes existed." In our time there is a tendency to interpret the concept of heroism in a rather free and elastic manner. Personages are described as heroes whom no ancient would ever have regarded as such, and talk of "the heroic" is introduced into criticism of literary genres to which it is quite foreign. It will be well, therefore, to state at the outset that in this paper the terms "hero" and "heroic" will be used in the two senses explained above in the *OED;* the terms are here to be understood in their traditional meanings.[1] I add, at the risk of stating the obvious, that heroic deeds, in the sense of deeds of extraordinary martial valor, may be performed not only by mythological heroes (in the technical sense of that word) but also by real human beings of any historical period, past, present, or future. Our inquiry will lead us down both paths.

What is true of heroic deeds in general is also true in particular of heroic death, which is my present concern. Whatever else may be associated with such a death, most would agree that there is one special

1. For the way in which the word ἥρως is used in the Homeric poems, see the remarks of M. L. West, ed., *Hesiod: "Works and Days"* (Oxford, 1978), pp. 370–72 (excursus 1. 3).

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quality characteristic of it: the heroic warrior confronts his death with a dignity born of bravery, unafraid and defiant to the end. His immediate foe may defeat him, but over such a one death, the ultimate foe, can have no dominion.

Comparative materials can aid in isolating the distinctive elements in the Homeric attitude toward and treatment of heroic death. In illustration of this I select a single example, taken from early Irish literature: Cúchulainn, the chief hero of the Ulster cycle of stories, which recount the exploits of the warriors of the *Craoibh Ruadh,* or Red Branch. The folklorist Alfred T. Nutt (1856–1910) named Cúchulainn the "Irish Achilles," and in fact there are some close similarities that have not gone unnoticed.[2] Perhaps most striking is the freely chosen death at an early age. In the *Iliad,* the approaching death of Achilles never actually occurs, but the audience always knows that it shall—and soon. The poet introduces this theme in the very first book, where Achilles already knows his fate. The first words that ever he speaks to his mother Thetis are μῆτερ, ἐπεί μ' ἔτεκές γε μινυνθάδιόν περ ἐόντα (352). That sets the tone, and it is reinforced by Thetis' remarkable exclamation in verse 414: ὤ μοι τέκνον ἐμόν, τί νύ σ' ἔτρεφον αἰνὰ τεκοῦσα;[3] Achilles' choice is well known: he may either stay at Troy to die gloriously at an early age or return home to a long but inglorious life. He himself, on his divine mother's authority, describes his two fates (κῆρες) in the ninth book of the *Iliad* (410–16);[4] there is never any doubt as to which he shall choose. The Homeric poet crystallizes mother Thetis' situation in one astonishing and untranslatable word—δυσαριστοτόκεια (*Il.* 18. 54).

And what of Cúchulainn? In the Irish epic, *Táin Bó Cuailnge,* the "Cattle-Raid of Cooley," in which Cúchulainn figures most prominently, there is an account of the day on which he first, as a young boy, formally took up arms. He had chanced to overhear Cathbad the Druid say that the signs indicated that whoever should take arms for the first time on that day would have a great name, although his life would be short. Immediately Cúchulainn went to the king, Conchubar, and requested arms, which were given to him. Soon the Druid discovered what he had done. Here is the sequel, in Lady Augusta Gregory's version:

> Just then Cathbad the Druid came in, and there was wonder on him, and he said, "Is it taking arms this young boy is?" "He is indeed," said the king. "It is sorry I would be to see his mother's son take arms on this day," said Cathbad. "Was it not yourself bade him do it?" said the king. "I did not surely," he said. "Then you have lied to me,

2. In some respects Cúchulainn can also be compared to Heracles. This is particularly true of the descriptions of his extraordinary feats of hunting and fighting, which go far beyond the Homeric representations of Achilles' accomplishments. On the limits observed by Homer, cf. J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), pp. 166–67 and p. 167, n. 50, for further references to the secondary literature.

3. Even the phrasing of αἰνὰ τεκοῦσα is unusual; cf. M. L. West, ed., *Hesiod: "Theogony"* (Oxford, 1966), p. 246, on *Theog.* 276 λυγρὰ παθοῦσα, to which αἰνὰ τεκοῦσα is an exact parallel. Other examples of unusual and "nonformulaic" diction in connection with Achilles' fate will be noted below.

4. See further *Il.* 1. 505–6; 18. 54–60, 88–126; 19. 418–24 (the prophecy of the immortal horse Xanthus); 22. 358–60 (Hector's prophecy); 24. 538–40.

> boy," said Conchubar. "I told no lie, King," said Cuchulain, "for it was he indeed put it in my mind when he was teaching the others, for when one of them asked him if there was any special virtue in this day, he said that whoever would for the first time take arms to-day, his name would be greater than any other in Ireland, and he did not say any harm would come on him, but that his life would be short." "And what I said is true," said Cathbad, "there will be fame on you and a great name, but your lifetime will not be long." "It is little I would care," said Cuchulain, "if my life were to last one day and one night only, so long as my name and the story of what I had done would live after me."[5]

Such a choice is in the heroic manner; one might even say, more pertinently, in the manner of Achilles.[6] It would not be practicable to rehearse here all of Cúchulainn's exploits, nor is it necessary, for it is the nature of his death in particular that interests me, and no less a figure than William Butler Yeats, of whom more anon, has stated that "'The Death of Cuchullin' . . . is among the greatest things of all legendary literature."[7]

He died on the plain of Muirthemne. He knew that he would not return from that battle and so first went to his mother Dechtine and bade her the last farewell. On the field of battle itself his deeds were such as befitted a hero of his greatness. Then, finally, the end. Again I quote from Lady Gregory's translation:

> Then Lugaid threw the spear, and it went through and through Cuchulain's body, and he knew he had got his deadly wound; and his bowels came out on the cushions of the chariot, and his only horse went away from him . . . with half the harness hanging from his neck, and left his master, the king of the heroes of Ireland, to die upon the plain of Muirthemne.
>
> Then Cuchulain said: "There is great desire on me to go to that lake beyond, and to get a drink from it."
>
> "We will give you leave to do that," they said, "if you will come back to us after."
>
> "I will bid you come for me if I am not able to come back myself," said Cuchulain.

5. *Cuchulain of Muirthemne: The Story of the Men of the Red Branch of Ulster*[5], with a preface by W. B. Yeats (Oxford, 1970), p. 28. There are several English translations of the *Táin;* not only do these differ in the level of scholarship attained, but they also, to some extent, reflect different manuscript recensions. At different times I shall quote from different versions, but never, I trust, in such a way as to misrepresent the original. In any event, the central episode, the death of Cúchulainn, does not occur in the *Táin* proper and cannot be cited from versions of that work. (The reader should be aware that English spellings of Irish names vary considerably, and I have not felt it necessary to impose an artificial uniformity on divergent sources. Cúchulainn, for example, is also written Cu Chulainn, Cuchulain, Cuchullinn, Cuchullin, Cuhoolin; similarly, Conchubar can be spelled Conchobor, Conhor, Concobar.)

6. There is a similar story told in the *Táin* of the warrior Cethern, who had been severely wounded in battle. The healer Fingin is summoned: "After this the healer gave him a choice: either to treat his sickness for a whole year and live out his life's span, or get enough strength quickly, in three days and nights, to fit him to fight his present enemies. He chose the second course." He is given the quick cure and "then the armies closed in on him and he wrought havoc among them until he fell" (trans. T. Kinsella, *The Tain* [London, 1970], pp. 212–13 = Gregory, *Cuchulain,* pp. 190–91). That is the choice and death of a hero. (The contrast with the less heroic situation of Euchenor in *Il.* 13. 663–72—when given the choice, Euchenor elects to die fighting at Troy rather than by painful disease at home—should be noted.)

7. *Uncollected Prose by W. B. Yeats,* collected and edited by J. P. Frayne, vol. 1 (New York, 1970), p. 359. (The review from which this sentence comes originally appeared in the issue of *The Bookman* for June 1895, p. 86.)

Then he gathered up his bowels into his body, and he went down to the lake. He drank a drink, and he washed himself, and he turned back again to his death, and he called to his enemies to come and meet him.

There was a pillar-stone west of the lake, and his eye lit on it, and he went to the pillar-stone, and he tied himself to it with his breast-belt, the way he would not meet his death lying down, but would meet it standing up. Then his enemies came round about him, but they were in dread of going close to him, for they were not sure but he might still be alive. . . .

Then the Grey of Macha came back to defend Cuchulain as long as there was life in him, and the hero-light was shining above him. . . .[8]

Then a bird came and settled on his shoulder. "It is not on that pillar birds were used to settle," said Erc.

Then Lugaid came and lifted up Cuchulain's hair from his shoulders, and struck his head off, and the men of Ireland gave three heavy shouts, and the sword fell from Cuchulain's hand, and as it fell, it struck off Lugaid's right hand, so that it fell to the ground. Then they cut off Cuchulain's hand, in satisfaction for it, and then the light faded away from about Cuchulain's head, and left it as pale as the snow of a single night.[9]

So died the hero Cúchulainn. The tale is so striking an example of heroic death that a brief account of its remarkable influence on posterity, specifically in Ireland, would be worth the telling for its own sake. Quite apart from that, such an account has a special relevance to this inquiry: Cúchulainn, the "Irish Achilles," by his death has inspired living men in a way that Achilles himself never has. Let us try to discover why this should be so.

It was especially after the Irish literary revival had begun in the nineteenth century that the old stories became once again widely known, in translations from the Gaelic. Standish O'Grady and Kuno Meyer, Douglas Hyde and Whitley Stokes—these are some of the scholars who performed valuable service in making the Irish tales available in English. A more familiar name is perhaps that of Lady Gregory, the ever-faithful supporter and patron of Yeats. Her book, *Cuchulain of Muirthemne,* first published in 1902, became a great success, in part because of her felicitous use of the local dialect with its Irish syntax, and we have her own word for the effect which her version had on Yeats: "it was only when I had read him one day in London my chapter the 'Death of Cuchulain' that he came to look on me as a fellow writer."[10]

8. The "hero-light" was a light believed to appear above, or issue from, the head of a champion in battle, Irish *lon laoich, luan laith* (other spellings of these phrases occur), literally "light of a hero," "light of a champion." (*Lon* or *luan* = "light," and *laoch,* gen. *laoich* = "hero," *lath,* gen. *laith* = "champion," vel sim. For the etymology of *laoch* [possibly cognate with Greek λαός], see C. Watkins, "Indo-European Metrics and Archaic Irish Verse," *Celtica* 6 [1963]: 241, n. 1.) The hero-light is sometimes mentioned in connection with Cúchulainn's "warp-spasm," a remarkable and bizarre series of inhuman distortions that he was accustomed to undergo prior to battle, whence he was called *an riastarte,* "the distorted one." But here the fading hero-light is a distinct and moving detail: one is reminded of the blazing fire that Athena enkindled over Achilles' head in *Il.* 18. 206, 225–27. Such phenomena are actually rather common: there is a similar description of Diomedes in *Il.* 5. 4–9; cf. also Verg. *Aen.* 2. 679–91 (of Ascanius), Livy 1. 39. 1 (of Servius Tullius; see R. M. Ogilvie, *A Commentary on Livy, Books 1–5* [Oxford, 1965], pp. 157–58), Ov. *Fasti* 6. 635–36 (of Servius Tullius).

9. *Cuchulain,* pp. 255–56.

10. *Seventy Years* (Gerrards Cross, 1974), p. 390.

Yeats himself is the best and most important example of the influence of Cúchulainn's story on a writer. He had already begun to compose poems on Cúchulainn in his twenties, and he continued to do so throughout his life. Appropriately enough, the earliest such poem was originally entitled "The Death of Cuchulain."[11] The poem "Cuchulain Comforted" is dated 13 January 1939, which was but a fortnight before his death. It is the same with Yeats' plays. He wrote six Cúchulainn plays in all, the first appearing in 1904 (*On Baile's Strand*), and the last, which was still only in typescript when he died, was called—*The Death of Cuchulain.*[12]

Aristotle distinguished between ὁ θεωρητικὸς βίος and ὁ πολιτικὸς βίος. If Yeats, poet and dreamer, be taken as representative of the former, the leaders of the Easter Rising in 1916 may represent the life of action. The events are well known. On Easter Monday, 24 April 1916, an Irish Republic was proclaimed on the steps of the General Post Office in Dublin, whereupon this and other buildings were occupied by Irish Volunteers. After five days of heavy fighting the Volunteers surrendered without terms to the English, and by 12 May fifteen of the leaders had been executed after summary courts-martial. Yeats was greatly moved and wrote one of his most famous poems, "Easter 1916," which contains the well-known lines:

> I write it out in a verse—
> MacDonough and MacBride
> And Connolly and Pearse
> Now and in time to be,
> Wherever green is worn,
> Are changed, changed utterly:
> A terrible beauty is born.

Here he names four executed leaders whom he had known personally. Historical documents, including pre-execution interviews, have survived, and there is no doubt that these men had a realistic understanding of the slim chances for a military victory. They hoped rather to achieve a reawakening of the national spirit by their example, that is, by dying a hero's death. Patrick Pearse wrote to his mother before his execution the following: "This is the death I should have asked for if God had given me the choice of all deaths—to die a soldier's death for Ireland and freedom."[13]

11. The poem was first published in *United Ireland* on 11 June 1892, two days before Yeats' twenty-seventh birthday. In the *Collected Poems* a revised version is printed with the title "Cuchulain's Fight with the Sea." See also, from about the same period (perhaps a bit earlier), "To the Rose upon the Rood of Time," verse 3: "Cuchulain battling with the bitter tide." (These poems present a different version of Cúchulainn's death.)

12. For details, see P. L. Marcus, ed., "*The Death of Cuchulain*": *Manuscript Materials including the Author's Final Text by W. B. Yeats* (Ithaca and London, 1982). There is a striking confirmation of the lifelong influence of Lady Gregory's *Cuchulain* on Yeats in the manuscript (P16^r, lines 4–6 = Marcus, p. 97), where the draft contains the following sentence: "You will find the names of all the heads / in Augusta Gregorys [*sic*] book, or in the Gaelic epic it self [*sic*] if / you can read old Ggael [*sic*]" (cf. Marcus, p. 5).

13. Compare the last stanza of Yeats' poem "Three Songs to the One Burden": "Some had no thought of victory / But had gone out to die / That Ireland's mind be greater, / Her heart mount up on

The relevance of all this to the present investigation is to be found in the fact that "Pearse and some of his followers had a cult of [Cuchulain]." The words are Yeats'.[14] Another writer put it simply: "Pearse and his soldiers went out to die calling upon Cuchulain."[15]

Another of those who took part in the 1916 Rising was Charles Burgess, or Cathal Brugha, as he preferred to be called. That he did not die the hero's death then was no fault of his own. English bullets and bombs left fourteen scars on his body, but he survived, only to die, defiantly, fighting on the Republican side in the Civil War of 1922–23. The distinguished Irish author Frank O'Connor described his death this way: "There is something about his end which recalls the old sagas. One thinks of CuChulainn tying himself to a pillarstone by his belt and facing his enemies till the battle glory faded from his head and the bird of evil omen perched upon the bowed shoulder."[16]

Perhaps most remarkable of all was the death of James Connolly—the same Connolly who appears in Yeats' poems next to Pearse. In the fighting at the Post Office he had been severely wounded in the leg. After the surrender he was court-martialed and sentenced to be executed. As he could neither walk nor stand, he was carried on a stretcher to the rear courtyard of the jail, strapped into a chair, and shot. The similarity to the death of Cúchulainn, who, so badly wounded that he could not stand, strapped himself up to die, is eerie.

Finally, there is a statue of the dead Cúchulainn by Oliver Sheppard. It shows him strapped to the stone, his shield still in his left hand, his sword in his right. The bird of death has settled on his right shoulder.[17] The statue stands in the rebuilt General Post Office in Dublin, where the Easter Rising began in 1916. It would be difficult to find a better demonstration of the survival—or resurrection—of an ancient symbol of heroic death than the placement of such a statue in such surroundings.

At no time in history has Achilles, the most perfect and sublime heroic creation, inspired men in quite this way. And yet there can be no doubt that the Greeks shared this conception of the brave warrior who chose with a will the hero's death, undaunted and unafraid to the end. Achilles himself has always been regarded as the very exemplum of this, and many other instances could be adduced from Greece, whether from myth or from history, as one wishes.

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high; / And yet who knows what's yet to come? / For Patrick Pearse had said / That in every generation Must Ireland's blood be shed."

14. A. Wade, ed., *The Letters of W. B. Yeats* (London, 1954), p. 911. The letter, dated 28 June 1938, is addressed to Edith Shackleton Heald. He wrote the words to explain certain verses from his poem "The Statues": "When Pearse summoned Cuchulain to his side, / What stalked through the Post Office?" In general, see B. Kennelly, "The Heroic Ideal in Yeats's Cuchulain Plays," *Hermathena* 101 (1965): 13–21.

15. E. Malins, *Yeats and the Easter Rising,* Yeats Centenary Papers 1 (Dublin, 1965), p. 22.

16. *The Big Fellow: A Life of Michael Collins* (London, 1937), pp. 288–89.

17. On the significance of black birds, especially the crow or raven, as a symbol of death in early Irish mythology, see, e.g., M. Tymoczko, *Two Death Tales from the Ulster Cycle: "The Death of Cu Roi" and "The Death of Cu Chulainn"* (Dublin, 1981), p. 89, n. 4. Recall that in the Roman tradition Marcus Valerius Corvus was said to have acquired his cognomen by defeating in single combat a giant Gaul (that is, a Celt) with the help of a raven that repeatedly flew in the Gaul's face (Livy 7. 26. 5; cf. Claud. Quadr., frag. 12 Peter). For another statue of Cúchulainn, see below, n. 36.

For Greek history it is quite enough for our purposes to refer to Leonidas and the three hundred Spartans at Thermopylae, perhaps the most famous example of historical *Heldentod* in western civilization, and the inspiration for that most famous of Greek epigrams:

ὦ ξεῖν' ἀγγέλλειν Λακεδαιμονίοις ὅτι τῇδε
κείμεθα τοῖς κείνων ῥήμασι πειθόμενοι.

There was a time when every schoolboy knew not only the story but the epigram itself, if not in the original Greek, then at least in the Latin version of Cicero (*Tusc.* 1. 42. 101).

The early Greek poets preach this same gospel of heroism. In the seventh century B.C. Callinus and Tyrtaeus, the one at Ephesus, the other at Sparta, both exhort their fellow citizens to the bravery even unto death. Scant though their fragments be, their attitude is unmistakable and often expressed in language of striking vividness. Thus Callinus proclaims (frag. 1. 6–9):

τιμῆέν τε γάρ ἐστι καὶ ἀγλαὸν ἀνδρὶ μάχεσθαι
γῆς πέρι καὶ παίδων κουριδίης τ' ἀλόχου
δυσμενέσιν· θάνατος δὲ τότ' ἔσσεται, ὁππότε κεν δὴ
Μοῖραι ἐπικλώσωσ'.

Tyrtaeus returns again and again to this same theme:

τεθνάμεναι γὰρ καλὸν ἐνὶ προμάχοισι πεσόντα
ἄνδρ' ἀγαθὸν περὶ ᾗ πατρίδι μαρνάμενον.
[frag. 6. 7. 1–2 Diehl = 10. 1–2 West]

θυμῷ γῆς πέρι τῆσδε μαχώμεθα καὶ περὶ παίδων
θνήσκωμεν ψυχέων μηκέτι φειδόμενοι.
[frag. 6. 7. 13–14 D. = 10. 13–14 W.]

οὐδέ ποτε κλέος ἐσθλὸν ἀπόλλυται οὐδ' ὄνομ' αὐτοῦ,
ἀλλ' ὑπὸ γῆς περ ἐὼν γίνεται ἀθάνατος,
ὅντιν' ἀριστεύοντα μένοντά τε μαρνάμενόν τε
γῆς πέρι καὶ παίδων θοῦρος Ἄρης ὀλέσῃ.[18]
[frag. 9. 31–34 D. = 12. 31–34 W.]

Examples could easily be multiplied, but it would be superfluous. That heroic death in battle was an ancient Hellenic ideal may be taken as established and hardly matter for dispute.

How, then, does Homer—under which name I include the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* and nothing else—fit into this picture? Not quite so obviously as one would perhaps assume. To deny the concept of heroism to the Homeric poems would of course be eccentric, and such is hardly my intention. I would like, however, to examine this single aspect of the

18. For Tyrtaeus' concept of heroism and its influence upon later authors, see W. Jaeger, "Tyrtaios über die wahre APETH," *Sitz. Ber. Akad.*, phil.-hist. Kl. 23 (1932): 537–68 = *Scripta Minora* (Rome, 1960), pp. 75–114; English version in W. Jaeger, *Five Essays*, trans. A. M. Fiske, R.S.C.J. (Montreal, 1966), pp. 103–42.

broad concept heroism, namely, heroic death as it is handled in the Homeric poems. I propose to distinguish between the theory and the practice of *Heldentod* in Homer; the results of such an approach seem to me to be of some interest.

I consider first what may be termed the theoretical attitude toward heroic death in the Homeric poems. There is no mistaking it; such dying is represented as glorious—and in language that is a model for later poets who take up similar themes. In Book 15 of the *Iliad,* Hector begins a general's exhortation to the Trojans and their Lycian allies with two blunt words (487), ἀνέρες ἔστε, "Be men." As he proceeds, he becomes even more blunt (494–97):

> ἀλλὰ μάχεσθ' ἐπὶ νηυσὶν ἀολλέες· ὃς δέ κεν ὑμέων
> βλημένος ἠὲ τυπεὶς θάνατον καὶ πότμον ἐπίσπῃ,
> τεθνάτω· οὔ οἱ ἀεικὲς ἀμυνομένῳ περὶ πάτρης
> τεθνάμεν.

"It is not unseemly to die defending one's country."[19] The words recall the very similar pronouncements of Callinus and Tyrtaeus already quoted and also, of course, the famous verse of Horace, *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori.* The lineal descent of this familiar sentiment from Homer to Horace is particularly clear.

Priam, in Book 22 of the *Iliad,* makes an even more striking assertion (71–73):

> νέῳ δέ τε πάντ' ἐπέοικεν
> ἀρηϊκταμένῳ, δεδαϊγμένῳ ὀξέϊ χαλκῷ
> κεῖσθαι· πάντα δὲ καλὰ θανόντι περ, ὅττι φανήῃ.

The stunning paradox, whereby the dead young warrior, ripped and gashed by weapons of bronze, is said to possess all beauty, provided that he have been killed in battle, could only have meaning in a culture that knew a genuine heroic ideal. It was this ideal that, to give the clearest example, made Achilles go to Troy to die young on the field of glory when he could have stayed at home to live out a long life of obscurity. He never had any illusions about the fate awaiting him there at Troy (*Il.* 21. 108–13):

19. In line 496, οὐ . . . ἀεικές = οὐκ αἰσχρόν = (almost) καλόν. Compare especially *Il.* 9. 70 ἔοικέ τοι, οὔ τοι ἀεικές and 19. 124 οὔ οἱ ἀεικὲς ἀνασσέμεν Ἀργείοισιν. (Curiously, none of these passages is cited in LSJ or the *DGE.*) Aesch. *PV* 1041–42 should also be compared: πάσχειν δὲ κακῶς / ἐχθρὸν ὑπ' ἐχθρῶν οὐδὲν ἀεικές, where ἀεικές responds to αἰσχρόν in 1039. The translations of the phrase in the *PV* found in LSJ ("it is nothing *strange* that . . .") and in the *DGE* ("no tiene nada de raro") are absurd, as the Homeric parallels show. The Herodotean passages in which οὐδὲν ἀεικές does mean "it is nothing strange that . . ." (cited in lexica together with Aesch. *PV* 1042) are another matter. At issue is a failure to distinguish two distinct meanings of the root, as seen, e.g., in ἔοικεν or εἰκώς: (1) "to seem likely or be probable"; and (2) "to be seemly, fitting." Ἀεικές in Herodotus may reflect the former meaning, ἀεικές in Homer and Aeschylus certainly reflects the latter. Xen. *An.* 6. 5. 17, where the two senses appear to converge, is instructive: τὸ μὲν ἀπιέναι ἀπὸ πολεμίων οὐδενὶ καλῷ ἔοικε, τὸ δὲ ἐφέπεσθαι καὶ τοῖς κακίοσι θάρρος ἐμποιεῖ. (The responsion with τοῖς κακίοσι strongly suggests that οὐδενὶ καλῷ is masculine, not neuter.)

οὐχ ὁράᾳς οἷος καὶ ἐγώ καλός τε μέγας τε;
πατρὸς δ' εἶμ' ἀγαθοῖο, θεὰ δέ με γείνατο μήτηρ·
ἀλλ' ἔπι τοι καὶ ἐμοὶ θάνατος καὶ μοῖρα κραταιή·
ἔσσεται ἢ ἠὼς ἢ δείλη ἢ μέσον ἦμαρ,
ὁππότε τις καὶ ἐμεῖο Ἄρηι ἐκ θυμὸν ἕληται,
ἢ ὅ γε δουρὶ βαλὼν ἢ ἀπὸ νευρῆφιν ὀϊστῷ.[20]

Hector, too, when finally he realizes that he cannot escape from Achilles, sums up the warrior's traditional code of heroic death (*Il.* 22. 303–5):

νῦν αὖτέ με μοῖρα κιχάνει.
μὴ μὰν ἀσπουδί γε καὶ ἀκλειῶς ἀπολοίμην,
ἀλλὰ μέγα ῥέξας τι καὶ ἐσσομένοισι πυθέσθαι.[21]

To these declarations one more passage must be added, from the justly celebrated speech of Sarpedon in Book 12 of the *Iliad* (322–28):

ὦ πέπον, εἰ μὲν γὰρ πόλεμον περὶ τόνδε φυγόντε
αἰεὶ δὴ μέλλομεν ἀγήρω τ' ἀθανάτω τε
ἔσσεσθ', οὔτε κεν αὐτὸς ἐνὶ πρώτοισι μαχοίμην
οὔτε κε σὲ στέλλοιμι μάχην ἐς κυδιάνειραν.
νῦν δ' ἔμπης γὰρ κῆρες ἐφεστᾶσιν θανάτοιο
μυρίαι, ἃς οὐκ ἔστι φυγεῖν βροτὸν οὐδ' ὑπαλύξαι,
ἴομεν, ἠέ τῳ εὖχος ὀρέξομεν, ἠέ τις ἡμῖν.[22]

These several utterances in combination set forth a coherent attitude toward heroic death that is unambiguous and basically not very different from that found in other heroic cultures: every man must die, and a brave death in battle is the way to everlasting glory.

Modern scholars take this attitude for granted in Homer, as a quotation or two will suffice to show. Griffin states that "this is what interests the poet very much, the sight of a hero *succeeding in facing his own death,*" and again, that "the hero is granted . . . the single privilege of *dying a hero's death,* not a random or undignified one."[23] Schein, in his recent study of the *Iliad,* remarks that "some glory can be won, too, by dying bravely, in an act that sums up and puts a seal on a life lived in accordance with . . . heroic 'excellence' (*arete*)."[24]

Such, then, is the theory of heroic death in Homer. What is the actual practice? To find the answer we must first make a fundamental distinction between the narrative parts of the Homeric poems, in which the

20. Cf. *Il.* 18. 115–21.

21. Cf. 22. 108–10. Arrian surely had *Il.* 22. 304–5 in mind when he described Alexander the Great in a battle scene as follows (*An.* 6. 9. 5): ἔγνω . . . ὅτι . . . καταπηδήσας . . . εἴσω τοῦ τείχους . . . εἰ . . . καὶ κινδυνεύειν δέοι, μεγάλα ἔργα καὶ τοῖς ἔπειτα πυθέσθαι ἄξια ἐργασάμενος οὐκ ἀσπουδεὶ ἀποθανεῖται κτλ. These last words are, *mutatis mutandis,* little more than a prose paraphrase of Homer.

22. "Heroes in very various traditions invoke this reason for their willingness to face death": Griffin, *Homer,* p. 92, n. 35, whom see for some non-Greek parallels.

23. *Homer,* pp. 95 and 94, respectively (emphasis mine in each instance). The secondary literature on Homer is enormous, and I cannot claim to have read all or even most of it. Of more recent studies, Griffin's book and S. Schein, *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's "Iliad"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1984), can be recommended as generally reliable; see these works for further references.

24. *Mortal Hero,* p. 68.

poet is speaking in his own person, and the speeches put into the mouths of the characters. It is most significant that every one of the noble and heroic sentiments quoted above is from a speech; we are not hearing the poet narrating events *in propria persona.*

One passage may serve to illustrate how the presence of the traditional notion of heroic death tends to be unconsciously taken for granted without qualification by Homer's modern readers. In Book 20 of the *Iliad* Achilles goes on a rampage of slaughter. One of his victims is a certain Deucalion; here is Lattimore's translation of the passage (479–81):

> There through the arm Achilleus transfixed him
> with the bronze spearhead, and he, arm hanging heavy, waited
> and looked his death in the face.

E. V. Rieu's rendering is similar, "Deucalion . . . looked Death in the face." The expression conjures up a picture of heroic defiance that neither suits the immediate context of irresistible butchery nor accurately reproduces the sense of the actual Greek words. Here, if anywhere in the *Iliad,* Achilles is represented as a berserker cutting down enemy after enemy in his savage fury; he kills with a staccato rhythm. The Trojans respond with terror and pleas for mercy; active resistance to this rage, bold defiance of it, these are out of the question.[25] So far from confronting death heroically and defiantly, Deucalion actually is depicted as placed in the desperate predicament of seeing that he is about to be killed, all helpless to do anything about it. Homer is showing us a pathetic death, not a defiant one. The Greek makes this clear: ὁ δέ μιν μένε χεῖρα βαρυνθείς, / πρόσθ' ὁρόων θάνατον. The phrase πρόσθ' ὁρόων θάνατον, which occurs only here, means simply "seeing his death before him." Griffin, following Marg, correctly observes that "in many killings the victim seems rather to wait passively for his death than to be killed fighting."[26] In short, Homer is telling us not that Deucalion is looking Death in the eye, but simply that he sees its approach—more's the pity for him. The phrase is a fine and delicate touch, but it heightens the pathos of the scene, not its heroic tone.[27]

25. See especially 493–94. Hector alone attempts to resist briefly and has to be rescued by Apollo (430–44).

26. *Homer,* p. 94 with n. 42. Μένε in 480 should not be taken emphatically as "stood fast," a sense that μένω frequently has. The verb is in itself neutral and "often expresses the inevitability of something unwelcome" (A. W. Bulloch on Callim. *Lav. Pall.* 68, with references); *Hymn. Hom. Cer.* 194 ἀκέουσα ἔμιμνε provides an explicit example.

27. It is no straw man that I raise. Griffin has recently interpreted πρόσθ' ὁρόων θάνατον along the same lines as Rieu and Lattimore and even transfers this unique phrase to heroes other than Deucalion. He writes: ". . . Lycaon, arms outstretched, *seeing death before him* [emph. mine]. Achilles, too, though the poem does not show his death, accepts and faces it; for this is what interests the poet very much, the sight of a hero succeeding in facing his own death" (*Homer,* pp. 94–95). Nothing in Homer's description of Lycaon's death corresponds to the words "seeing death before him" with such connotations of heroic action as Griffin evidently has in mind. In the footnote ad loc. (n. 43) Griffin cites *Il.* 20. 481, where the phrase was actually used of Deucalion; clearly he has transferred the expression from Deucalion to Lycaon, because he regards them both as examples of heroes "succeeding in facing their own deaths." In fact there is little indication that Deucalion died a heroic death, and the long and brilliant account of

In the narrative of the *Iliad* the deaths of three great heroes, Patroclus, Sarpedon, and Hector, are recounted in some detail; all three are regularly described as heroic deaths and, in differing degrees, they certainly are. The case of Sarpedon is clearest (16. 462–505). He goes down raging—κτεινόμενος μενέαινε—at the hands of Patroclus, like a great-spirited bull under the jaws of a lion, as Homer puts it. That is heroic death in any tradition.

Patroclus is not given a chance to die heroically in the full sense (16. 786–857). First Apollo strikes him senseless with his hand—from behind. His eyes spun, says the poet. The god then knocks off Patroclus' helmet and disarms him completely; he stands stupefied, στὴ δὲ ταφών. Next, Euphorbus takes advantage of this divine intervention and hits Patroclus in the back with a spear—again from behind. Patroclus tries to shrink back into the throng of his fellow warriors and avoid death (Homer is explicit on this), but Hector sees his opportunity, rushes up to him as he retreats, and drives his spear deep into his flanks. That is the fatal blow. How a warrior who is killed while he is running away in an attempt to save his own life can be said to have died defiantly and heroically—looking death in the face, as it were—is not readily apparent.

Finally, consider the death of Hector, the noblest Trojan of them all, in Book 22. To avoid any appearance of distortion, intentional or other, I quote the bare summary of that book by H. J. Rose:[28]

> Apollo, having drawn Achilles sufficiently far away, reveals himself; Achilles returns towards Troy, to find only Hektor outside the walls, ashamed to enter after the failure of his plans, despite the appeals of his parents. But as Achilles approaches, his courage fails him and he runs three times around the walls, hotly pursued but not overtaken, Apollo helping him for the last time and giving him speed equal to that of his enemy Achilles. . . . At last Athena intervenes; taking the form of Hektor's brother Deiphobos, she bids him stand and promises help. Both heroes cast their spears without effect, but Athena gives Achilles' spear back to him. Hektor realizes that he is alone and that the seeming Deiphobos was a trick of Athena. Making a desperate charge upon Achilles, he is mortally wounded, and his dying prayer to have his body returned for burial is contemptuously rejected. Achilles fastens the corpse to the rim of his chariot and drives back to the camp, dragging it behind him, in full view of those on the walls, including Andromache, who had not yet heard that Hektor was outside.

Unflinching defiance to the last breath—that, if anything, is the mark of the quintessential heroic death. It applies to Sarpedon, but hardly to Patroclus, who is actually fleeing when he is killed, and only partially to Hector, who wavers between bold defiance and frustrate dejection, not

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Lycaon's demise (*Il.* 21. 34–135) is the very pattern of an unheroic and inglorious death: Lycaon is terrified and begs abjectly for his life; his desperation is such that he concludes his appeal by telling Achilles not to kill him, since he and Hector are only half brothers, inasmuch as they had different mothers—in effect renouncing his glorious brother to save his own life. That we pity Lycaon rather than despise him is entirely due to the universality of Homer's outlook.

28. *A Handbook of Greek Literature*[4] (London, 1956), p. 22.

to mention panic fear.[29] The contrast with a death such as that of Cúchulainn, as described above, is obvious, and that is by no means a unique example. Here is another from the *Táin,* that of the hero Fraech, in Kinsella's version:

> "Fraech, we need your help to clear this nuisance away. Go and find Cúchulainn and challenge him."
>
> Early in the morning he went out with nine others, and they came to Ath Fuait. They saw the boy there, washing in the river.
>
> "Wait here," Fraech said to his followers. "I'll attack him there in the water; he isn't good in water."
>
> He stripped off his clothes and went up to him in the water.
>
> "If you came any nearer," Cúchulainn said, "I would have to kill you, and that would be a pity."
>
> "All the same, I'm coming to meet you in the water," Fraech said. "You'll have to fight."
>
> "Choose your style of combat then," Cúchulainn said.
>
> "Each to keep one arm round the other," Fraech said.
>
> They grappled a long time in the water until Fraech went under. Cúchulainn pulled him up again.
>
> "Now," Cúchulainn said, "will you let me spare you?"
>
> "I wouldn't have that said," Fraech said.
>
> Cúchulainn thrust him down once more and Fraech perished.[30]

It thus appears, remarkably, that heroic death, in the strictest sense of the term, is not particularly prominent in the *Iliad.* Moreover, of the three most likely candidates, Sarpedon, Patroclus, and Hector, only one is a Greek; Sarpedon is a Lycian and Hector a Trojan. That too is significant. From the larger point of view it is one of many indications of the universality of Homer's humanity. Regarded more narrowly, it tells us that the poet did not feel that the comparative absence of such heroic deaths from the Greek side detracted from the story, as he conceived it—and he conceived it for a Greek audience.

Other considerations reinforce this impression. First, over against the great death scenes of Sarpedon, Patroclus, and Hector may be set the numerous other deaths in the *Iliad.* These combats, as a number of scholars have clearly shown,[31] are highly stylized; the typical duel is over quickly, and usually a single blow is decisive. In other words, there is

29. Contrast, e.g., *Il.* 22. 250–53 with 22. 291–93; for Hector's panic fear, see *Il.* 22. 136–44. All three heroes deliver dying speeches, clearly a traditional device. Defiance is hardly the most prominent theme of any of them, and Hector's is actually a plea for his body, beginning with the word λίσσομαι. (Admittedly, such pleas are a stock motif.) For a representative discussion of the heroic code in Homer, as it is usually understood, see C. A. Rubino, "'A Thousand Shapes of Death': Heroic Immortality in the *Iliad,*" in *Arktouros: Hellenic Studies Presented to Bernard M. W. Knox on the Occasion of His 65th Birthday,* ed. G. W. Bowersock, W. Burkert, and M. C. J. Putnam (Berlin and New York, 1979), pp. 12–18.

30. *Tain,* pp. 93–94. Famous also is *The Death of Cu Roi;* see, e.g., Tymoczko, *Two Death Tales,* pp. 23–35.

31. See Griffin, *Homer,* p. 94, and Schein, *Mortal Hero,* p. 76, with notes for further references. G. Kirk, *The Songs of Homer* (Cambridge, 1962), pp. 372–75, has a very useful summary of the main Homeric battle conventions.

often little room for "heroics"; as Griffin says, "the Homeric poems are interested in death far more than they are in fighting."[32] Moreover, despite the modern tendency to write of Homeric warriors "dying a hero's death" and "resolving to die fighting" (see above), the reality is that very often they show fear, panic, and a most definite desire to go on living. In particular, it is not unusual for an imperiled hero to beg for his life; examples of this are Adrestus, Peisander and Hippolochus, Dolon, Tros, and, the most famous instance, Lycaon.[33] Above all, Homer shows in his death scenes his profound sympathy for the human condition and man's inexorable fate. His power of evoking pathos without sentimentality in numerous vignettes of death is justly counted among the great glories of the poems. In this respect, Homer has risen above the stereotypes of his inherited heroic material.

Hector, in debate with himself, declares it better to confront Achilles, either to kill him or to be killed himself gloriously for his city (ἐυκλειῶς πρὸ πόλεως). When his doom is upon him he wishes (22. 304–5) not to perish ingloriously (ἀκλειῶς), but after "having done something great even for future generations to learn."[34] We note that here too the words occur in direct speech, not narrative. What is the immediate sequel? He rushes at Achilles "like a high-flying eagle"; Achilles, in a rage, comes at him and, with the usual single blow, kills him. There is no drawn-out duel, no "great thing" done by Hector. Of course, to stand up to Achilles, knowing what that bodes, is the act of a hero; but there is one vivid picture above all that every reader takes away from Book 22—and that is Hector fleeing around the walls of Troy with Achilles in pursuit (199–201), as in a dream in which pursuer and pursued, both frustrated, can neither overtake nor be overtaken.[35]

The notion of perishing with glory, to which Hector gives expression, is typically heroic. I wonder if it is typically Homeric, at least in the execution. For it is not consistent with another outlook that is most decidedly Homeric, the notion that in a duel the victor—and only the victor—by the very act of winning gains glory for himself. This attitude is set forth in clear polar opposition on a number of occasions in the *Iliad:*

> 12. 328:
> ἴομεν, ἠέ τῳ εὖχος ὀρέξομεν, ἠέ τις ἡμῖν.
>
> 22. 130 (cf. 13. 327):
> εἴδομεν ὁπποτέρῳ κεν Ὀλύμπιος εὖχος ὀρέξῃ.

32. *Homer,* p. 94.

33. *Il.* 6. 46–50 (Adrestus); 10. 378–81 (Dolon); 11. 131–35 (Peisander and Hippolochus); 20. 463–69 (Tros); 21. 74–96 (Lycaon). For Lycaon compare above, n. 27.

34. For the language compare Odysseus' prayer in *Il.* 10. 281–82: δὸς δὲ πάλιν ἐπὶ νῆας ἐϋκλεῖας ἀφικέσθαι, / ῥέξαντας μέγα ἔργον, ὅ κε Τρώεσσι μελήσῃ.

35. On the other hand, when M. Mueller, ed., *The "Iliad"* (London, 1984), p. 80, writes of Hector's "extraordinary loss of courage at the approach of Achilles," this is surely too severe a judgment. For a striking example of truly unheroic conduct, see Menelaus' rationalizations for abandoning the corpse of Patroclus and fleeing before Hector to save his own life (*Il.* 17. 89–108).

22. 56–58 (Priam to Hector):
ἀλλ' εἰσέρχεο τεῖχος, ἐμὸν τέκος, ὄφρα σαώσῃς
Τρῶας καὶ Τρῳάς, μηδὲ μέγα κῦδος ὀρέξῃς
Πηλεΐδῃ, αὐτὸς δὲ φίλης αἰῶνος ἀμερθῇς.

15. 490–92:
ῥεῖα δ' ἀρίγνωτος Διὸς ἀνδράσι γίγνεται ἀλκή,
ἠμὲν ὀτέοισιν κῦδος ὑπέρτερον ἐγγυαλίξῃ,
ἠδ' ὅτινας μινύθῃ τε καὶ οὐκ ἐθέλησιν ἀμύνειν.

These passages point in a definite direction. The high road to undying glory, κλέος ἄφθιτον, was to be found primarily in being the best and in being preeminent above others, αἰὲν ἀριστεύειν καὶ ὑπείροχον ἔμμεναι ἄλλων (*Il.* 6. 208 = 11. 784). A Homeric warrior's chief fame came from his victories, not from his death. A single hexameter put in the mouth of Achilles neatly brings this out (*Il.* 18. 121): κείσομ' ἐπεί κε θάνω· νῦν δὲ κλέος ἐσθλὸν ἀροίμην. It is true that Greek notions of fate and divine intervention dictated that the hero must accept his death at the destined moment, but the emphasis is on noble resignation rather than defiant resistance. The reasons for the distinctively Greek outlook are complex, but one obvious factor was their conception of the underworld, which was entirely negative. The Homeric hero had no Moslem paradise to look forward to, no Valhalla where every morning before breakfast the warriors go out in full armor to fight and lay one another low merely for the play of it, an activity immediately followed by strong drink and good cheer. Thus it is that the greatest of the Achaean heroes could make his famous statement in Hades (*Od.* 11. 488–91):

μὴ δή μοι θάνατόν γε παραύδα, φαίδιμ' Ὀδυσσεῦ.
βουλοίμην κ' ἐπάρουρος ἐὼν θητεύεμεν ἄλλῳ,
ἀνδρὶ παρ' ἀκλήρῳ, ᾧ μὴ βίοτος πολὺς εἴη,
ἢ πᾶσιν νεκύεσσι καταφθιμένοισιν ἀνάσσειν.

It is difficult to see how any poet who had heroic death in its ordinary sense prominently before him could have put those words in the mouth of Achilles. It is an interesting fact that down through the centuries, whenever men have looked to ancient Greece for a model of heroic death, it has been the Spartans of Thermopylae and the Athenians of Marathon, not Hector and Achilles, who have inspired them. The contrast with Cúchulainn in this respect is pronounced.[36] This is, of course, in no sense a reflection of any defect in the Homeric poems. They differ from typical, not to say routine, heroic poems to the extent that, and precisely because, Homer's ineffable understanding of the human condition surpasses that of other epic bards. The deaths of Sarpedon,

36. Let one illustration suffice. In the debates over the Anglo-Irish Treaty of 1921, Mr. Thomas Moles made reference to the famous siege of Londonderry of 1689: "The apprentice boys who made a stand in Derry created an Irish Thermopylae as noble and historic as the old" (House of Commons Debates, 5th series, vol. 149, col. 340, 16 December 1921, cited in A. C. Hepburn, *The Conflict of Nationality in Modern Ireland* [New York, 1980], p. 127). In the same city there is a cemetery with a memorial to local Irish Volunteers "Erected by the Officers and Volunteers, Derry Brigade, *Óglaigh na hÉireann.*" Upon the memorial there stands a statue of the dying Cúchulainn.

Patroclus, and Hector are sublime achievements and quite untypical: in a word, Homeric.

If one surveys the other great heroes of the Homeric poems, it soon becomes apparent that heroic deaths are conspicuous chiefly by their absence. Agamemnon, the Greek king of kings, returns home from Troy a cuckold to be murdered by his wife and her lover, "like an ox feeding at the manger."[37] His brother Menelaus comes back to contented domesticity with once-wayward Helen; they lead a peaceful and comfortable life in retirement. His fighting days are over and, most notably, it is his destiny not to die at all, but to go to the Elysian plain, where the living is easy (*Od.* 4. 561–69). For him there is no death, heroic or other. Odysseus, after years of wandering, regains his wife and his estates in Ithaca; there Homer leaves him, very much alive and secure in the knowledge of Tiresias' infallible prophecy (*Od.* 11. 134–37 = 23. 281–84) that he shall die a gentle death in sleek old age.[38] Diomedes, son of Tydeus, is one of the most valorous heroes in the Homeric poems; no mention of his death occurs there. Ajax the Lesser, through his own folly and impiety, provoked Poseidon to kill him at sea; it was not the heroic death of a battling warrior that he met, as the poet's stark and simple words attest (*Od.* 4. 511): ὣς ὁ μὲν ἔνθ' ἀπόλωλεν, ἐπεὶ πίεν ἅλμυρὸν ὕδωρ. Ajax the Greater, according to the *Little Iliad,* after he lost the contest for Achilles' arms to Odysseus, went mad, attacked the Greek booty, and then killed himself.[39] Homer clearly knew some such story, for he tells in the *Odyssey* how Ajax, "the best of the Achaeans after Achilles," still angry at Odysseus for winning Achilles' arms, avoided him in the underworld. The armor is explicitly mentioned as the cause of his death (*Od.* 11. 549). Once again we encounter a great Homeric hero who does not die in battle. It is no answer to say that Homer had inherited these tales, for it has long been recognized that he freely adapts, and omits, traditional material. What he chooses to mention is therefore significant, and what he chooses to mention is a number of unheroic deaths.

The *Iliad* is Achilles' poem; it is appropriate to conclude with a few observations on him. Scholars have correctly understood that his death is prefigured from the very beginning and is constantly in the background throughout the poem.[40] We have seen it predicted already in the first book, and reference to it is made on a number of occasions[41]—always in the mouth of one of the characters, Achilles or another, never

37. See *Od.* 1. 29–36, 4. 518–37, 24. 95–97. Agamemnon explicitly contrasts his own inglorious death with that of Achilles, who died in battle, *Od.* 24. 36–46, 93–97.

38. Accounts of his later adventures are diverse but do not concern us; according to the *Telegony* he was killed by his own son κατ' ἄγνοιαν. Similarly we are told that Zeus has given to Nestor to grow old with ease in his own palace (*Od.* 4. 210).

39. See T. W. Allen, ed., *Homeri opera,* vol. 5 (Oxford, 1912), p. 106: Αἴας δ' ἐμμανὴς γενόμενος τήν τε λείαν τῶν Ἀχαιῶν λυμαίνεται καὶ ἑαυτὸν ἀναιρεῖ.

40. On this, see especially K. Reinhardt, *Die "Ilias" und ihr Dichter* (Göttingen, 1961), and W. Schadewaldt, *Iliasstudien*[3] (Darmstadt, 1966).

41. See above at n. 4.

in a narrative section. In the last book Homer has Achilles tell old Priam the awful lot of his own father, Peleus (540): ἕνα παῖδα τέκεν παναώριον. The single word παναώριος (only here down through the classical period) seals Achilles' fate once and for all. Ἄωρος is the normal adjective for one who dies an untimely death; it appears often on epitaphs. To appreciate fully the force of παῖδα παναώριον here, one need but recall the words that Andromache, in her despair, used to describe Astyanax after Hector's death (*Il.* 22. 490): ἦμαρ δ' ὀρφανικὸν παναφήλικα παῖδα τίθησι. These two phrases, παναφῆλιξ παῖς and παναώριος παῖς, parallel formations, are not traditional epic formulae; they are the exquisite creations of a supreme poet who knew precisely what he was about.

Homer thus composed a poem in which the protagonist and chief hero, Achilles, is doomed from the start, but whose death-struggle is not narrated. Nor is it in the *Odyssey,* where only the following is recorded (24. 37): θάνες ἐν Τροίῃ ἑκὰς Ἄργεος. No details are given. The familiar story of Achilles' vulnerable heel, which caused his death, survives in late sources. We do not know if Homer knew it; if he did, he suppressed it.[42] Even though there is never any doubt that Achilles shall die in battle and that his deeds of valor shall bring him everlasting glory, nowhere in Homer is there a description of a heroic death for the greatest of the Greek heroes. Homer never gives us a "Custer's Last Stand" for the best of the Achaeans.[43] In the Homeric poems the κλέα ἀνδρῶν that are to be sung forever refer first and foremost to the successful fights, the great dueling victories, of the heroes. When death does approach, generally it is its tragic inevitability that is Homer's first concern rather than any elaborate description of the actual dying of a warrior in accordance with the usual heroic model. Of such details he is sparing. I made a distinction above between the narrative sections of the poems, in which the poet speaks in his own person, and the speeches of direct discourse uttered by the heroes themselves. It would be well to recall that distinction at this point. Much has been written about the central importance of honor (τιμή) and fame (κλέος) in the Homeric poems, and this is just. Certainly for the great heroes undying fame is their chief joy and ultimate justification. But Homer is not his heroes; and if we confuse the two we can never attain even such an understanding as may be possible, ever imperfect, of these sublime poems. In the present instance the distinction can be succinctly stated. Homer's warriors, in common with the warriors, and poets, of other epic traditions, are preoccupied with

42. For references, see Schein, *Mortal Hero,* p. 121, n. 3, and D. C. Young, "The Diachronic Study of Myth and Achilles' Heel," *Journal of the California Classical Association, Northern Section* 4 (1979): 3–34.

43. The killing of Achilles is alluded to in several passages of the *Iliad,* but details elude us; cf. 19. 416–17, 21. 277–78, and 22. 359–60. At 21. 279–80 Achilles, thinking that the Scamander is about to overwhelm him, wishes that Hector had killed him: ὥς μ' ὄφελ' Ἕκτωρ κτεῖναι, ὃς ἐνθάδε γ' ἔτραφ' ἄριστος· / τῶ κ' ἀγαθὸς μὲν ἔπεφν', ἀγαθὸν δέ κεν ἐξενάριξε. Homer's original audience presumably knew how Achilles would die; and in the light of that, these words may have a deeper meaning that goes beyond the immediate context.

heroic death. Homer, by contrast, broadens his vision so as to embrace the universal experience of human death.

To die the glorious death of a hero is a great thing, and given to the few. The memory of such a one has always found a secure place in the hearts of this world's creatures, commoners and kings alike. In the case of the Homeric poems, the greatest heroic epics ever composed, it is not otherwise. Achilles and Hector, Ajax and Agamemnon—their speech everywhere fills the air with the heroic ideal of honor and glory. And let there be no mistake about it: if Homer himself had not shared this outlook, there would never have been an *Iliad* and *Odyssey* as we now have them. But the poet, unlike his heroes, will not be limited to the particular ideals of any one culture, howsoever noble; he rises above all such. Heroic death is great and noble to be sure, but it is not coextensive with the human condition, and that is Homer's real and proper subject. When he suppresses the details one has come to expect in a description of heroic death, preferring rather to introduce delicate touches of profound pathos, he reveals, here perhaps more than anywhere, his extraordinary sympathy with our common humanity. In the presence of such universality, silence is best; if one must pass a judgment on it, let it be in the words of Homer's only fellow, Shakespeare: "It is an attribute to God himself, / And earthly power doth then show likest God's."

I do not know whether anyone has ever observed what the opening verses of the *Iliad* should mean as straightforward Greek:[44]

> μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος
> οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρί' Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκε,
> πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν
> ἡρώων. . . .

Were we unfamiliar with the tale and these verses turned up on a papyrus, there would be only one natural interpretation of them: a mighty hero, Achilles, son of Peleus, became angry for some reason at a clan or tribe called the Achaioi and killed in battle many of these Achaioi, foreign enemies of his. That is the natural meaning of the Greek at first glance and, for all I know, Homer modeled these verses on an older passage that said just that, of actual enemies with other names. In fact, of course, the Greek here means something very different. It means that a mighty hero, Achilles, caused the death of many Achaioi, who were his friends and countrymen and at whom he was temporarily angry, but he caused their deaths only indirectly, by refusing to fight along with them against their common enemy, the Trojans, who did the actual killing. In short, Homer begins his poem by announcing what great carnage Achilles wrought, not by any heroic acts of valor, but by their contrary, inactivity. At the very outset Homer suggests where his priorities lie—or rather, where they do not lie.

44. The proem of the *Iliad* has been much studied; I have not read all the literature. See, e.g., J. Redfield, "The Proem of the *Iliad*: Homer's Art," *CP* 74 (1979): 95–110, where further references to the secondary literature can be found.

In *Macbeth* Shakespeare has Malcolm report the death of the Thane of Cawdor in these words (1. 4. 7–11):

> Nothing in his life
> Became him like the leaving it; he died
> As one that had been studied in his death
> To throw away the dearest thing he ow'd,
> As 'twere a careless trifle.

Such language well suits the typical ideal of traditional bravery. It is very heroic, but only moderately Homeric.[45]

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45. A version of this paper was given under the cordial auspices of the Department of Classics at the Johns Hopkins University on 21 March 1986. I should like to thank two anonymous referees for several references and the Editor for his firmness.