THE WORD OF ACHILLES

RUTH SCODEL

THE MIND of Achilles has been the subject of extensive discussion. Yet perhaps the most slighted lines in the *Iliad* are 16. 60–63:

> ἀλλὰ τὰ μὲν προτετύχθαι ἐάσομεν· οὐδ' ἄρα πως ἦν
> ἀσπερχὲς κεχολῶσθαι ἐνὶ φρεσίν· ἦτοι ἔφην γε
> οὐ πρὶν μηνιθμὸν καταπαυσέμεν, ἀλλ' ὁπότ' ἂν δὴ
> νῆας ἐμὰς ἀφίκηται ἀϋτή τε πτόλεμός τε.

Patroclus has repeated, with his own expressions of outrage, Nestor's message (11. 794–803), which suggested that if Achilles is refusing to fight because of an oracular warning from his mother, he could send Patroclus into battle with his armor.[1] Achilles, on hearing Patroclus' speech, has first denied receiving any such warning (16. 50–51) and then expounded on his feelings as he did in his speech to Ajax in Book 9 (646–48). The oracle is a false reason, and it is therefore quickly dropped; his ἄχος, the true reason, is explained. But a moment later it too is dismissed. Despite his pain, Achilles is willing to let it be, for he has realized the impossibility of being angry forever. This is a moment of recognition: ἄρα with the imperfect shows the surprised recognition of what has always been true.[2] Unless, therefore, it can be shown that Achilles is profoundly confused about his own motives, he is no longer controlled by an overpowering anger, as he told Ajax he was in Book 9.[3] But immediately a new objection appears: Achilles has *said* to the embassy that he would not fight until the fire had reached his ships.[4]

1. It is often assumed that Nestor refers to the prophecy Achilles mentions at 9. 410–13; see, e.g., H. Lloyd-Jones, *The Justice of Zeus*[2] (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1983), p. 19. But this has hardly stopped Achilles from fighting in the past, and if Nestor's suggestion that Patroclus fight in Achilles' place is serious, as Patroclus takes it to be, Nestor must have some more precise warning in mind. The imagined prophecy introduces an elegant irony, since Thetis had predicted the death, not of Achilles, but of Patroclus (18. 9–14).

2. J. D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles* (Oxford, 1934), pp. 36–37.

3. W. Schadewaldt, *Iliasstudien*[3] (Darmstadt, 1966), p. 129, mistranslates lines 60–61, obscuring the moment of revelation (criticized by P. von der Mühll, *Kritisches Hypomnema zur "Ilias"* [Basel, 1952], p. 241), and conflating this passage with Achilles' reply to Ajax in Book 9; for similar conflation, cf. J. Griffin, *Homer on Life and Death* (Oxford, 1980), p. 74. W. Sale, "Achilles and Heroic Values," *Arion* 2 (1963): 89–90, finds in Achilles' words "only a kind of prideful desire to be consistent with himself"; but since Sale sees this passage as earlier in composition than the embassy, it is not clear how consistency or inconsistency could be gauged.

4. Analysts who claim that Book 9 postdates Book 16 follow scl ' A ad 9. 61d in interpreting ἔφην as "thought" (διενοήθην) and take this line as the origin of Achilles :: see W. Leaf, *The "Iliad,"* vol. 2 (London, 1902; repr. Amsterdam, 1971), p. 161 ad loc.; the translation ("je pensais") of P. Mazon,

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This provides a new way of motivating Patroclus' entry. Achilles cannot fight because he cannot violate his word, and he immediately urges Patroclus to assume his armor and lead the Myrmidons (64–69).

Achilles' allegiance to his word has not for the most part been taken seriously.[5] Analysts use the speech (and such other elements in the scene as Patroclus' failure to report the condition of Machaon) as evidence for the disunity of the poem.[6] Unitarians who do not ignore the reasons Achilles gives for his actions either treat them as an expression of his continuing anger and pride, rather than as clear statements of his actual motives, or describe them in terms (of irrationality, or of metaphysical choices) that dismiss their basic practicality.[7] If Achilles means what he says, the entire plot of the poem displays an ironic twist that the critical literature has ignored: Achilles accepts Nestor's plan because he believes that he cannot enter battle without retracting his official statement that he would fight when fire reached his ships, and only then (9. 649–53):

> ἀλλ' ὑμεῖς ἔρχεσθε καὶ ἀγγελίην ἀπόφασθε·
> οὐ γὰρ πρὶν πολέμοιο μεδήσομαι αἱματόεντος,
> πρίν γ' υἱὸν Πριάμοιο δαΐφρονος, Ἕκτορα δῖον,
> Μυρμιδόνων ἐπί τε κλισίας καὶ νῆας ἱκέσθαι
> κτείνοντ' Ἀργείους, κατά τε σμῦξαι πυρὶ νῆας.

Yet this statement, on which he places so much weight, was not reported by the embassy; there is a fatal gap between Achilles' view of where he stands and the Achaeans' view of his position.

Achilles continues to detest Agamemnon (77 ἐχθρῆς ἐκ κεφαλῆς) and clearly still feels resentment, but he is no longer inordinately resentful, and his anger is not governing his actions. On the other hand, he does not think himself in any way in the wrong for having allowed his anger to rule as long as it did. Once we recognize his position, his instructions to Patroclus later in the speech, which have raised analytic objections, become perfectly sensible. Scholars have claimed that Achilles ignores the embassy of Book 9, and the speech has often been used as evidence

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Homère: "Iliade," vol. 3 (Paris, 1949), p. 101; and von der Mühll, *Kritisches Hypomnema,* p. 241. But this leaves an intolerable weakness in the argument: could Achilles dismiss his anger but explain that he himself will not fight because he did not "think" he would? O. Tsagarakis, "The Achaean Embassy and the Wrath of Achilles," *Hermes* 99 (1971): 269–70, defends ἔφην as a reference to the embassy, but in discussing Achilles' motives for not fighting mentions only his desire for compensation (pp. 265–66).

5. For an exception, though the issue is mentioned only in passing, see J. Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the "Iliad": The Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago, 1975), p. 106; an earlier exception is G. W. Nitzsch, *Die Sagenpoesie der Griechen* (Braunschweig, 1852), p. 262.

6. See G. Jachmann, *Die homerische Schiffskatalog und die "Ilias"* (Cologne, 1958), pp. 56–69.

7. For the former approach, see, e.g., C. M. Bowra, *Tradition and Design in the "Iliad"* (Oxford, 1930), p. 198, and A. Lesky, "Zur Eingangsszene der Patroklie," *Serta Philologica Aenipontana,* Innsbrucker Beitr. zur Kulturwiss. 7–8 (Innsbruck, 1962), p. 23 (= *Gesammelte Schriften* [Bern, 1966], p. 77); for these critics Achilles yields only to sympathy for Patroclus, not to any pity for the others. For the latter approach, see, e.g., E. T. Owen, *The Story of the "Iliad"* (Ann Arbor, 1946; repr. 1966), pp. 147–54; and A. Parry, "The Language of Achilles," *TAPA* 87 (1956): 6–7 (= *The Language and Background of Homer,* ed. G. S. Kirk [Cambridge, 1964], pp. 53–54), influenced by C. H. Whitman; cf. *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, Mass., 1958), pp. 196–99.

that Book 9 was composed later than Book 16.[8] In describing the boldness of the Trojans he comments (71–73):

τάχα κεν φεύγοντες ἐναύλους
πλήσειαν νεκύων, εἴ μοι κρείων Ἀγαμέμνων
ἤπια εἰδείη.

These words show not that Achilles does not remember the embassy, but that it did not offer him real satisfaction, probably because Agamemnon never admitted being wrong. As often noted, Odysseus suppresses the last two lines of Agamemnon's message to Achilles—the demand that Achilles acknowledge that Agamemnon is βασιλεύτερος (9. 160–61)—but Achilles responds as if he had heard them and knew that Agamemnon was less conciliatory than Odysseus has made him sound.[9] It has often been pointed out, too, that Achilles' ἤπια εἰδείη is general: if Agamemnon were a different kind of person in his relations with Achilles, all would be well.[10] Indeed, Achilles is probably frustrated that Agamemnon has not already sent a new embassy, for he clearly expects one.

When Achilles promised not to fight until fire reached his own ships, he implied that he did not care for gifts, following the model of Meleager, who did not receive gifts after saving the city at the last moment (9. 598–605). With the moderation in his anger has come a renewed desire to receive the gifts that will restore his honor in the conventional way.[11] He advises Patroclus with the gifts in mind (85–86): ἀτὰρ οἱ περικαλλέα κούρην / ἂψ ἀπονάσσωσιν, ποτὶ δ' ἀγλαὰ δῶρα πόρωσιν. If Patroclus is too successful, he will give the Achaeans no motive to supplicate Achilles again, and he will lose honor in the army (89–90): μὴ σύ γ' ἄνευθεν ἐμεῖο λιλαίεσθαι πολεμίζειν / Τρωσὶ φιλοπτολέμοισιν· ἀτιμότερον δέ με θήσεις. He has already imagined the Achaeans' supplication (11. 609–10), apparently with a note of triumph in the thought.[12] Here too he seems to assume that another embassy will come. He is determined to keep to his word and not to fight until the last possible moment unless he is asked to change his mind; for if he once entered battle, he would then have nothing with which to bargain for the gifts that will restore his honor.

We do not know enough about the social norms concerning heroic anger and withdrawal from battle to know what would occur if Achilles did decide to fight in response to Patroclus' plea, but Agamemnon would probably not be obliged to provide the gifts, and once the ships

8. See Leaf, *The "Iliad,"* 2:153; D. L. Page, *History and the Homeric "Iliad"* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1959), pp. 307–10, objects to lines 52–61, 71–73, and 83–87.

9. Cf. Whitman, *Homer,* p. 192.

10. So Schadewaldt, *Iliasstudien*[3], p. 129.

11. Analysts, of course, find a further argument for disunity; cf. U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff, *Die "Ilias" und Homer* (Berlin, 1916), p. 120.

12. An explanation of these lines, which form a cornerstone of analytic criticism (see Page, *History,* pp. 305–6), can be found as early as Nitzsch, *Sagenpoesie,* pp. 238–39. The embassy, though close enough to a supplication to justify Phoenix' allegory of the Λιταί, did not formally supplicate Achilles.

were out of danger he would have little incentive to do so. Achilles has been offered them in return for giving up his anger and returning to battle, and he has refused; nothing has been said about keeping the offer open.[13] The example of Meleager shows that such an offer did not remain open indefinitely. That the gifts are actually presented without a renewed offer after Patroclus' death is no guide to what Achilles could expect if he entered battle in Book 16. Although in Book 19 Achilles will obviously fight again whether he receives the gifts or not, he has not in fact yet entered battle, and the situation would be desperate without him. Agamemnon behaves with an exaggerated correctness, apparently attempting to retrieve his prestige and keep Achilles—who is no more a normally functioning member of the society of Achaean kings than he was during his anger—under some kind of social control. He insists on presenting Achilles with the gifts—although Achilles does not want to bother with them but is eager to fight immediately—for the presentation adapts the abnormal situation to a normal one.

Achilles could perhaps enter battle himself and do only what he enjoins Patroclus to do, saving the ships while still leaving the Trojans at an advantage. This, however, might cancel the bargain Thetis made with Zeus. But the reason Achilles gives—his declaration to the embassy—implies that self-esteem demands he not break his solemn word, reported to the council, without the Achaeans' having again asked him to change his mind. Patroclus' plea is a private entreaty, and by abandoning the stand he has publicly taken Achilles would show that his word is meaningless; no threat he made would ever be taken seriously again. To change so explicit a promise would be an intolerable display of weakness. Therefore the Achaeans must be saved from destruction, but not by Achilles. If Patroclus and the Myrmidons save the situation for the day, without doing so well that Achaean self-confidence is restored, their achievement will advertise what Achilles might be worth and hint that he would be more receptive to a new offer. Achilles is committed to a straightforward relation between thought and word, word and action. Although he changes his mind continually, he cannot allow himself to act inconsistently, particularly in so public a matter, without a reason, without being persuaded. His sincerity requires that he keep his word unless the pleas of the Achaeans induce him to a new formulation; those of his own follower Patroclus cannot suffice (especially since he does not even know that Patroclus' words are Nestor's). The sending of Patroclus permits Achilles to save the army while remaining officially aloof; it is a quibble that enables him to keep his word.

The advice he gives Patroclus is politically motivated and politically sound, and it is perhaps frustration at having to think politically that prompts Achilles' famous impossible wish at the close of the speech (97–100):

13. See Tsagarakis, "The Achaean Embassy," pp. 266–67.

αἴ γάρ, Ζεῦ τε πάτερ καὶ Ἀθηναίη καὶ Ἄπολλον,
μήτε τις οὖν Τρώων θάνατον φύγοι, ὅσσοι ἔασι,
μήτε τις Ἀργείων, νῶϊν δ' ἐκδῦμεν ὄλεθρον,
ὄφρ' οἷοι Τροίης ἱερὰ κρήδεμνα λύωμεν.

Achilles' eagerness for Patroclus to rescue the Achaeans shows that he does not seriously wish their destruction. Some are actually dear to him. But he values Patroclus over anyone else and is therefore deeply frustrated that the situation lays constraints on Patroclus. The lines are in part an apology to Patroclus for asking him to respect both Achilles' social needs and his own limits. Imagining a world with no other people, and hence no need to worry about their response to his actions, is the only way he can imagine freedom for Patroclus and himself.

The irony behind Achilles' speech is this: the situation, which is perfectly clear to him, depends on an understanding of the embassy's outcome which is not shared by the Achaeans. Achilles assumes that all the Achaeans know his final and official response—that he would fight only when fire reached his own ships—and so understand that even a change of heart on his side would not lead immediately to his reentering battle. He perhaps also assumes that they know that this final response represented a change from his initial reaction (9. 356–61, where he said he would sail home), clearly leaving him open to persuasion. But this response, which Achilles takes so seriously, has been completely ignored by everyone else. It is a notorious analytic problem that Odysseus does not report Achilles' replies to Phoenix and Ajax at the close of the embassy but summarizes Achilles' reply to his own speech (9. 677–92):

Ἀτρεΐδη κύδιστε, ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγάμεμνον,
κεῖνός γ' οὐκ ἐθέλει σβέσσαι χόλον, ἀλλ' ἔτι μᾶλλον
πιμπλάνεται μένεος, σὲ δ' ἀναίνεται ἠδὲ σὰ δῶρα.
αὐτόν σε φράζεσθαι ἐν Ἀργείοισιν ἄνωγεν
ὅππως κεν νῆάς τε σαῷς καὶ λαὸν Ἀχαιῶν·
αὐτὸς δ' ἠπείλησεν ἅμ' ἠοῖ φαινομένηφι
νῆας ἐϋσσέλμους ἅλαδ' ἑλκέμεν ἀμφιελίσσας.
καὶ δ' ἂν τοῖς ἄλλοισιν ἔφη παραμυθήσασθαι
οἴκαδ' ἀποπλείειν, ἐπεὶ οὐκέτι δήετε τέκμωρ
Ἰλίου αἰπεινῆς· μάλα γάρ ἔθεν εὐρύοπα Ζεὺς
χεῖρα ἐὴν ὑπερέσχε, τεθαρσήκασι δὲ λαοί.
ὣς ἔφατ'· εἰσὶ καὶ οἵδε τάδ' εἰπέμεν, οἵ μοι ἕποντο,
Αἴας καὶ κήρυκε δύω, πεπνυμένω ἄμφω.
Φοῖνιξ δ' αὖθ' ὁ γέρων κατελέξατο, ὡς γὰρ ἀνώγει,
ὄφρα οἱ ἐν νήεσσι φίλην ἐς πατρίδ' ἵπηται
αὔριον, ἢν ἐθέλῃσιν· ἀνάγκῃ δ' οὔ τί μιν ἄξει.

Odysseus reports Achilles' initial response to Agamemnon's offer without noting his replies to Ajax and Phoenix. He refers to the other envoys but seems to be citing them as witnesses to the truth of what he has said, not suggesting that their reports might supplement his own.[14]

14. See C. Rothe, *Die "Ilias" als Dichtung* (Paderborn, 1910), pp. 237–38, for argument that Odysseus does not intend to distort Achilles' response.

That is, in effect, the function they perform, since no one says anything and their silence implies agreement; if they did not accept Odysseus' decision to report the embassy as he does, their silence would be incomprehensible. Aristarchus athetized the five lines that refer to the other envoys (schol. A ad 9. 688), in part because he found it unbecoming for Odysseus to call on witnesses, as if he expected his word to be doubted (καὶ ὅτι ὡς ἀπιστησόμενος μάρτυρας ἐπισπᾶται).[15] The reminder of their presence certainly emphasizes the strangeness of Odysseus' report. Yet Odysseus calls Achilles' announcement that he will go home an ἀπειλή, a (mere) threat. Achilles spoke of going home without the slightest element of doubt in his first speech (9. 356–61). Either Odysseus has in fact paid attention to Achilles' replies to the other speeches, and therefore introduces this element of doubt into his report, or he does not take Achilles at his word as a matter of course.[16]

Messengers normally report with complete accuracy what they hear. The sequence here is clearly unusual enough to demand an explanation, preferably one that both gives Odysseus a credible reason to act this way and explains why the poet chose to have him do so. Unitarians have commonly explained this sequence by suggesting that Odysseus' report increases the immediate suspense;[17] but this explanation is weak in itself and offers no reason for Odysseus as a character to act as he does. Odysseus may not always select the best course of action, but we can safely assume that he is not stupid or thoughtless, unless we find explicit signals to indicate that he is acting foolishly.[18] He has therefore probably deliberately chosen to report only Achilles' first reply, as his failure to include Agamemnon's claim to be βασιλεύτερος was prompted by tact. It therefore makes sense to look at the situation after the embassy from Odysseus' point of view.[19] Readers generally agree that Achilles has moderated his position in his response to Ajax, since he no longer considers sailing home. But for Odysseus, his final reply is particularly difficult because it puts very precise conditions on Achilles' return, conditions that could be intolerable for the Achaeans. Achilles' ships were at the far end of the camp (11. 8–9), and fire would not reach his ships until many, if not most, of the ships had been lost. Achilles surely means to rescue the Achaeans at the last moment, like Meleager, who saved his city only after his own chamber was under attack and the city was being burned, but in time to ward off the κακὸν ἦμαρ (588–97). But

15. See K. Reinhardt, *Die "Ilias" und ihr Dichter* (Göttingen, 1961), pp. 240–41, and M. van der Valk, *Researches on the Text and Scholia of the "Iliad"* (Leiden, 1964), pp. 450–51.

16. It thus seems to me incorrect to say that Odysseus, who conveyed Agamemnon's official offer to Achilles, transmits Achilles' "official" reply (so, e.g., C. Segal, "The Embassy and the Duals of *Iliad* 9," *GRBS* 9 [1968]: 111–12): Achilles explicitly instructs the ambassadors to report what he has said at the end of both his first (421–22) and his last speech (649–55).

17. So Rothe, *"Ilias,"* p. 238, followed by Schadewaldt, *Iliasstudien*[3], p. 135, n. 1.

18. See, e.g., *Od.* 9. 228–29, where he comments on his own bad choice.

19. J. Arieti, "Achilles' Alienation in *Iliad* 9," *CJ* 82 (1986): 27, describes Odysseus as a "realist" who reports the substance of Achilles' position—his refusal to fight—and regards the modifications as irrelevant; cf. T. A. Tarkow, "Achilles' Responses to the Embassy," *CB* 58 (1982): 30–34.

since the situation of the camp is not the same as that of a city, his reply, taken literally, offers no real help, and the envoys may not even understand his intention. His initial announcement that he will go home, on the other hand, though even more negative, has one great advantage: it will be shown to be false in the morning, as soon as the Achaeans see that Achilles has not left. And once his threat is shown to be false, his rejection of the embassy is itself in a way open to question and can be made to seem inconsequential.

Odysseus and the other envoys need not think that Achilles will take his own promise very seriously, since they have seen him change his mind, and not only on this occasion. In Book 1, during the initial quarrel with Agamemnon, Achilles also says that he will go home (169–71), and Agamemnon positively encourages him to leave (173–80), while repeating his threat to take Briseis (181–87). Achilles almost kills Agamemnon but is checked by the appearance of Athena. In obedience to the goddess, who urges him to rebuke Agamemnon and promises him gifts in the future (210–14), he abuses the king and swears that Agamemnon will regret dishonoring Achilles when the Achaeans suffer (235–44). Since the other Achaeans do not see or hear Athena, they have no way of understanding why Achilles decides not to go home, but to withdraw from battle instead; all they know is that he has made the threat and then changed his mind. Achilles behaves here very much as he will toward the embassy, changing his plan in accordance with persuasion, divine or human, but standing firmly by his final promise; but this could not be clear to the onlookers at the quarrel. Judging by their earlier experience, the envoys might well see Achilles' changes of mind as the result less of persuasion than of inherent unreliability. If, then, they believe he will do as he says, reporting the truth can only dishearten the Achaeans; and if, as is more likely, they regard him as unstable and given to spontaneous changes of mind, it is relatively unimportant that his reply be conveyed accurately.

Odysseus seems to put Achilles' response in the worst possible light. Not only does he report Achilles' initial response to Agamemnon's offer as if it were his final word, but he also—though he qualifies Achilles' answer as a (mere) threat—summarizes it in the strongest possible way, emphasizing Achilles' contempt for Agamemnon and his encouragement of the others to give up the war and go home. He also delivers the report in a style aimed at giving it full effect (694 μάλα γὰρ κρατερῶς ἀγόρευσε). The theme of giving up and going home is, of course, also raised by Agamemnon shortly before he sends the embassy. There he opens the council by recommending flight (9. 27–28): φεύγωμεν σὺν νηυσὶ φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν· / οὐ γὰρ ἔτι Τροίην αἱρήσομεν εὐρυάγυιαν. After a long silence, Diomedes makes a vigorous reply, concluding with a promise that though Agamemnon may go home, and even all the Achaeans, Diomedes and Sthenelus will remain and take Troy. The bold speech arouses great enthusiasm (50 οἱ δ' ἄρα πάντες ἐπίαχον υἷες Ἀχαιῶν). Odysseus therefore can expect that Achilles' threat to go, supported by

his suggestion that others do likewise, will provoke a response from Diomedes, and that is exactly what happens. Diomedes is not impressed by Achilles' threat to sail away (9. 701–3):

> ἀλλ' ἤτοι κεῖνον μὲν ἐάσομεν, ἤ κεν ἴῃσιν,
> ἤ κε μένῃ· τότε δ' αὖτε μαχήσεται, ὁππότε κέν μιν
> θυμὸς ἐνὶ στήθεσσιν ἀνώγῃ καὶ θεὸς ὄρσῃ.

An accurate report of Achilles' position, apparently promising help when it is too late, would have been extremely discouraging and damaging to morale. But ironically, by reporting Achilles' even harsher initial response, Odysseus provokes a reaction that leaves the kings' fighting spirit at least no worse than it was before the embassy was attempted. Just as Odysseus correctly judges how to bring the demoralized army back under control in Book 2, after Agamemnon's disastrous test (188–206) and after Thersites' speech (243–77), so here his speech is successful.

Yet Diomedes' reply manifests an unfortunate result of Odysseus' strategy as well, one that points to the poet's reasons for managing the episode this way. Odysseus has given the impression that Achilles was not at all moved by the ambassadors and has, in fact, been roused to talking once again about leaving. Diomedes therefore argues that the Achaeans should not have sent the embassy at all (697–700):

> Ἀτρεΐδη κύδιστε, ἄναξ ἀνδρῶν Ἀγάμεμνον,
> μὴ ὄφελες λίσσεσθαι ἀμύμονα Πηλεΐωνα,
> μυρία δῶρα διδούς· ὁ δ' ἀγήνωρ ἐστὶ καὶ ἄλλως·
> νῦν αὖ μιν πολὺ μᾶλλον ἀγηνορίῃσιν ἐνῆκας.

In Diomedes' view, Achilles' reentry into battle will depend entirely on Achilles and the appropriate god. Since Achilles has shown himself incapable of being persuaded, and indeed has become more hostile as the result of attempts to mollify him, there would certainly be no point in further attempts to convince Achilles to fight.[20] Diomedes believes that the attempt to persuade Achilles has only increased Achilles' arrogance. Odysseus' report, though successful in maintaining morale, misrepresents Achilles' susceptibility to persuasion and leaves the Achaeans completely ignorant of what Achilles believes his situation to be. As far as the Achaeans are concerned, once Achilles fails to carry out his threat to depart, his position is exactly what it was before the embassy, except that he has now displayed his stubbornness. Without knowing that Achilles has partially yielded to the pleas of Phoenix and Ajax, they cannot guess that he is more attached to the other Achaeans, and thus more likely to moderate his anger, than his initial reply suggested. Not knowing Achilles' promise to fight when fire reached his own ships and not before, they have no way of offering him the persuasion that would enable him to change his mind. They do not know that he has accepted the example of Meleager and so sees his alternatives as fighting at the last moment and not receiving gifts, or yielding earlier and receiving

20. Arieti, "Achilles' Alienation," p. 27, thinks that Diomedes' answer does not suggest that he actually knows of Achilles' varied replies, but shows how fully he assumes Achilles' unreliability.

them, and they therefore cannot know that the gifts are likely to return to his thoughts when his anger diminishes. There is no reason for them to try a second embassy, since they have no cause either to think it might be effective or to know that Achilles, bound by his final statement, cannot allow himself to fight without a further plea.

This tragic irony is important to the plot of the *Iliad.* When Achilles, by sending Patroclus to Nestor, shows that he can still be moved by the fate of other Achaeans, Nestor attempts through Patroclus to persuade him to fight. But Nestor has no real chance of success, for his attempt rests on incorrect beliefs about Achilles' sense of his own position. Nestor does not know that Achilles has declared he will fight only when fire reaches his own ships, or that he has been warned against intervening at the last moment and depriving himself of gifts. From Nestor's point of view, Achilles did not fulfill the threat he made to the embassy and so has no formal and public position to uphold. His actions will depend entirely on personal feelings and motives; if Achilles feels that the Achaeans and Agamemnon have been shown how badly they fare without him, he has no reason not to intervene, at least to save them from complete destruction by doing for them what Achilles actually instructs Patroclus to do. Hence, when Nestor suspects that Achilles is relenting, he supposes that oracular information might be keeping him from battle, since he knows of nothing else. Reckoning with the possibility that Achilles has a motive other than anger for not fighting, he suggests the intervention of Patroclus, since if Achilles were obeying a divine warning, a further supplication would be completely irrelevant.

Achilles seizes on the possibility of letting Patroclus rescue the Achaeans as a solution to his actual problem; that problem, however, is not a private motive like an oracle, to which a supplication by the other Achaeans would be irrelevant, but a position he has, as he believes, publicly taken, which he can honorably and profitably renounce only after renewed negotiation. The silence of Odysseus, probably based on a misunderstanding of Achilles' attitude toward his own word, leads to a profound misunderstanding between Achilles and the other Achaeans. Nestor assumes that Achilles has only private motives, while Achilles assumes that his statement is publicly known. Achilles must stand by his promise precisely because it was his official reply, reported to all the kings. At the opening of Book 16, only this loyalty of Achilles to his own final word prevents him from entering battle and giving the poem a nontragic resolution. It is often thought that Achilles is continuously angry throughout the work, from the initial quarrel with Agamemnon until the last quiet encounter with Priam; but at the crucial moment at which he sends forth Patroclus, his anger is almost entirely gone. The plot presents a problem more complex than a single character's inability to control his anger; the calamitous outcome is the result of a social failure, of misunderstood statements and distorted communications.

The University of Michigan,
Ann Arbor