

Achilles and his awful power are never far away

The Mourner's Song
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War is very much with us in the world right now and it has made us who we are. But what is it and who are we? In western civilisation, we are what we remember about war. We have chosen to remember the *Iliad* for more than 2,500 years, and classicist James Tatum helps us to hear what the *Iliad* still has to say to us.

Tatum's title speaks of the *Iliad* as the first in a series of mourning songs from the Trojan war to Vietnam. But his view of war, death and memory also encompasses physical monuments, such as Edwin Lutyens' first-world-war Memorial to the Missing of the Somme at Thiepval, France, Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington DC, and memorials in Vietnam commemorating what the surviving Vietnamese call the America war. Lutyens and Lin do well at memorialising human loss. In 1916, the British suffered 420,000 casualties at the Somme. The *Iliad* does a good job, too, because it does not celebrate victory. It honours the losers in war so much that US anthropologist James Redfield redirected his career to explain Homer's epic as the tragedy of Hector.

Tatum also shows us the ghastly visage of the corpse of a Salvadoran soldier whose skull is stripped of flesh and decorated by a rebel to resemble *calaveras* used in Day of the Dead ceremonies. This abomination lies on a continuum from Achilles' berserk defilement of Hector's corpse through Goya's graphic designs of battlefield mutilations to the perverse sexual mutilation of American corpses by Japanese soldiers and the almost "unremembered" desecration of Japanese corpses by Americans described in E. B. Sledge's account of fighting at Peleliu and Okinawa in the second world war. Tatum reminds us that war is about "the desire to kill, whether channelled and ritualised or unchannelled and uncontrollable". When war's desire to kill turns into uncontrollable rage, it may become the desire to disfigure and dehumanise the enemy, dead or alive. The *Iliad* foreshadows this in its first word (*menin* , "wrath") and the adjective that describes the force of Achilles' anger (*oulomenen* , "destructive"). Achilles' rage destroys others, friends and foes, and it destroys his better self.

Tatum argues that the Vietnam veterans and Somme memorials are effective because they overwhelm the visitor with aggregate masses of names. The *Iliad* likewise bludgeons its readers with descriptions of 500-plus grisly battle deaths, each naming the killers and the killed. On the monuments and in the epic, we witness killing upon killing, but we can come to terms with these deaths one by one only through intense concentration on the single

names and identities of the individual victims. Chris Hedges in his recent controversial book, *War is a Force that Gives us Meaning*, emphasises our universal human impulse to memorialise the names of those who have died through violence. During the first Gulf war, Hedges visited the Sulaimaniya central security prison in Iraq where Kurdish prisoners were tortured and killed. On the wall of one cell, a prisoner named Ahmed Mohammed had scrawled: "These were my friends, arrested with me. All were executed."

Five names on a ruined wall formed his fragile monument in defiance of human brutality. Likewise, each name on the Thiepval or Washington memorials has the magical ability to recall for the right visitor the personality of the victim in his totality, not frozen at a specific moment, as in a photograph or other kinds of personal memorabilia.

Tatum thinks that the *Iliad* and Maya Lin's monument are also successful war memorials because they reject straightforward chronological narrative and do not impose any *post hoc* order or patriotic logic on the chaos of war. Homer begins with the conflict that was nearly catastrophic for the Greeks, between Achilles and Agamemnon, loops onward to the death of Patroclus and the death and defilement of Hector, and ends with the foreboding pathos of Hector's burial. The Vietnam Veterans Memorial rises from and descends into the earth and presents the names of the dead so that the visitor must begin *in mediis rebus*. Homer, Lin and Lutyens place warfare and death "at the center of man's activities".

Most of us access the *Iliad*'s messages through translation. Tatum discusses frankly, and accurately, the different qualities of the English translations we have available. Richmond Lattimore captures Homer with "an excellent ear and philological precision" so that "Homer's words are nearly always there". But what is good "for the short run does not work for the long". In Tatum's view, Robert Fagles' aurally compelling translation also falters in the long run by getting caught up in poetic effects that are so beautiful that they distract us from what Homer is saying, or they convey a tone at odds with the original. In my opinion, Stanley Lombardo's translation, written for and from performance, captures the *Iliad* well as a war poem. Tatum commends all these, but recommends Alexander Pope's translation for the novel reason that its stylistic artificiality gets across how the *Iliad*'s own hybrid literary dialect must have struck the ears of the ancient Greeks.

Whichever translation we choose, it will be impossible, after reading Tatum's book, to read the *Iliad* in the same way again. Do we with Jonathan Shay (*Achilles in Vietnam*) view Agamemnon as a prototypical REMF ("rear echelon mother****er" in Vietnam soldiers' slang) whose self-serving incompetence ruins the honorable character of his best military leader, Achilles? Or do we see Agamemnon as a debased Homeric equivalent of Ulysses S. Grant, fixed on the strategic point of view, undistracted by "the accidents of human misery", and successful according to the Clausewitzian measure of the quantities of blood shed in pursuit of victory? Do we view the catalogue of ships as a tedious relic of oral poetry shoehorned into our version of the epic? Or do we view it with Tatum as the strategically significant

"reintegration of the army under Agamemnon's command that Achilles and, more recently, Agamemnon's own folly and the war weariness of his men had come close to destroying"?

Tatum refuses to let us delude ourselves. The poetry of war for western civilisation has always been in the killing. We will never reread Homer's depiction of the shield Hephaestus manufactures for Achilles without simultaneously feeling the sheer terror of Richard Rhodes' reconstruction of the detonation of the atomic bomb blasts of Nagasaki and Hiroshima broken down into millionths of a second. As Tatum explains: "The nearer we are to ground zero, the higher the kill rate rises." Achilles in Olympian armour is a nuclear fireball, a thing of horror and horrific beauty. And he persists in our collective memory because we keep offering him occasions to use his awful powers.

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