

Warfare in Homer

The true hero, the true subject, the core of the *Iliad* is [violent] force.

Simone Weil, *L'Iliade ou le poème de la force* (Holoka 2003, 19)

Why do we care about these stories which are so far from us and which are anyway not true?

(Redfield 1975, xiv)

Why did the whole Greek world exult over the combat scenes of the *Iliad*? I fear that we do not understand them in a sufficiently “Greek” manner; indeed, that we should shudder if we were to understand them “in Greek.”

(Nietzsche 1954, 32–3)

TRUE STORIES of war try to tell us something about what war is. Read enough war stories and you will know four things. War is not pretty. War is not good. Only the human agents caught up in war can try to be noble or moral; war itself is neither, and few human beings rise to the occasion, and then all too often for no good reason and without effect. And war is ultimately unknowable.

Yet the purpose or purposes of particular war stories – essentially what they mean to their tellers and audiences and readers – can be hard to figure out. The Homeric epics are no exceptions, especially because in their current canonical forms they originated over two and half millennia ago and elements in them go back as much as a millennium further, well into the Mycenaean palatial period. (For the Mycenaean phase of epic song, see Ruijgh 1995, 85–8; 2004, 530–1.)

Why did the Greeks sing oral folk songs about war encompassing a wide variety of themes in a continuum from the late Bronze Age palatial period (ca. 1500–1200 B.C.) down throughout the historical period of the *poleis* (800 B.C. onwards)? Why did they, at some point, assemble and privilege two large-scale epics, the *Iliad* (ca. 15,700 lines) and the *Odyssey* (ca. 12,100 lines), as the central enculturating documents of their culture? The *Iliad* sings about what happened to armed men recruited from all areas of Greece serving under

their regional commanders in a war far off overseas for a length of time well beyond the capacities of any army of the period to maintain itself in the field. They are besieging as an enemy the men, women, and children who live in the piously and effectively ruled community of TROY.

The Trojans and their leaders and allies are portrayed with the tragically honest human sympathy that is a hallmark of almost all memorable war literature (Palaima and Tritle 2013; Palaima 2014a, 2015, 2018). Demonization and dehumanization of the enemy, techniques used with modern armies in order to overcome the fundamental prohibition against killing other human beings (Freud 1959; Grossman 1995), are not found in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

The *Odyssey* sings about what happens to the leader of a Greek regional contingent at Troy (and to a few leaders of other communities, chosen for comparison and contrast) and his men in trying to get back home, and when he reaches home. It also sings about what has happened and is happening in his home community during his extended absence.

What did these poems tell their original audiences? What do they now tell us about war, why, and how?

Given that war was an acknowledged constant in ancient Greek culture and that what Thucydides terms *autarkeia* (independence of agency and self-sufficiency) was the primary objective of Bronze Age palatial and historical *polis* communities, the realities and consequences of war for individuals, families, and larger social groups would have been inescapable, deeply felt, and known, in accordance with the universal Greek cultural notion of *pathei mathein* (“to learn through suffering”; Palaima 2014b, 3–7). All adult male “citizens” grew up knowing that they would experience combat on land or sea at some time, most likely many times, in their own lifetimes.

There may then be exaggeration, mythical and otherwise, in the Homeric epics, analogous to what American war novelist Tim O’Brien (1990, 101) calls “heating up the story.” Think of Achilles fighting the river gods Scamander and Simois in *Iliad* 21.228–360, or Diomedes wounding Aphrodite in *Iliad* 5.312–62. This literary technique is used in true war stories in order to get across what war and the firsthand experience of combat are.

But there is no minimizing or obfuscating in the Homeric epics what is at stake for the men, women, and children when war is on. The Homeric epics are true stories in O’Brien’s (1990, 84) sense: “True war stories do not generalize. They do not indulge in abstraction or analysis.” And they are certainly true war stories in Hemingway’s ([1929] 1957, 184–5) sense: “Abstract words such as glory, honor, courage, or hallow were obscene beside the concrete names of villages, the numbers of roads, the names of rivers, the numbers of regiments and the dates.”

The *Iliad* speaks of the Greek concept of *timē*, literally the public honor paid as a reward to an individual for valorous service to his community, and the key warrior figures on both sides strive for *timē* and are controlled in their actions by an inbred social shame (*aidōs*) that keeps them from falling short or makes them aware when they have. But the unifying plot of the *Iliad* centers on the alienation and public dishonoring of Achilles. Achilles is the greatest warrior and field commander in terms of fighting prowess, successful leadership, and caring attention to the common good. What happens to him and other soldiers, on the Greek and Trojan sides, puts the lie to what Wilfred Owen (1964, 55–6) calls “the old lie” told to “children ardent for some desperate glory”: *dulce et decorum est pro patria mori*, “it is sweet and fitting to die for your country.” That “old lie” and the command given to Glaucus

by his father Hippolochus when he went off to war: *aien aristeuein* (*Il.* 6.208), “ever to excel at the manly art of war,” and the promise of *kleos aphthiton*, “fame unperishing” (*Il.* 9.413), essentially an everlasting life in the memory of the community, are needed to inspire men to risk the only lives they will ever have for society as a whole (Gray 2017, 27).

We can apply to the many stories told in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* the saying that was worn out by American soldiers in what the Vietnamese still call the “America War” as they were trying to make sense of the incomprehensible things they went through and witnessed: “There it is.” The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, when it comes to the realities of fighting and killing, have the photographic-memory realism of Owen’s “Dulce Et Decorum Est” or “A Terre” (Owen 1964, 55–6, 64–6) and of Randall Jarrell’s “Death of the Ball Turret Gunner” (Shapiro 2003, 88). Yet, except in certain isolated vignettes and when Achilles is at his most alienated, they do not come close to the savage irony of Hemingway’s “To Good Guys Dead” (Hemingway 1992, 47; see also 26–7, 42–3; poems 17, 18, 33, 34), Louis Simpson’s “Carentan O Carentan” (Shapiro 2003, 183–5), Harvey Shapiro’s “War Stories” (Shapiro 2003, 206–8), or Charles Patterson’s (2002, 11–12) “War Story” (see also 4–8, 64–5, and esp. 54–5: “There It Is”). The cumulative impact of the combat wounding and death scenes in the *Iliad* is captured in Alice Oswald’s (2012) modern poetic rendering of just those scenes, done literally rhapsodically, i.e. “stitched together.”

Modern readers who have never been in combat or felt the physical effects of war think the gory details in the *Iliad* are fantastic. Yet study of the combat scenes leads to the conclusion, regarding the descriptions of wounds and their consequences, that “the poet is to be believed unless there is strong evidence to the contrary” (Saunders 2003, 132). Decapitate an enemy soldier standing in your path, as Achilles dispatches the unfortunate Deucalion in *Iliad* 20.482–3, and spinal fluid will briefly spurt up into the air like a malfunctioning water fountain. Then, as Kiowa explains again and again about seeing Ted Lavender shot and killed in Vietnam, “the poor bastard just flat-fuck fell. Boom Down. Nothing else” (O’Brien 1990, 7). Or as Holoka (2003, 4) explains Weil’s insight: “Force converts people literally into things, that is, corpses: ‘Someone was there and, the next moment, no one.’” The *Iliad* (20.482–3) gives us two quick snapshots of the like when Achilles slices off Deucalion’s head at the neck, helmet and all, and moves quickly on: “marrow fluid then / out of his spine surged; on the ground, he lay stretched out” (*Il.* 20.482–3, translation mine).

How war is captured in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* has been a cause for wonder, disgust, horror, admiration, bewilderment, and general curiosity about the human condition for serious modern readers of the epics from Nietzsche (1954, written 1872) to Weil (2003, written 1939) as well as to Redfield (1975), Logue ([1997] 2017), Lombardo (1994, 2000), Shay (1994, 2002), Ehrhart (1994; rejoinder to Shay 1994), and Meineck and Konstan (2014). They adopt, respectively, philosophical, spiritual, anthropological, poetical, psychiatric, veteran memoirist, and dramatic approaches to making the war violence in Homer speak to us in our times and to making us see core truths that we would rather avoid seeing about our fates as individual human beings and as political creatures, in the ancient Greek sense.

In contrast to twentieth-century *cris-de-coeur* and palpably ironic or cynical criticisms, explicit or implicit, of those in power or back home by war-poet storytellers (in addition to those already mentioned, see also Sassoon, Nemerov [Norris 2009], Komunyakaa 1988, 47–8, 62–3, and non-veteran Ginsberg 1996), neither the *Iliad* nor the *Odyssey* add up to

indictments of how and why war is waged or what it does to those who actually have to do the dirty business of killing and wounding in war or being wounded and dying.

Nonetheless, the epics do bring out the reality of the suffering that war causes. The *Odyssey* closes with a satisfying and order-restoring bloodbath of the suitors and hangings of the women who served them. The *Iliad* ends with lamentations raised for Hector by his father, mother, wife, and sister-in-law who have already earlier told the audience what terrible ends lie in store for them now that Hector is gone. And Achilles knows that he, too, will die at Troy.

What do we know at the end of all the war waged in the *Iliad* and after the postwar return and violent reintegration of a soldier-commander-king into his community in the *Odyssey*?

There it is and so it goes.

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