

<https://classical-inquiries.chs.harvard.edu/temporary-like-achilles-by-thomas-palaima/>

A dark, moody background image of a classical painting, likely of Achilles, with a focus on his face and armor.

Classical Inquiries

Temporary like Achilles #2 and Kerouacts 1-6, by Thomas Palaima

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OCTOBER 8, 2020 | CI Poetry Project Recomposing Heroes

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Temporary Like Achilles #2 (for Leon Golden)

Inspired by Achilles' own words
Iliad 1.149–171, 1.365–392, 9.308–429

'Rage,' Homer sings.
'Sing the rage of Achilles.'
Twenty-three raids,
twenty-three sieges of cities,
all taken,
feeding soldiers
and the pride-lust of commanders.

A true shepherd of the forces.
Unique in speed afoot,

strategic brilliance,
endurance and making men endure
and save themselves from themselves.
Noble,
caring even of spear captives.

Briseis loved him.
Phoenix and Patroclus, too.

Good sound moral character.
Knowing in the ways of war
and what war does
to hearts and souls.
Respectful of the gods.
Attuned to justice.

Nine long years.
And in the tenth
He took her.
Agamemnon did.
And with her his honor.

And all those men,
high-ranked and low,
whom he had kept from death
nurtured, protected,
guided, led
out and back,
rescued from plague, spears and arrows
and their own weaknesses,
fatigue,
blindness,
stupidity,
despair,
they let her be taken.
She was his medal of honor,
his war prize,
Briseis.

'Rage' the poet
asks the goddess to sing.
Not the rage of the hand
that grasped, but did not draw
the sword.
The rage that spoke
and walked away.

Postscript Dedication:

This poem deals with what finally broke Achilles and what is lost in the focus of the Iliad on one aspect of his anger for having been publicly dishonored by Agamemnon, who took from Achilles the spear-captive Briseis.

Looking at the Iliad with too narrow a focus, all of Achilles' stellar acts as a field commander fall away. His good moral character gets lost. But it is there in his care for his men. It is seen in his consideration in raising the issue of Agamemnon's sacrilege against the priest of Apollo by doing so in a formal assembly and having a prophet speak to the background. It explains his restraint in not drawing his sword and slaying Agamemnon when he could have. In point of fact, no one "stood behind him when the game got rough." Not one voice was heard in support of the truths Achilles was proclaiming judiciously in the assembly. Yet Homer tells us that all the soldiers knew what the source of the plague was — Agamemnon's dishonoring of the priest of Apollo — and what harm is caused.

Achilles withdraws from savage fighting that had long surpassed in duration and losses the tipping point that led Siegfried Sassoon to issue his "Non serviam" in World War I. He withdrew not just because Agamemnon insulted him and threatened to strip him of his war-captive Briseis, but because no one among the soldiers whom he had long protected and supported through his courage and leadership or among the other leaders who led troops from their regions to Troy stepped forward to back him up.

Leon Golden was, during his active scholarly career, a superb interpreter of the epic hero and of works of war, ancient and modern.

Kerouacts 1-6 with Prologues

March 12, 1922 – October 21, 1969

honoris causa

—“I just can’t stand it; I like to be by myself.”

—“Stella, I’m Bleeding” October 20, 1969

Jack Kerouac,
hodophiliac,
hamaxomaniac,
Catholic,
Buddhist,
anti-communist,
made random stops
on the road.

Jack Kerouac,
podophiliac,
loved to feel
his two feet
as they beat
wayward paths
along life's street.

Jack Kerouac,
logophiliac,
long-distance
writer-sprinter,
fed ten feet
of teleprinter
and twelve times ten
of tracing paper
round the platen.

Jack Kerouac,
aniconophiliac,
no one's beatnik priest,
"decadent and drunk,
didn't give a shit,"
for any thoughts of where
out on the highway.

Jack Kerouac,
dipsomaniac,
took to the bottle,
opened up the throttle,
as his route curved
down his throat.

Jack Kerouac,
God's own good soul,
took the road
with no road back
until the desolation angel
put down her foot
when the bleeding
would not stop.