



ON HOMER'S ILIAD: WHY ERIS, MIMESIS AND MENIS MATTER MORE THAN EVER

Posted on July 1, 2021 by Nalin Ranasinghe



The excerpt that follows is from [*Confessions of Odysseus*](#) by the late Nalin Ranasinghe (1960-2020), who was professor of philosophy at Assumption College.

This book is a unique reading of Homer in that it seeks to examine modernity through the Iliad and the Odyssey. As Predrag Cicovacki in his indispensable preface to the book, elucidates: "In Ranasinghe's view, Odysseus is both the first recognizable human being and a model of curious and concupiscent human rationality that constantly strives toward the virtues of self-knowledge and moderation. Homer leads us to believe that the cosmos leans toward virtue, although its fundamental truths may be inherently unspeakable. This is the line of thought that Ranasinghe believes was further developed by Socrates, Plato, and Jesus, while being obscured by Aristotle, Augustine, and their followers. Homer's later epic and his central insights are, according to Ranasinghe, the most fertile soil on which a humane civilization can grow and flourish."

The book is forthcoming from St. Augustine. Be sure to pick up your copy of this very interesting journey of ideas.

When I started this book, it was Obama's hour. He hoped to end the Bush wars, fix the economy and bridge our divisions. Homer's epic pointed towards a new Oresteia: a millennial trilogy going from oracular Oprah and orgulous Osama to obsequious Obama. But we fell from tragedy into a satyr play, an infernal Punch & Judy parody of Achilles' divine rage/Menis at Troy. This internecine strife delights the ruling rich; taking sides like Olympians, they pit puppets against proles. Yes, they can plunder without risk (or even dismantle the state) if we're distracted by rage.

Our masque of Menis began when a new Clytemnestra enraged the white proletariat; its honest but blind fury soon found a demagogic messiah. Thirsting for hot blood they declared war on the bi-coastal elite, "deep state," Jews, blacks, aliens, science, and the world. While this rebirth of rage thrills the mob, our hidden gods use its innate nihilism to push a crass agenda. As his war against all rages endlessly, their puppet-messiah mocks morality, fakes news, fosters crony capitalism, and gets America high on hatred. My tale ends apocalyptically when his puppeteers emerge to claim power over a bankrupt state and its alienated citizenry. Corporate tyranny, race war, cyber addiction, and debt slavery await if we do not stop this fake Achilles and the real rage he arouses.

THE
**CONFESSIONS
OF ODYSSEUS**



NALIN RANASINGHE

INTRODUCTION BY PREDRAG CICOVACKI

That is why we must return to our origins—reading the *Iliad* and studying the blinding power rage exerts over city and soul before seeking Homer's cure for this disease. While the remedy is found in his tale of Odysseus' late return from Troy to save Ithaca, we must first ask our oracle the right question by decoding the *Iliad*. Homer has done most of our work for us; Socrates and Plato only retrieved what was implicit in his texts. They used a way of Midrash finely begun by Attic tragedy. This playful exegetic art was replaced by Aristotle's scholastic science, but it can yet be recovered.

Homer must be read as the wisest Greeks did, not for fantastic tales of the Olympians but because his myths reveal eternal constants of the human state: the soul's ruling passions and the possibility of

knowing and educating these false gods. Wrestled with thus the *Iliad* becomes a cautionary tale, not one urging literal reading or mindless mimesis. It may always be that for the few who grasp Homer, many more will obey his gods or imitate his antiheroes; but the *Odyssey* hints that while its poet sees this potential for misuse, he is willing to take a noble risk and hope that eros can listen to and educate *thumos*. This faith is implicit in his tale of Achilles and the Trojan War. It is vital today that we see how the West's end resembles its angry origins, as depicted in the *Iliad*. This is why Homer is said to be as fresh as the morning newspaper. His wisdom may outlive our literacy.

Even as subservient propagandists try to justify the ways of kings to man as divine providence, genuine inspired poetry continues its subversive struggle to reveal how the true gods see the world in all its fragile beauty; to this extent bards are literally poet/makers or better, savior/refreshers of reality. Thus, the *Iliad* shows how a plague of Menis, divine or divinized rage, infected our ancestors. But if this tragic poem is not read rightly—but seen as a paean to the glory of Ares/Achilles—this plague will return to punish our perverse piety and violent ignorance. Eris' apple that began the Trojan war thus resembles the forbidden fruit of Eden that brought us the Fall. These very forces, viral strife and toxic knowledge, have joined their baleful powers again today.

The Unlikely Aristeia Of Hephaestus

Achilles is the starting point of each generation. Politicians raising new armies to kill each other rekindle his wrath and deploy his ever-alluring archetype for power and profit. He is used today in a way that would make even Agamemnon's gross shade blush. The formless souls of our young are stunted by easy access to infernal weapons; we become self-forgetting, superpowered and superfluous by technology. Hephaestus does not hobble anymore; by his artifice and Hobbes' counsel, the war of all against all has been escalated exponentially. No more Aphrodite's cuckolded spouse, this god now exceeds Ares and Athena in glory and might; he makes angry boys socially inept and economically useless, but able to take pagan vengeance on judgmental Christian culture.

In short, as Max Weber sagely saw, Hephaestus the deformed deity once thrown down from heaven, may now be seen to have restored the Olympians for a secular second sailing. Today it is a truth almost universally acknowledged that the Gods (worship them as Hera, Ares, Aphrodite and Dionysus or call them jealousy, violence, sex and alcohol as any good sociologist would) are more powerful than that Enlightenment paradigm, the educated post-Christian individual, could possibly imagine. The confidence in calculation that led men to abandon the Homeric, Platonic, or Christian soul and replace it

with Aristotle's nous or silicon chips is thus proven by experience to be misplaced and unfounded. Even artificial intelligence or the much-anticipated event of the "Singularity" cannot save us from ourselves. Thus, if they have not done so already, the Gods and/or centrifugal forces of postmodernity have chosen to tear soul, city, and cosmos apart. Today technology has created a world where everyone from 8 to 80 strives to be Achilles at 18. Even worse, since our culture has been infantilized by promises of eternal youth and mindless pleasure, we are all concupiscent consumers: selfish suitors as ripe for slaughter as Penelope's wooers.

But the deeper question is if we, like Achilles, his comrades, and the stupid suitors, are trapped by Hephaestus in a Hobbesian Hell, a war of all against all from which there are only apparent armistices but never any true respite or relief. Even Jesus could not bring peace on earth. Then, after Christianity became the exclusive faith of a persecuting empire, St. Augustine rendered unto Caesar the perverse doctrine that due to original sin, life on earth is a dark state of continual deserved punishment; further, as peace is impossible, good Christians must meekly await the apocalypse. In this condition slavery is to be preferred over rule since there are fewer opportunities for sin. Augustine also denied self-knowledge; we only know ourselves as sinners. He asserts, and we must believe, that God/the Church knows us better than we know ourselves. He/it also predetermines whether or not we are good or evil, destined for heavenly bliss or hellish damnation.

Made to choose between undeserved slavery/sin and ostracized outlaw-hood, many men pleabargained: they accepted the false charges against their soul and picked theocratic authoritarianism over raw anarchy. This craven wish for liberation from freedom trumps self-knowledge's lonely innocence. As Paul told the Romans, if human righteousness is possible then Christ died in vain.

Modern technology offers a way out of this dilemma. It promises the Epicurean earthly pleasure of a suitor's life to those who follow religion merely to enjoy the bliss of Christian heaven. As long as he renounces egalitarian ethics and spurns talk of human rights or justice, a bold man can enroll himself among the ranks of the elect and become a predator on a natural order that is destined to pass away. In time he may also come to enjoy the exquisite pleasure of chastising the natural slaves of creation. Augustinian Christianity, as both Luther and Calvin discovered, even gives a religious justification for this Darwinian distinction between the elect, the few mysteriously and undeservedly favored by God, and the losers left behind, unredeemed and doubly predestined. In short, we can enjoy a glorious life of a predator on earth and do so with a divine mandate. As the allied gods of terror and technology have brought us back to Homeric times, this book will claim that only Odysseus can redeem us from Achilles

and set the cycle of civilization in motion again.

The Afterlife Of Achilles

But does blind Homer presume to criticize shining Achilles? Is the hero of the *Iliad* truly more like one of Penelope's suitors than Odysseus? Is Achilles' tale but an epic tragedy, and not the West's founding epic of a betrayed hero? Can we hear his cry of rage and not hear Roland's horn in an empty forest? I will argue that instead of trying to emulate him, as Alexander did, we must instead resist the siren song of his splendid vices and opt for the way of life led by Odysseus and Socrates. Achilles and Alexander spelled death to civic friendship, even as their bellicosity seemingly united Hellas. Achilles' rage caused the Dark Ages as surely as Alexander ended Athenian freedom; Augustus then destroyed the Roman Republic and became universal landlord of a pacified empire. Later Augustine solidified this Thousand Year Reich by making a castrated Christianity its creed.

Perhaps only Odysseus and Socrates/Plato deliberately deviated from the brutal order wrought by Achilles' potent afterlife. Achilles, Aristotle, Alexander, and Augustus are ultimately imperial and un-Athenian in that they address hoi polloi in the imperative. It is presumed that their divine mandate, tradition or force majeure trumps any right of plebs to think, speak, or act for themselves. Silencing dissent is necessary once the "best" lose reverence for the soul, their own included, and deign to rule directly over the huddled many they could have had killed. Statesmanship becomes a technique serving the Hobbesian imperative of keeping the people alive, orderly, and productive.

In short, the natural result of charismatic Caesarism is implicit slavery. And, if Caesarism is the telos of Achilles' immortal desire for glory, his legacy or body is empire. From each of Caesar's wounds grows a tradition, a Roman road or information superhighway, bringing civilization and trade smoothly down to every categorized part of a far-flung empire in time and space. There is no possibility of questioning precedent or going upstream by the liquid medium of dialectic; truth is reified as sacred tradition or even naturalized so that other possibilities cannot be imagined. Happiness is found when men pursue safe commodious pleasures under their landlord's shadow.

Shakespeare saw that while the evil men do out-lives them, the good is interred with their bones.

Even a benign Emperor will use bad epic poetry to elevate his deeds, power, and divine mandate; he

does so at the expense of nobles like Glaucus and Sarpedon who looked to tragedy to hallow their heroic rights. Poetry rather than sheer force of arms is the ultimate basis of lasting power over men; it gives their hegemony divine sanction. This is why Homer is greater than Achilles; what is a hero without a poet? While Augustus rather than Aeneas is the hero of Virgil's artificial epic, Homer is dishonored when paid epigones turn his heroic tragedy into pseudo-epic founding poems.

This is why we must continually ponder if Homer sought to elevate Achilles to the unrivaled status he came to enjoy in pagan antiquity and every subsequent classical revival. In short, was Homer's original intent descriptive and cautionary or prescriptive and valorizing? And if his true purpose is the former, could it be that the *Iliad's* alluring surface serves to preserve its esoteric meaning over time, to survive a barbaric or imperial age when texts had to be memorized and recited? We shall make this argument later when we consider the end of Book 5 of the *Odyssey* where this very possibility seems to be analogically depicted. It is possible that Homer arrived after the Dark Ages and saw the potential for a tragic rendering of much older tales of Achilles and his mad wrath. Even though my reading of the *Odyssey* presupposes the ultimate insufficiency of the *Iliad* and its hero, a vexing matter that has consumed more gallons of ink than the quantity of heroic blood originally shed at Troy, and thus necessarily cannot be irrefutably proved here, I can show plausible grounds emerging from within the *Iliad* to support this outlaw interpretation.

It all began when Achilles lost faith in Zeus. After first rebelling against the selfish ways of Agamemnon, Zeus' mortal counterpart, he then found himself to have been ultimately tricked by the god. But what is he apart from Zeus' favor? Achilles once likened Patroclus to a little girl crying to her mother but is he any different? Further, the toxic deal Achilles has with Zeus leads to the disgrace of the hero as well the discrediting of the *Iliad's* gods. Both Zeus and Achilles, not to mention Agamemnon, are ruled by necessity and care only for their own ascendancy, glory, and power. While Zeus undergoes change in the shift from *Iliad* to *Odyssey*, Achilles only sees the emptiness of the deathless glory he cold-bloodedly sought. First, the sad wraith of Patroclus indicates the existence of soul, then Hector's body proves immune to every humiliation Achilles can inflict, and finally Priam reveals that he too is braver than Achilles. Priam humbled himself, before the man who killed so many of his sons, out of love. This fond folly made him risk war for Paris; now it leads him to travel with Hermes, the leader of souls to Hades, to plead with Achilles' Hellish rage. But Priam's action shows us that he is a braver man and better lover than the "Best of the Achaeans." Achilles' guilty secret is that he loves his rage more than Patroclus. It makes him hate himself more than the man clad in his armor whom he slew: Hector. This could be why he protests too much in his humiliation of Hector's body. He is already punishing himself in Hades.

Voluntarism And Nihilism

War is easy to declare and almost impossible to conclude. For this reason, unjust relationships are so hard to end. Admission of prior wrongdoing leads to a demand for compensation and discredits illicit authority. This is why Agamemnon readily concedes Achilles' martial superiority but then invokes a qualitative difference he must maintain by force of will; if not, he ceases to be king (or God in the case of Zeus). Even Zeus must maintain this irrational ratio with the other gods. Any true king or god thus must exceed logos! This absurd necessity compels masters but rules slaves.

Agamemnon grants that Achilles is a better warrior—but only because he displays a psychopathic indifference to life that his corrupt cynical commander can only feign sometimes. The Lion King creates rough order within but claims that he must always fight the original chaos outside. Yet if this logic is taken to an extreme, Agamemnon fears it will expose its ugly origin in his greedy will. The evil Achilles rages against is not ontological but artificial; it feeds on human selfishness. In short, growth and becoming must not be denied for the sake of being—defined as rigid order. Men need not be herded like unruly animals. Such an attitude denies the fluid quality of a human soul, affirms the cosmic primacy of violence, and denies the goodness and beauty of ultimate reality.

The seemingly craven Greek kings know quite well that if they query Agamemnon's arbitrary will and undeserved hegemony, it is not only the justice and plans of Zeus that will come ultimately under fire, their own lordship will soon be scrutinized by men like Thersites; and so even meritocratic Odysseus cannot voice the resentment he feels towards aristocratic Achilles. The prospects of demagoguery and nihilistic anarchy loom once we have an exploited army united by unjust suffering; the demos must never see that sacred hierarchy ultimately rests on the human soul unknowingly denying itself. As they vainly defy Zeus' will, Hera and Poseidon hint that their brother's claims to total power are not as absolute as he says. This is also mimed in Odysseus' duel with the Cyclopes when the hero claims to act in Zeus' name. Wordy Polyphemus, the hero's own ugly shadow, voices the resentment of the chthonic life forces exploited by Cronos' crooked son. But this craft of cheating craftsman is not a tool to be readily turned against its users; if not used prudently, it can be a potent demagogic/fascist device once the many wrest power from their rulers. Freedmen must not emulate divine power; they should try instead to become fully human. Homeric humanism deftly steers between the Charybdis of greedy kings and the Scylla of the mob.

This is why the potential Achilles stands for must not be ruled by Ares or armed by Hephaestus. While he posthumously serves as an archetype by which angry youth are manipulated, Achilles himself is not courageous; true courage is erotic, it is not born of thumos, rage, or despair. Achilles is as solipsistic as Hamlet, but his rage is indulged by Thetis the ultimate helicopter parent. His guilt for Patroclus reveals all that is left of Achilles' humanity. Patroclus was the last human Achilles had a loving relationship with. His lover's affection was all that could contain Achilles' titanic rage. After his death, many mediocre myths about his quasi-divine rage for glory began to possess/infect other men, even Penelope's wooers. The myths made its victims as blind to results as to causes; they were happy to live in the immediate now, in the presence of the deluding power possessing them. Ares is not in the *Odyssey*; he is replaced by the giant shadow of Achilles. Ares only exists in the past via pre-Homeric bards, or in a caricatured form, in the present, as the suitors.

By reducing Ares to human proportions, both in his comic portrait of the god and by his tragic account of Achilles, Homer makes it possible for the contagious power of rage to be understood and addressed. But as we saw, Ares will be reincarnated as Mars the father of Romulus founder of Rome. Such a resurrection spells death to city and Eros; Roma is Amor spelled backwards. It represents a recipe by which a cold-blooded will to power can be made sacred and eternal; in effect, the so-called Eternal City is actually the death of the city state and the triumph of oligarchic family values. By contrast, Athena stands for the erotic ideal of a polity based on the potential for logos in all. The *Odyssey* may be read in this political way, not as the mother of all revenge tales.

Moving To The *Odyssey*

This political reading can be summed up simply. While Achilles saw too late that political theology's gods are as unjust as its goals are empty, Odysseus is fated to atone for his sins and order his soul. Only then can he reconcile with Athena and receive a new account of divine justice, Troy's true treasure, that may be brought back to Hellas. The two Homeric works are two halves of a whole: the first, a tragedy describing the perennial temptations inherited by every generation; and the second, an epic prescribing how these psychic diseases are cured. But while all youth seek to be Achilles, a truth as universal as that attributing mortality to Socrates, few gain the telos of life; Odysseus' self-knowledge is as hard to hold as Socratic wisdom. The *Iliad* attracts the diseased many by its angry allure before a self-selected few are cured by continually re-reading the *Odyssey*.

While Homer is magnificently impartial in his refusal to take sides in the tragic conflict between Greeks

and Trojans in the *Iliad*, it is evident in the *Odyssey* that there is a chasm between the two texts that has to be resolved. There is also a most urgent political problem to be addressed. This state of affairs may be seen to stem from the *Iliad* and the Trojan War but is found to derive more immediately from Achilles and Agamemnon. The mimetic attraction exerted by the former and the latter's inability to assert legitimate authority have led to the state of affairs we see at the start of the *Odyssey*. It is not just the anarchy in Ithaca that is troubling. Many of the best heroes have perished and those who survive are but shadows of their great reputations. For all their fine war stories and professed love for his father, neither Nestor nor Menelaus can offer Telemachus even minimal military aid. They can no longer lay claim to Zeus-given authority over their war veterans or their angry orphans. This is why Odysseus is warned not to return home as Agamemnon did.

The losses and disillusionment caused by the war has made the alliance between Greeks forged by Agamemnon disintegrate. Anarchy reigns in many places and there is no longer any stomach for war or respect for rule. While Nestor, the ultimate survivor, is now more priest than king, Menelaus seems to rely on magic potions and money to rule Sparta. The Dark Ages are upon Hellas and they result from the Trojan War's bitter aftereffects. Before it men thought they were divine puppets; too weak for self-rule, they preferred currying favor with gods and kings that licensed them to violate the even weaker. But the war exposed the weakness and folly of kings and even gods. Men who cannot trust their betters often lose the power to believe in their own virtue or that of others.

Hannah Arendt saw that politics, the basis of any human community that fosters true virtue, is the opposite of violence. The *Iliad* and *Odyssey* both reveal this crucial disjunction. In the *Iliad* Ajax and Priam are both braver than Achilles for neither embraced rage. Aristotle teaches that courage involves virtuous but risky acts chosen deliberately despite loving life and hating death. While Ajax is always there for his comrades, Achilles likes to slaughter the fleeing for his greater glory. His psychopathic indifference to other lives is punctured by his lover's death; Patroclus' display of civic courage shows the emptiness of Achilles' entitled excellence; love, courage, humility, and friendship are all erotic and relational virtues. As such, they are alien to Achilles' thumotic soul.

No longer secure in his thumotic identity as the chosen one, Achilles is driven back from his unreflective "heroic" existence between divine and human realms, down to the shallow depths of his soul. It now means little for him to be the spoiled darling of the gods. Even if fools imitate him and envy his great menis, Achilles' spirit is already dead. In his lurid tale of the underworld Odysseus hints that like Heracles, the *Iliad*'s hero is in two places at once; despite the rage that made his glory immortal in

Hellas, Achilles' soul only knows self-hatred in Hades. It is clear that he does not want to be recalled or admired for acts that now torment him eternally. He wishes to be even less than a slave; even a slave is trustworthy within limits. We too realize that Achilles is limitless and untrustworthy. Role models like him make politics—and its basis, trust—impossible.

It follows that Achilles, being incapable of friendship, is inimical to cities and civilization; he must not be seen as the West's founding hero but as the hater of every city and wall—not just Troy's. Walls do not make a city, but a wall of fear is built around the Greek camp after Achilles changes the quality of the comradeship between this band of pirates. Even Troy becomes less of a city by the favor Zeus bestows on Hector at Achilles' request. Though for a while Hector is the besieger of the Greek walls he is but Achilles' factor, even before donning his fatal armor. Is the temporary rout of the Greeks due to Hector, Achilles, or Zeus? Once Zeus withdraws his favor, hubris-hungover Hector elects to fight outside the walls, dooming himself and his city. The loss of Hector cost the Trojans more than Achilles' death weakened the Greeks. It could even be that Achilles had to die before Odysseus takes Troy; glory is exchanged for guile and human intellect seems to matter more than the short-lived gifts of immoral gods. It is as if Odysseus must bring Achilles down with Heracles' bow for the war to end. Athena's metis has to defeat Ares' raging menis.

The reader of the *Iliad* has knowledge that neither Greeks nor Trojans were privy to. Intelligence of Thetis's successful request that Zeus help her son by humbling Agamemnon's forces helps us see through the brazen "armor of the lie" worn by Achilles; he is not one who hates more than the gates of Hades someone who says one thing and means another. While Nestor shrewdly suspects that Achilles has a secret deal with Zeus, a deal never disclosed even to Patroclus, but which serves as the basis for his confident expectation that Agamemnon will come begging to him, we see that Achilles is not just a spoilt glory-hound but a real traitor. This pledge explains Achilles' belated promise to arm when his own ships were attacked. But, as with most divine bargains, he is fooled when Patroclus is killed. Then, as Phoenix warned, an ugly thumotic necessity, born of rage, shame, and self-hatred makes Achilles take up arms but at the cost of the immortal glory he madly desired.

Achilles stands for the disillusionment of the young with corrupt leaders and the rigged community norms sustaining them. Like him they return to their tents or Hobbesian suburbs and commodious booty. While Achilles' earlier immediate and unreflective "all-in" state is like Heidegger's fatalistic rejection of self-knowledge, for it lets us be at the disposal of Zeus or Hitler, his deep grief is proof of a soul's existence. But this sorrow must be led from the tent/cave and clad decently—not left in the

brazen armor of the lie. Achilles was first ruled by false value-markers that disordered his soul; those were norms of virtue set by corrupt Agamemnon. These honors he rejects with fitting disgust. But nihilism is not the answer. Neither is a long obscure life. We turn to the *Odyssey*. It is Odysseus who must "transition" from Ares/Achilles into himself: he must be more than a Hephaestus who captures the Achilles-miming suitors of Aphrodite/Helen's cousin in his web of lies and trickery.

How A City Should Read The *Iliad*

Achilles' tale is tragic, not epic. The *Iliad* is cautionary and not foundational. After losing his quasi-divine self-sufficiency, realizing that he too needs the political goods of love and comradeship, Achilles sees that his peers could no longer give him respect or friendship. Since he is favored by gods and not truly fighting beside them, he is merely a tool for victory: like Philoctetes' bow. So even killing Hector is empty; it cannot remove the disgrace or negative *kleos* he sustained by allowing Patroclus to be killed in his place. Achilles reveals the extent of his knowledge when he rigs the games for Patroclus. Earlier he rejected the glory gained from a rigged war and the cheating Olympians. Next believing there is nothing more and, playing the role of Zeus as he presides over the funeral games, he offered a less violent glory for those like Antilochus who belong to the next generation. Then, as noted, he meets a braver man than himself: Priam. Priam's futile love for his dead son penetrated Achilles' arms and did what Hector could not. The *Iliad* teaches that there is no glory without courage; but this quality is born of love, not from mad despair or tragic *thumos*.

Tragedy exposes the deeper rules undergirding the beauty of the cosmos and the tragic hero is happy to see this sublime vision, even in death, although he gains no profit from this insight and lacks the ability to take it back to the cave. Achilles is not truly the best; what he has is the unfair favor of the gods, compounded further by the treacherous deal he makes with Zeus. This inequity is imaged in Patroclus' funeral games. It is also so with Ajax; it is ultimately the favor of Athena who gives Odysseus Achilles' arms. Yet this very apotheosis as Achilles/Ares destroys Odysseus; he cannot educate his own soul. As Heraclitus said, "it is difficult to fight *thumos*, it buys what it wishes at the cost of psyche" DK B85. Odysseus must learn to renounce this rough magic, become invulnerable in the heel and spike the landing or return to common humanity in a way that truly redeems the ache/rage of his *laos*/people. This is how he truly surpasses Achilles! The hero of the *Iliad* merely stands beside the people's pain but does not mitigate or represent it. Homeric tragedy becomes true epic in the *Odyssey*. Here, instead of living off his *thumos*, Odysseus uses his psychic and erotic ability to see all souls and cities. He thus gives fine expression in both speech and deed to what Aristotle would describe much later as a soul's

power to be all things. The soul is also the basis for the axiomatic assertion of human equality, a lofty ideal first explored in the *Odyssey*.

The Greeks came to see that human souls were best cultivated in a polis. And, as Aristotle tells us in his *Ethics*, a polity finds its origin in the extension of friendship. The *Iliad* shows how even the gifts and favors of the gods were not sufficient to actualize Achilles' soul. While interactions among the Greeks provide fine examples of comradeship, their union does not on final analysis exist to foster a good life for all; despite providing us many pregnant pre-political instances of ad hoc deliberation among pirate kings, their discussions pertain to tactics rather than the common good. It is only after the war's bitter pyrrhic end that the true interests of the many become visible.

But Troy does not serve as an example of a polis either. Priam's city is but the oikos or household of a wealthy family; the Trojans do not argue over strategy or discuss whether or not Helen should be returned to Menelaus. It is hard to imagine the besieged men of Troy putting Paris' marital bliss before their bodily safety and fighting ten long years just for Helen. While men like Priam and Hector were pious, and duly offered fine sacrifices to the gods, there is something lacking in merely ritual virtue—although failing to honor the Olympians in this way will certainly incur their ill favor. Trojan piety is stagnant and there is no mutually beneficial interaction with the gods; Troy's god-built walls are too thick. The towering city of Ilium is but a royal citadel held together by its great wealth. His gold lets Priam indulge Paris, buy allies, and withstand a long siege. It is vital to see that Odysseus' household is like Troy. Here too, great wealth is feasted away and not replenished.

But the *Iliad* also gives many reminders that Olympus itself is like a rich household. The gods seem to lead an Epicurean existence that is only relieved by the excitement of the war. But even the gods are not truly self-sufficient since they crave honor and a self-knowledge they cannot give themselves; it seems that happiness or eudaimonia is closely related to divine activity beside heroic mortals; the deathless gods can only revel in their power when they use it meaningfully. This involves human tragedy and not divine comedy. Left to themselves the gods are like the idle playful Phaiakians, and Athena is no better than lovesick princess Nausicaa; it seems that even gods must go "slumming" like Paris to find beauty and meaning beyond their perfect essentiality. Even the gods are political animals; they can best be groomed, known, or seen by us in a just city.

The converse of this ironic situation is seen in the *Odyssey's* second half; now we find that the heroes whom the gods need do not hold virtue apart from the gods or their fellow men. This is the essence of

tragedy; the case of Achilles is paradigmatic and not exceptional. As much as we admire towering Ajax, he is not self-sufficiently clad in virtue. Sophocles will have jealous Athena break Ajax: first by seducing him with glory, then manipulating his rage, and finally leading him to see his comrades through divine eyes: as cattle. While Ajax never manifested this fury when he took on Hector and was most himself when he fought fearless foes threatening these comrades, he seems no better than an angry ox once Athena champions Odysseus, his rival for the arms of Achilles.

Upon final analysis the *Iliad* could be read as a duel between a god and man: Zeus and Achilles. Both seek to remain in unrivalled unchanged superiority and yet, by the tragedy's end, both have lost. While Achilles' fall is more overtly imminent, the seeming victor—following a pattern seen with Patroclus, Hector, and even Achilles himself—is warned of his own swift approaching death. Even as Zeus and Apollo will unite to bring about the end of Achilles, seemingly the greatest threat to the limits between gods and men, the doomed mortal's disillusioned rage has exposed the “two-faced double-dealing” ways of Zeus and himself. While these most ignominious epithets were hurled at Ares, careful readers/hearers of the *Iliad* know that the god and man to whom they best apply are Zeus and Achilles. They are as badly exposed as Patroclus was before Hector slew him.

But how then do we deal with the problem of Achilles? His angry ghost appears before each new generation of disillusioned youth, and his siren song lures them towards short brief lives of rage and destruction. As noted before, the issue is most acute in our time; surely it is not by chance that a zombie-resurrection of the Greek gods occurs before us. Hobbes' mad “war of all against all” has reached a crescendo today with a loss of faith in Christian logos and a recognition that our technocratic elites are as shamelessly corrupt as they are ignorant. We must find a better way of interaction between gods and men before Achilles' rage gives us up to scavenging birds and dogs. In short, the corruption of Agamemnon/Hillary does not prove Thersites/Trump to be our savior.

I will conclude by saying that Homer's solution to the problem of Achilles is to be found in his *Odyssey*. While the *Iliad* describes it with unmatched eloquence, the problem would have existed whether not Homer would have given it expression; but his tragic poem provides an account of Menis and its causes that makes it possible for us to discern the outlines of a response. We need to conceive of a relation between gods and men in terms that are less adversarial and fatalistic. Homer helps to us view Achilles skeptically, to not allow his blazing anger and mimetic attraction to blind our capacity for prudent action. Odysseus exemplifies this human power when he successfully prevents Achilles from leading the army against Troy before it was fed. Homer likewise provides intellectual nourishment that protects

his careful readers from the heady intoxication of the Menis he describes so well; he makes it possible for us to not be stampeded into seeing Troy through Achilles' bloodshot eyes; as noted, Agamemnon's corruption does not make Achilles infallible or even right. The armor of glory given him by Hephaestus make Achilles' soul hard to see. It is only by studying his afterlife, in Hades and Hellas, that the tragic truth of Achilles becomes visible. As we shall see, even Odysseus must overcome Achilles' blinding charisma if he is to return home.

While Bruno Snell brilliantly describes Homeric divinities as puppeteers manipulating men through strings attached to their various emotions and vital organs, Vico is more faithful to the esoteric intent of Homer. He depicts heroes wrestling with their gods, much as Jacob did with the Angel of the Lord, gaining meaning and identity from this nightlong struggle. I suggest that a similar *agon* is undertaken in the *Odyssey* by its hero, himself a peerless wrestler as Book 23 of the *Iliad* recounts. But Odysseus must not only strive against the gods, he has to also contend with two other equally slippery opponents: his own soul and the *Iliad* itself. For this ultimate trial he must descend into the psychic underworld and reconstitute the collective consciousness of Hellas. His tale gives posterity a mythic account of a higher justice, a subtle erotic power that guides souls better than anointed king or jealous god could. The humanistic arc of civilization itself originates from Odysseus' bow and Homer's lyre. The following book seeks to describe this epic beginning.

The [featured image](#) shows Dante, Homer, Virgil on Mount Parnassus (detail), by Raphael, painted ca. 1510-1511.

