IDENTITY IN THE ILIAD:

What does Achilles think of himself?

by Stanley Lombardo

The same question of course could be asked about Agamemnon, or Hector, or Helen, or any of the major characters in the Iliad. We feel that we know them as distinct personalities. The question I'm interested in is whether we feel that they know themselves, and if they do, how, and how well. They certainly have self-images that they are capable of projecting onto their public, but they also have perceptions about themselves that we associate with some deeper kind of self-reflection.

There is a broad range of phenomena here. Hector's conversation with himself before the walls of Troy in Iliad 22 (famously discussed by Julian Jaynes[1]) is a kind of self-probing unique in the Iliad. More typical is Hector conveying to Andromache his understanding of himself as motivated partly by "shame before the Trojan men and women." Helen likes, for whatever reason, to create the impression that she has a low opinion of herself as a moral agent. Agamemnon expresses to the assembled troops his awareness that he is subject to fits of moral blindness. Even Briseis, whose lament over the fallen Patroclus is her only speech in the poem, manages to create a poignant sense of herself in the few lines she has. What about the poem's major character then? Is Achilles' self-knowledge proportionate to the psychological space he occupies in the poem? How deeply does he think about who he is, and what is this thinking like?

Homer gives us a base-line for how heroes think of themselves in Sarpedon's great speech to Glaucus as they are about to enter battle:

"Glaucus, you know
how you and I
Have the best of
everything in Lycia—
Seats, cuts of meat, full
cups, everybody
Looking at us as if we were gods?
(Iliad 12.319-323. All Iliad citations are from my translation.)

Well now we have to take
our stand at the front,
Where all the best fight, and
face the heat of battle,
So that many an armored
Lycian will say,
'So they're not inglorious after all,
Our Lycian lords...'
Ah, my friend, if you
and I could only
Get out of this war alive and then
Be immortal and
ageless all our days,
I would never again fight
among the foremost
Or send you into battle
where men win glory.
But as it is, death is everywhere
In more shapes than we can count,
And since no mortal is
immune or can escape,
Let's go forward, either to give glory
To another man or get
glory from him."
(Iliad 12.326-341)

Sarpedon lays out the social system in which heroes are rewarded with material goods and fame for their prowess in mortal combat, and he defines himself in terms of this system of exchanges and in terms of his mortality. Death being both universal and unpredictable, the hero sees himself as someone who has the ability to give himself a chance for the best life has to offer by taking death on.

Like Sarpedon and the other heroes, Achilles too lives and risks his life for glory and glory's tokens. But Achilles is unique and exceeds the baseline in two important ways. One is that he sees his contract as being not only with society but with Zeus himself. The other is that for Achilles death is not only a risk; his early death is a certainty. After Agamemnon has taken Briseis from him, Achilles reminds his divine mother, Thetis, of his situation:

"Mother, since you bore me
for a short life only,
Olympian Zeus was supposed
to grant me honor.
Well, he hasn't given me
any at all. Agamemnon
Has taken away my prize
and dishonored me."
(Iliad 1, 367-70)

Thetis confirms her son's perceptions and his decision to withdraw from the war. And the great hero,

...Achilles, son of Peleus
in the line of Zeus,
Nursed his anger, the great runner
idle by his fleet's fast hulls.
He was not to be seen in
council, that arena for glory,
Nor in combat, He sat tight
in camp consumed with grief,
His great heart yearning for

the battle cry and war.
(Iliad 1.517-520)

When we next meet Achilles, days and a major battle later, he is sitting outside his tent accompanying himself on his lyre as the ambassadors from Agamemnon arrive. His response to Agamemnon's offer of an apology and generous restitution is a startling rejection not only of Agamemnon's offer but of the entire heroic code that posits glory and riches as compensation for risking death in battle:

In the end, everybody
comes out the same,
Coward and hero get
the same reward.
(Iliad 9.324-27)

Nothing is worth my
life, not all the riches
They say Troy held before
the Greeks came,
Not all the wealth in
Phoebus Apollo's
Marble shrine up in craggy Pytho.
Cattle and flocks are
there for the taking;
You can always get tripods
and chestnut horses.
But a man's life cannot
be won back
Once his breath has passed
beyond his clenched teeth.
(Iliad 9.415-22)

Achilles clearly has been reassessing his life in the interval he has had for reflection. The emotional intensity of his great renunciation speech in Iliad 9 is as extraordinary as the thoughts he expresses, and of emotional intensity like this can be vital in shaping or transforming a sense of one's self. Michelle Rosaldo makes this point tellingly in an essay on feeling and the self:

It will make sense to see emotions not as things opposed to thought but as cognitions implicating the immediate, carnal 'me.'…Feeling is forever being given shape through thought and that thought is laden with emotional meaning…What distinguishes a 'cold' cognition from a 'hot' is fundamentally a sense of the engagement of the actor's self.[2]

Achilles is just this kind of fully engaged, visceral actor, and his engagement fuels "hot" cognitions, or, perhaps better, recognitions of what is most essential to him. His emotions intensify the self as a positive manifestation of identity rather than as an indication of negative self-obsession, as in this passage, which turns the stock motif of the arming of the hero into stark, physicalized characterization:

His eyes glowed
Like white-hot steel, and
he gritted his teeth
Against the grief that had
sunk into his bones,
And every motion he made
in putting on the armor
Forged for him in heaven
was an act of passion
Directed against the Trojans.
(Iliad 19.391-96)

Achilles is an isolated splendor, here and elsewhere. Yet, although in comparison to the other Greek leaders he is much less pressured by the concerns of the collective, this is because his emotional intensity attaches to individuals—his mother Thetis, his father Peleus, his girl Briseis, and his beloved Patroclus. When Patroclus is killed Achilles undergoes another, still deeper, round of emotional upheaval. In Jonathan Shay's professional assessment he becomes a berserker[3], but even in this new extremity of grief and hostility he is capable of reassessing and renouncing anger. He accepts Agamemnon's apology and restitution. Even before he sent Patroclus out to drive the Trojans back, Achilles told him,

I never meant
To hold my grudge forever.
(Iliad 16. 62-63)

And when Thetis comes to console her son over Patroclus' corpse he says to her,

I wish all strife could
stop, among gods
And among men, and
anger too—it sends
Sensible men into fits of temper,
It drips down our throats
sweeter than honey
And mushrooms up in
our bellies like smoke.
(Iliad 18. 112-16)

Achilles' expression of the seductive power of anger, cast in terms of vivid bodily sensations, is reminiscent of language that might be used by a drug addict, and suggests deep personal experience reflected upon. His concomitant wish for the universal abolition of strife and anger has a similar air of someone in recovery, perhaps the more so because it is almost immediately followed by a "but not yet" clause. He still has to kill Hector, even though he knows his own death will follow shortly. As he drives off he speaks to his divine horse, Xanthus, expressing his awareness of his imminent death in terms of separation from his mother and father:

I know in my bones I will die here
Far from my father and mother.
Still, I won't stop
Until I have made the
Trojans sick of war.
(Iliad 19.449-52)

After Hector's brutal slaying, Achilles'compulsive mistreatment of his corpse marks the low point in his consciousness, a trough so deep that it requires divine intervention. Zeus still believes in Achilles' basic decency and sets things in motion, dispatching Iris to Hector's father, Priam, and Thetis to her son. When Priam arrives in Achilles' hut, Achilles' love for his own father awakens in him sympathy for the father of his hated enemy. And he sees himself again, now as "just one child, all out of season" who can't help his father in his old age,

since I'm far
From my fatherland,
squatting here in Troy,
Tormenting you and your children.
(Iliad 24. 583-85)

Achilles' ability to see himself extends to the careful way he handles the preparation of Hector's corpse. He calls the women to wash the body and anoint it with oil,

Removing it first for fear that
Priam might see his son
And in his grief be unable
to control his anger
At the sight of his child, and
that this would arouse
Achilles' passion and he
would kill the old man
And so sin against the
commandments of Zeus.
(Iliad 24.629-33)

Achilles knows he is still Achilles. The last we see of him in the Iliad, not many lines later, the great hero is asleep in his hut by the ships,

And by his side lay lovely Briseis.

What did she think of him?

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[1] Julian Jaynes, The Origin of Consciousness in the Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind. Houghton Mifflin, 1976.

[2] Michelle Rosaldo, "Towards an Anthropology of Self and Feeling," in Culture Theory: Essays on Mind, Self and Emotion, ed. Richard A. Schweder and Robert A. LeVine, Cambridge, 1984, 138, 143.

[3] Jonathan Shay, Achilles in Vietnam. New York, 1994, 77-79.

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Professor of Classics at the University of Kansas, is a native of New Orleans. He has a B.A. from Loyola University in New Orleans, an M.A. from Tulane University, and a Ph.D. from the University of Texas (1976). In 1976 he joined the faculty at the University of Kansas, where he served as department chair for fifteen years and teaches Greek and Latin at all levels, as well as general courses on Greek literature and culture. He was awarded a Kemper Teaching Fellowship by the university and a Mortar Board Teaching Award. He is currently director of the University Honors Program.

Professor Lombardo's publications are primarily literary translations of Greek poetry, including Homer's Iliad (Hackett, 1997; reviewed in the New York Times, 7/20/97; recipient of the Byron Caldwell Book Award; performed by Aquila Theatre Company at Lincoln Center, 1999); Homer's Odyssey (Hackett, 2000, a New York Times Book of the Year); and translations of Plato, Hesiod, Callimachus, and of Sappho, which was a finalist for the 2003 Pen Literary Award for translation; and most recently Virgil's Aeneid, also a finalist for a Pen award and reviewed in the New York Review of Books (April, 2007). He also maintains an interest in Asian philosophy and has co-authored a translation of Tao Te Ching and co-edited an anthology of classical Zen texts. His translation of Dante's Inferno will appear in 2009.

Professor Lombardo has given dramatic readings of his translations on campuses throughout the country, as well as at such venues as the Smithsonian Institution, the Chicago Humanities Festival and on C-SPAN and National Public Radio. He has recorded and released award-winning audio books (Parmenides Press) of his Homer translations.

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