



**The Funeral of Achilles; An Epilogue to the 'Iliad' in Book 24 of the 'Odyssey'**

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THE FUNERAL OF ACHILLES;  
AN EPILOGUE TO THE *ILIAD* IN  
BOOK 24 OF THE *ODYSSEY*

By OLIVER WHITEHEAD

Critical comment on the end of the *Odyssey* has centred on a two-fold question: first, is Book 24, together with the last 76 lines of Book 23, an interpolation? And secondly, does this final section of the poem add significantly to the content or meaning of the poem as a whole, whether or not its originality can be established? Two of Homer's early critics, Aristophanes and Aristarchus, are reported by the scholiasts to have placed the ending of the poem at Book 23, line 296. However, the terms used for 'ending' (πέρας, τέλος) are subject to varying interpretations. It is uncertain whether these expressions indicate that the text in its entirety ends at this point, or simply that the substance of the narrative ends here, in which case what follows is inessential. Recent commentators have carried on the controversy; however, despite some forceful arguments to the contrary, the dominant consensus now favours the unitarian position.<sup>1</sup> The present discussion will attempt to reinforce this position and specifically to explore some ramifications of the second *Nekyia* which have not yet been fully dealt with.

W. B. Stanford has shown how the final episodes fulfil certain specific nostalgic longings on which the narrative of Odysseus' wanderings lays considerable stress, such as the need to be reunited with Laertes and for the recovery of his possessions. He concludes, in accordance with his initial purpose, that the passage is an integral and essential part of the poem.<sup>2</sup> However, one might go beyond Stanford's argument and suggest a further relevance of the underworld episode in particular for an overall reading of the poem. In this episode, in which the shades of Achilles and Agamemnon meet those of the suitors, and the stories of the burial of Achilles and the revenge of Odysseus are juxtaposed, the *Odyssey* self-consciously comments on its function as a moral lesson or example; but beyond this, its implications extend back to the *Iliad*, and it can be seen as supplying a delayed epilogue to the earlier poem. It would not be difficult to establish – though it is beyond the scope of the present essay to do so – that the reassessment of the Iliadic world-view is a recurrent concern of the *Odyssey*; here, we will confine our aims merely to an attempt to show that the episode in question is an integral part of this reassessment, and therefore of the *Odyssey* as a whole.

In brief, a concern with the *Iliad*, and also with the area of the past

which lies between the narratives of the two poems, is expressed throughout the *Odyssey*. The references to the Trojan War in the *Odyssey* constitute an important determining factor in our evaluation of the ultimate goal or *telos* of that poem, inasmuch as it is defined morally and philosophically. The movement of the poem towards a vision of political order and domestic peace is also a movement away from the divisive and violent world of the Trojan War; the return to Ithaca is also a return from Troy. The attitude towards the Trojan War in the *Odyssey* reflects this process of reevaluation. It is typified by Nestor in his speech to Telemachus in Book 3, 103ff., in which he recalls the events of the war as a series of 'sorrows' and 'evils'. His sentiments are clearly identified with those of Odysseus, too, when the latter weeps in response to the recitation by Demodokos of events at Troy (8.83ff., 521ff.). Perhaps the strongest retrospective comment on the *Iliad* is Menelaos' renunciation of the value of possessions – one of the fundamental imperatives of the warrior society – in Book 4:

I wish I lived in my house with only a third part of all  
these goods, and that the men were alive who died in those days  
in wide Troy land far away from horse-pasturing Argos.

(4.97–9)<sup>3</sup>

By presenting these attitudes towards the war, the poet clearly implies a critique of the heroic values of the *Iliad*. At the same time, however, he repeatedly forces himself and his characters to overcome their reluctance to recall the war. The effect of these reminiscences is to complete or fulfil the narrative of the *Iliad*. Most of the episodes recalled take place after the conclusion of the *Iliad*, centring on the period from the sack of Troy to the earlier *nostoi*, in particular that of Agamemnon. The stories told by Helen in Book 4 deal with a spying expedition of Odysseus not mentioned in the *Iliad*, and with the episode of the Wooden Horse. The latter story also occupies a central position in the second narrative of Demodokos in the Phaiakian court, while the first, which recounts an argument between Odysseus and Achilles, is again external to the *Iliad*. All these episodes, however, are clearly presented with the *Iliad* in mind; indeed, the fact that the narrative of the *Iliad* is not reduplicated at any point suggests an intention to supplement the earlier poem and to stretch the *Odyssey*'s field of vision back towards a point of contact with the *Iliad*.

The second *Nekyia* in Book 24 is the culmination of this particular concern of the *Odyssey*. Here, the fate of Achilles – the chief content of the *Iliad* – is brought to a conclusion, and its relationship with the meaning of the *Odyssey* is made clear. Thus, the *Odyssey* provides a delayed epilogue to the *Iliad*. Through this epilogue, the *Odyssey* clarifies its own meaning by reflecting on or reinterpreting the *Iliad*.

This becomes apparent in the interrelationship between the narratives of Agamemnon and Amphimedon, and Agamemnon's final dictum in lines 192–202. In this scene, each story takes on an exemplary character, each narrator is primarily concerned with illustrating a final judgement on his or another's destiny. In the tone of the dialogue, then, there is an implication that the underworld has become an allegorical situation, in which the figures permanently embody the essence of their destinies on earth, as do the souls in Dante's *Inferno*.<sup>4</sup> In the course of the scene, three major lines of the Trojan Cycle are skilfully interlocked: the Achilles theme, the murder of Agamemnon, and the story of the *Odyssey* itself.

The setting of the scene begins at line 15, the introductory lines having dealt with the passage of the suitors' souls to the underworld, under the guidance of Hermes. An association with the *Iliad* is suggested in this line, which ends in the formula Πηληιάδεω Ἀχιλῆος, echoing the first line of the *Iliad*: 'Sing to me, goddess, of the wrath of Achilles, son of Peleus' (Πηληιάδεω Ἀχιλῆος). However, as the narrative continues, the attention of any reader familiar with the *Iliad* is quickly drawn to another scene in that poem. In Book 18 of the *Iliad*, following the account of the battle over Patroklos' corpse, Antilochos runs back to Achilles' ships to tell him the news of Patroklos' death. The first three characters described in the underworld are again Achilles, Patroklos, and Antilochos. The recurrence of this grouping is not unnatural in itself; after all, Patroklos and Antilochos are the two greatest friends of Achilles. But the connection between the two scenes extends further than this: when Antilochos announces Patroklos' death in the *Iliad*, Achilles' reaction is itself deathlike. In lines 25–6 of the *Iliad* 18, Achilles lies in the dust, 'mightily in his might' (μέγας μεγαλωστί). Exactly the same formula is used by Agamemnon in the *Odyssey* 24, to describe the actual death of Achilles:

and you in the turning dust lay  
mightily in your might, your horsemanship all forgotten.  
(39–40)

There are, again, elaborate descriptions of the mourning of Thetis and the sea-nymphs in both scenes (*Iliad* 18.35–64, and *Odyssey* 24.47–59). Altogether, the two passages exhibit a striking set of similarities. One might at this point merely conclude that the author of the passage wrote from a familiarity with the *Iliad* and saw the mourning episode in the latter poem as an appropriate model for Agamemnon's account, and have done with it. But are we not perhaps justified in asking why the passage echoes a description of a hero in mourning, rather than one who is actually dead? What makes the question particularly interesting is that the passage in the *Odyssey* seems to uncover a symbolic sense

implicit in its Iliadic model. In its own context, the scene in the *Iliad* has been convincingly read as a prefiguration of the death of Achilles.<sup>5</sup> From Book 18 onwards, the major tensions underlying the last part of the *Iliad* arise from the dislocation which exists between Achilles' projected or symbolic death and its consummation.<sup>6</sup> Literal references to his death become increasingly explicit as the narrative moves forward. From the ambiguous prophecy reported by Achilles in Book 9, 410–16, the certainty of his death emerges in his words to Lycaon in Book 21, 110–13. This prediction is refined to an even more specific degree in the last words of Hektor (22.358–60) and again by the ghost of Patroklos in Book 23, 80–81. Within the pattern of the total narrative of the *Iliad*, these predictions are merely reiterations of the unquestionable fact of Achilles' death which is initially demanded by the death of Patroklos, and whose necessity is revealed by the symbolic implications of the mourning scene in Book 18. The need for Achilles to complete his death, which has already begun in the death of Patroklos, gradually becomes the point towards which the story moves, though this point is external to the poem itself. However, within the limits of the poem, there are frequent anticipations of or substitutions for this goal. In Achilles' vision in Book 23, Patroklos requests that their bones be buried together in the urn which Thetis gave to Achilles (83–92). Again, there is an implication in the terms of Priam's night-journey to Achilles in Book 24 that Achilles is already in the land of the dead.<sup>7</sup>

The death of Achilles, then, is the dominant concern of the last part of the *Iliad*, and its meaning is fully explored. The significance of his death lies in the immanence with which it pervades his life. Achilles' knowledge of his death becomes a formulation of the *telos* of all heroic action, in that it represents the ultimate object of heroic knowledge. However, it is only in the context of a continuing state of warfare that this knowledge can be attained. It is therefore essential that the *Iliad* be open-ended, and that any ultimate resolution be precluded by the narrative. The meeting between Priam and Achilles in Book 24, although it conveys a vision of common humanity which temporarily suspends the motives of war, does not ignore the necessity for the continuation of the fighting after its purpose has been accomplished; Priam's last words to Achilles are:

and on the twelfth day we will fight, if indeed it is necessary  
(667)

and the burial of Hektor is carried out in fear of a breach of this truce by the Achaians (739–800), so that, up to the last lines of the poem, the continuation of the war is held in the awareness of both the poet and the participants in the story.

This open-endedness of Achilles' life and destiny is an essential part of the meaning of the *Iliad*; the transcendent knowledge which Achilles achieves consists in the internalization of the meaning of death, rather than in the physical event of death itself. The speech of Agamemnon in the *Odyssey* 24 looks back on this achievement and reformulates it. The events described in Agamemnon's speech respond to and fulfil the expectations set up within the last part of the *Iliad*. Achilles' symbolic projected death in Book 23 is satisfied. In essence, a projected goal not fulfilled within the *Iliad* is supplied. The accomplishment of this end, however, does not imply that the *Iliad* is intrinsically incomplete; rather it forces the reader or audience to reevaluate the earlier poem. The terms of Agamemnon's tribute to Achilles are consistent with his character as it is portrayed in the *Iliad*, especially in Book 9. For, while the central interest of Achilles' character is his capacity to see beyond the limitations of the value placed on external tokens of honour, Agamemnon expresses his greatness only in terms of the material objects surrounding his death: the extravagant sacrifices around his funeral pyre, the golden jar of Thetis, the size of his burial mound and so forth. Agamemnon ends his speech with a kind of eulogy, in which he affirms that Achilles was loved by the gods and that his reputation is immortal (92-4). And yet the qualities through which Achilles became godlike and the true meaning or content of his fame are not spoken of by Agamemnon. The greatness of Achilles has become reduced to definable, physical dimensions.

As this scene continues, the story of the *Iliad*, as conveyed by Agamemnon's speech, is brought into relation with the story of the *Odyssey* itself. It becomes apparent that Agamemnon's ironic and eternal misunderstanding of Achilles is, at bottom, a prelude to a lament for himself. Agamemnon's pleasure in dwelling on the details of Achilles' funeral arises, we feel, from the bitter memory of his own contrastingly disgraceful fate; Achilles got what Agamemnon aspired to, though ironically Achilles himself, as we know from the *Iliad*, would have treated this display of esteem with contempt. This implicit contrast between himself and Achilles is at work throughout Agamemnon's speech. This sense of contrast becomes more explicit after Amphi-medon's account of Odysseus' revenge. Here, Agamemnon turns from Achilles to Odysseus as a model against which to hold up the example of his own evil fate. More precisely, he contrasts their wives, setting them up as examples of virtue and vice:

O fortunate son of Laertes, Odysseus of many devices,  
surely you won for yourself a wife endowed with great virtue.  
How good was proved the heart that is in blameless Penelope,  
Ikarios' daughter, and how well she remembers Odysseus,

her wedded husband. Thereby the fame of her virtue shall never die away, but the immortals will make for the people of earth a thing of grace in the song for prudent Penelope. Not so did the daughter of Tyndareos fashion her evil deeds, when she killed her wedded lord, and a song of loathing will be hers among men, to make evil the reputation of womankind, even for one whose acts are virtuous.

(192–202)

In this passage, we see how the shift from Achilles to Odysseus as paradigmatic figures underlines the transition from the heroic ethos of the *Iliad* to the more morally delineated universe of the *Odyssey* in which the gods are concerned more with matters of good and evil than with heroic honour.

In Agamemnon's speech we can also see how the poem reflects self-consciously on its own status as narrative. The speech illustrates how the story will come to be told and retold in a process from which the poem itself is ultimately to evolve, under the sanction of the 'immortals'. Clearly the epigrammatic, proverbial quality of Agamemnon's line is reductive in its effect – much of the significance which the reader (or audience) has seen in the greater narrative is excluded from his simple, exemplary formula. But this simplicity carries an authority, reinforced by the perspective of the underworld, in which events in time are seen, in a Hellenistic sense, *sub specie aeternitatis*, and their moral essence is abstracted. The force of the lines, then, is that they provide for the reader an indication that a certain kind of response is required, which is, in a sense, prescribed by the human and divine authors of the song.

The *Odyssey* sets itself apart from the *Iliad* in relation not only to its ethical premisses but also to its narrative structure; the examination of the second *Nekyia* shows us that these two characteristics are inter-related. Unlike the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* is strongly marked by the dynamics of the closed text. The closure of the *Odyssey* is a function not only of its ending but of its entire structure. Odysseus' absence from Ithaka creates the conditions in which alone the progressive unfolding of the story is possible; the events of the ending – Odysseus' return, the slaughter, the reunion with Penelope and the final battle – accordingly remove the possibility of any further extension of the narrative, unlike any configuration of events in the *Iliad*. The *Odyssey*'s reassessment of the system of values affirmed in the *Iliad* is, as we can see from the dialogue of Achilles and Agamemnon in Book 24, at the same time an imposition of closure in retrospect on the narrative of the *Iliad*. The passage reveals the force of two interrelated demands: one for closure, the other for moral clarity. Both are fundamental to the shaping of the *Odyssey* and both suggest that the poem's composition was guided by a greater need than that of the *Iliad* to sub-

ordinate poetry as mere *mimesis* to the moral vision of the poet and his society.

## NOTES

1. Denys Page is a vigorous supporter of the analytic approach in *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford, 1955). Page particularly argues against the original status of the dialogue in the underworld: 'The text itself affords clear evidence that the conversation of Achilles and Agamemnon was not originally designed to stand where it stands today' (p. 119). More recent commentators, however, have concentrated on defending the place of the passages in question. Stanford, in his article 'The Ending of the Odyssey: An Ethical Approach' (*Hermathena* 100 (1965)), shows how the passages satisfy teleological expectations set up within the earlier narrative. Other critics have addressed the traditional objections more directly: Carroll Moulton, in 'The End of the Odyssey' (*GRBS* 15 (1974), 153-69), demonstrates the inconclusiveness of the arguments based on the Scholium and on linguistic anomalies within the passage; Dorothea Wender's *The Last Scenes of the Odyssey* (*Memnosyne* supplement 52 (Leiden, 1978)) makes the most concerted recent effort to dismiss the Aristarchan objections and establish the unitarian view.

2. Op. cit. above, n. 1.

3. All quotations are cited in Richmond Lattimore's translations (*The Iliad*, Chicago, 1961, and *The Odyssey*, New York, 1968).

4. As Auerbach, in *Dante: Poet of the Secular World* (Chicago, 1927), notes, it is always the essential moment in the life of each character that is preserved permanently in the afterlife, especially in the *Inferno*.

5. C. H. Whitman, in *Homer and the Heroic Tradition* (Cambridge, 1958), argues that the description of Achilles' mourning 'is a funeral scene, in form, differing from a real funeral only in that Achilles is as yet only symbolically dead' (p. 202).

6. If, as Whitman suggests (op. cit., p. 200ff.), Patroklos embodies the human aspect of Achilles, then from the moment at which Patroklos dies, Achilles' death is a perpetually immanent fact.

7. See Whitman, op. cit., p. 217. The role of Hermes as Priam's guide, the crossing of the Skamander and the barred gates of Achilles' residence (not mentioned elsewhere) are all suggestive of an underworld journey.