

THE HERO AS A HUMAN BEING: AN ADLERIAN READING OF ACHILLES

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Beyond Literal Teleology

Among Homeric heroes, Achilles and Odysseus are the ones who touch me the most. But in spite of being captivated by Odysseus' thirst for adventure and exploration, I have never been able to identify totally with him, for I have regarded his love of knowledge with some caution, as an obsession, a fetish that overrides every other drive and that is best avoided. Moreover, this same love of knowledge keeps him shielded from the immediacy of the experience. For instance, Odysseus wants to *listen* to the delightful and deadly song of the sirens, he wants to *apprehend* it, but is not prepared to undergo the experience and sustain the encounter on equal terms. He is not a true sailor, for the rule the sailors must obey, in Maurice Blanchot's words, is that "no allusion can be made to a goal or a destination" (1999, p. 445).

Odysseus' method is *teleological* through and through, and the way he understands teleology, not unlike deterministic, "objective" psychology understands it, is *literal*. Odysseus is the archetypal figure behind the "objective" scientist or the therapist who gorges on *facts* and is eager to set goals for his client. He is the hero occupying the province of the thoroughly modern trade of the "life

coach”, and of all those who thrive on not dealing with “pointless” and “time-wasting” traumas, early recollections, dreams and instead get to work on setting and achieving *goals*.

The subtlety of Adler’s thought can be even more appreciated when set in contrapuntal mode against such literalisms, for Adler’s teleology is, as I read it, *fictional*: neither the client, nor the therapist know the goal of therapy. The unfolding of the person’s potential is precisely what constitutes that murky realm to which Freudian orthodoxy has mistakenly given ontological reality: the fractured, driven and libidinous unconscious.

The Mortal Hero

If Odysseus embodies the myth of scientific objectivity in all its grandeur of hubris and dehumanising objectivity, in Achilles we find, conversely, a hero who is all too aware of his mortality. The feeling of human inferiority and vulnerability is all the stronger for we often witness it through the eyes of his mother, the goddess Thetis. As the son of a man and of a goddess, his very being is moulded within conflicting strains. He feels in the same way as a mortal being, and at the same time has the revelatory insight of an immortal, and such vision makes his finitude and inferiority even more painful.

Moreover, his inferiority is specifically *organ inferiority* (Achilles’ heel) to which he compensates (he becomes known as “swift-footed” Achilles). He is the only truly multifaceted, *complex* hero, endowed with both appealing and abhorrent characteristics. It would be easy to read him (and dismiss him) as the embodiment of ego and of egotistic drives, but that is a charge more appropriately moved

against Hercules, who does shadow-boxing in the Underworld, using his muscles against the dead who frighten him with their appearance on the other side of the river Styx.

Achilles, “the purest, the highest, the best of the Achaians” (Schein, 1984, p. 90) fights and kills more effectively than any other warrior, but at the same time, he is constantly aware of the fact that he is “the most-swiftly doomed”, that he will not return to Troy, that he is going to die young.

He is utterly dominated by *wrath*, which is more than mere irritability or even anger: Homer’s word is *menis*, which is the unbounded rage of a god unleashed upon humans, a terrifying rage whose intensity is inconceivable.

In the medieval Christian interpretation, Achilles is also dominated by *lust*. Following Fulgentius the Mythographer (late V or early VI Century) such medieval interpretation to which Dante also subscribed (he relegated him to the second circle of Hell, among the lustful, in the company of Paris), became dominant with Achilles’ life being re-read as a cautionary tale on the danger of an unbridled libido (King, 1987).

Achilles is a victim of *inconsulta temeritas* (inconsiderate lack of *common sense*). He displays a dangerous tendency to act from passion; classical poetry sees him as one who cannot control his temper, whereas medieval narratives chastise his sexual excesses, his overindulging in sensual pleasure. They disapprove of his “wandering eye”, for according to Christianity, lust begins in the organ of sight. Both classical poetry and medieval literature reprimand his lack of common sense. Such chorus of disapproval

had authoritatively started with Plato who in his *Apology* is very critical of Achilles' "illiberality of mind" and presents him as the model of what he calls the "timocratic" person, one overruled by passion and the emotions.

Achilles' death echoes the tragic fate of Samson, of David and Solomon. Achilles fell for Polyxena, an "enemy woman", to whom he reveals his vulnerable spot; he is then lured, unarmed, into Apollo's temple and killed by Paris, who shoots a poisonous arrow into his heel.

Human Search for Meaning

All evidence seems to conjure up against Achilles. He lacks common sense; he seems dominated by aggression and lust. He seemed to have lived his short life on what Adler calls "the useless side". At the same time, we must not forget that the key to his life is the omnipresent feeling of mortality, and that for him the only compensation for this oppressive sense of impermanence and inherent inferiority is the pursuit of two qualities, what the Greeks called respectively *timi*, (honour), and *kleos*, (glory). Achilles is greatly preoccupied with the problem of *meaning*, with the overriding need to give meaning to his brief existence. Katherine C. King (1987) puts it beautifully:

“It is only because death in its myriad forms is inescapable that it behoves a man to attempt to win honour, that is, to win the right to have the tangible good things in life ... All of this implies a recognition, together with *kleos* (glory), the intangible companion of *timi* that disseminates and preserves one’s name and deeds even after death, and is what gives life meaning” (p. 6).

The search for meaning is thus set against the uncertainty of life. In Book Nine of the Iliad we learn of Achilles’ fateful choice: he gave up a long, inglorious life in Phtia for a brief, dazzling existence on the battlefield. In his own thinking, he was exchanging a meaningless existence for a meaningful one.

To fully appreciate his choice we need to make the effort of entering into an archaic mode of thinking, in tune with the myths and events of which our hero is protagonist, and be willing to suspend our modern, post-modern prejudices, for these are steeped in perspectivism, in various socio-historical and personal-behaviouristic biases and filters. To understand and sympathise with Achilles’ predicament, we need to think mythically and poetically. Achilles is willing to step out of the useless side of life and to employ his natural aggression in the service of heroic deeds. This is also a way of compensating for that painful sense of inferiority eating at the core of his being.

His vulnerability arises at birth. *He is inferior because he is born*, i. e. because he is *human*. There is no claim to or reliance on heroic *invulnerability*, which in Otto Rank’s vision (1924/1993) (who was significantly, if cautiously, sympathetic to Adler’s views) is but “a kind of permanent uterus, which the hero brings with him into the world as armour, horny skin or helmet” (p. 107).

Wounded Hero and Healer

We do not find redemption in Achilles, at least not the clear-cut redemption of religious and ethical narratives as found in Christian and Buddhist literature. Buddhist texts provide us with the great example of Angulimala, who after having killed many people is converted by the Buddha to a life of humility, service and virtue. What we do find in Achilles is a very *complex* hero; a warrior who is also a *healer*. He is capable of killing with great skill, and is equally capable of healing. In Homer's words (as cited in King, 1987):

“A healer is a man worth many others, for cutting out harrows and sprinkling on kindly drugs” (p. 8).

No other great leader and warrior is as accomplished a healer as Achilles. His much loved medicine teacher was the centaur Cheiron (Il. 9.486-491), son of Kronos. As a boy of six, the wonder-child Achilles would bring the boars and lions he had killed with his “short-tipped javelin” to Cheiron's cave as gifts.

We do not find often in world literature a martial hero who is as multifaceted as Achilles. In K.C. King's words,

The *Iliad's* military hero is used to make a profound statement about the human condition. Because Achilles is not only superlative in prowess and physical beauty but also superlatively complex – possessing the skills of a healer, the uncompromising principles of an idealist, the self-knowledge of a philosopher, the artistry of a poet – readers are engaged with him as a complete human being. (King, 1987: p220)

Having learned the nuts and bolts of medicine from the wise Cheiron, later Achilles later learns compassion through fellowship with his dear friend, the sweet-tempered Patroklos. It is through his relationship with Patroklos that he learns deep human empathy. He learns from Patroklos' life, and learns even more from his death at the hands of Antilochus. Achilles' shattering cry of grief is heard by Thesis at the bottom of the sea. Kind-hearted Patroklos, "he who knew how to be sweet to everyone" (Il. 17. 671), is dead! He, who alone could bear and understand the depth of Achilles' solitude, will no longer listen to the sound of Achilles' lyre.

Achilles' proficiency for healing does not arise merely out of skill and technique, but is ingrained in his experience of grief. His is not the hard-edged professionalism of the "expert" but instead the soft heart of the wounded healer.

He is a healer who can be fierce if the situation requires it; he can employ the *yin* aspect of compassion (caring, nurturing) as well as the *yang* (stern, ferocious warrior-like).

A Man who Sings

Achilles is also "a man who sings". When Odysseus, Aias and Phoinix go to visit him, they find him, says Homer:

"Delighting his heart with a clear-sounding lyre
A beautiful one, intricately carved, with a cross-bar of silver
Which he took from the spoils when he destroyed
the city of Eetion
With it he pleased his heart, and he sang
the glorious stories of men" (Iliad, Book 11, 186-189).

There is no contradiction between the lyre and the sword. They are both at home in Achilles' character (King, 1987), but Achilles often sings his disillusionment with the heroic code. His singing is very private; only his dear friend Patroklos listens to him in silence. His are *lyric*, not epic songs; heroism is filtered through a very personal lens: heroism is intensely lonely, not unlike love gone wrong. In singing privately, he also rests, for "one must pause ... in order to renew one's capacity for tears" (Vivante, as cited in King, 1987, p. 43).

And Achilles is also merciful, for he respects the dignity of the suppliant. Apollo's criticism of him is unfair as it is obvious, for the god Apollo sides with harmonious restraint and moderation; he univocally compares Achilles to a ferocious lion, whose only purpose in battle is to kill or be killed. He is not human, Apollo objects, he does not deserve the favour of the gods.

"[He] is savage like a lion,
who yielding to his great strength and proud spirit
goes among the sheepflocks of men that he may feast"
(Iliad, Book 24, vv. 41-43).

Achilles' shield reflects the uniqueness of the "mortal hero" who carries it; it contains the entire world and, unlike other warriors' shields, it attracts its viewers rather than scares them away. The artist Hephaistos has depicted on it both the beauty and the uncertainty of life. In its centre are the sea, earth, and sky, with sun, moon and stars. Then we see two cities, one at war, and the other at peace. In the city at peace there are two scenes, one is a marriage, one is a court case. Inside the other city we see an ambush in which Strife (*Èris*), Confusion (*Kudoimos*), and Death (*Kér*) join in, and outside it rural scenes of harvesting and ploughing, with two lions

approaching, threatening such idyll. There are also young people dancing, and Ocean encircles everything. Life is depicted in all its sweetness and transience.

Conclusion

Wearing his armour and shield, fully aware of his mortality, Achilles goes to battle. He shows courage, even when thoroughly disillusioned with the heroic code. He is not the modern hero, the soldier who is sent to occupy a country - whose name he cannot pronounce – for the sake of multinational and imperialist interests. Such a “hero” is more akin to the “strong man” of the Viennese music halls whom Adler talked about (Hoffman, 1994, p. 239). The “strong man” lifts a weight with immense difficulty only to see the weight carried away with one hand by a small child during the rapturous applause. The “modern hero” is a faithful representation of the omnipotent fantasy of the human ego, unwilling to pay its respects to the gods. Achilles, on the other hand, is a flawed and at the same time remarkable example of human courage, of our human striving for meaning in the midst of the transience, uncertainty, and sweetness of life.

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