IV.—The Tragic Philosophy of the Iliad

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The Olympian pantheon does not embody the most mature religious thought of the poet or of the period responsible for the composition of the *Iliad*. Neither the corporate body of the gods nor individual members will stand that weight. When the concept of the pantheon is burdened with this thought the pantheon in fact disintegrates and a new concept begins to emerge to replace the obviously outmoded one. In a sense the pantheon is the defeated antagonist of the tragedy of the *Iliad:* the moral victory goes to man, the protagonist. The statement of that moral victory is to be found in the exposition of the poet's tragic philosophy through the development and solution of tragic conflict.[1]

The primary elements of this conflict are life and death. Bridging the chasm between the two flash the bright figures of gods and goddesses, symbolizing at once the objective truth of death and man's subjective experience of its intrusion into the whole of his world. The immortals are not confused with the reality whose manifestations they help to explain in rational terms. They never usurp the primary rôle of death, although temporarily it may become incarnate in them. However, in particular context, and in general effect, they symbolize the antagonist of life, man's arch-enemy.

The *Iliad* represents man's conflict in life with immanent death. In so far as the idea of conflict is basic to the main theme of the poem the scope of the *Iliad* is tragic rather than epic, and the two figures in whom the elements of conflict are made most explicit,

[1] In the nature of things, it is difficult to annotate an interpretation adequately and appropriately. Frequently references to the text itself fail to reduce themselves to terms sufficiently specific and limited: the very fact of interpretation demands that they be seen in the context of the whole and in conjunction with innumerable parallel details. Whatever the point of departure, Homer provides an embarrassing wealth of detail. So it is, too, with Homeric criticism. One cannot reasonably or fairly evaluate the influence of an infinite variety of editions and critical works on one's thinking at a given point. This interpretation, however, is most specifically indebted to the work of Walter Leaf, John A. Scott, C. M. Bowra, and S. E. Bassett. Throughout, quotations from the poem are taken from the translation by Lang, Leaf, and Myers.

Achilles and Hector, are tragic rather than epic heroes. A comparison of their characterization with that of an obvious epic prototype, Diomedes for example, indicates the extent to which the poet's tragic concept has outrun the epic narrative. Not only has the direction of the narrative been turned, from the point of view of the main theme, but many subsidiary episodes, characters, and details have been touched in their adaptation to the whole by this motif of tragedy. The primary redirection, however, is carried by the characterization of Achilles, and to a lesser extent, by that of Hector. Achilles and Hector between them embody the whole of the tragedy of man, the tragedy of his inner conflict of soul and of the blows dealt his outward extension of personality in his relations with other human beings. The gods have no essential intellectual or moral rôle in the development of this theme. Man fights his grim battle of life in the face of death, with no real recourse to any intermediary powers.

The tragic concepts expressed in these characters are as indicative of sophistication and self-consciousness of intellect as their delineation in character is of sophisticated artistry. It is something of a shock to realize that Achilles' conflict is mental and spiritual; that in spite of the climactic surge of physical action which releases his emotions once a solution is reached the hero of this battle story is most typically portrayed in the throes of introspection. The psychological study of Achilles is broken down into a series of crises, and the whole of this narrative of action is made to depend very vitally upon the progressive development of the hero's spiritual malaise. In such an interpretation the wrath of Achilles is certainly far from primitive. It has, however, been superimposed upon a primitive epic character, and inevitably traditional epic material and treatment occasionally necessitate modification of the design. By comparison with Hector the original Achilles of epic is representative of a simpler, more direct, less complex human type. Hector, on the other hand, carries with him all of the complexity of highly civilized man, for whom he is in fact the symbol, whose sensitivities and sensibilities he shares. As a tragic hero he is not actually individualized so subtly as Achilles is, although in himself he represents a subtler type of man. Hector is typical, the comprehensive expression of a civilization which is in process of destruction; Achilles is individual in that he is unique among the destroying agents. In comparing the two characters there is always a tend-

ency to discount Achilles' individuality because of the simplicity of the conqueror prototype and to mistake Hector's typicalness for individuality because of the greater complexity of what he typifies.

The characterization of Achilles represents an analysis of the progress of the human soul through the various stages of tragic ordeal. Achilles goes through a whole series of emotional, mental, and spiritual crises. His resentment against Agamemnon rapidly passes into a revulsion against the whole pattern of a life which predicates such situations. The ambassadors find him in an almost exalted mood of renunciation, "delighting his soul" in song, and "singing the glories of heroes" (9.186–189). Patroclus his friend sits near him in silence and throughout the colloquy which follows remains silent. He alone realizes, and thus emphasizes, the degree to which Achilles has dissociated himself from life in his contemplation of death. In his great speech to Odysseus (9.308–429) Achilles reveals this absorption with the ideas of death's inevitability and life's futility. The intensity of that mood could not be sustained indefinitely, and when Patroclus is finally emboldened to try to break through the spiritual barrier which Achilles' inhuman aloofness has raised between them, Achilles reveals to him the mental and spiritual anguish through which he has been living. "In great heaviness" he tells Patroclus of the "dread sorrow" which has come upon his heart and spirit since his quarrel with Agamemnon (16.48–55).

With Patroclus' entry into battle Achilles' withdrawal is nullified and concern for his friend and anxious foreboding as to his fate gradually subordinate his own personal problem. When he hears of the realization of his worst fears regarding Patrolcus he is moved by a storm of passionate grief which contrasts sharply with his earlier sickness of soul (18.1–126). This is a healthy emotion which demands an outlet in action for its expression—the vindication of his love for Patroclus in the accomplishment of revenge on Hector. Destruction is uppermost in his mind now—the destruction of his enemy which involves self-destruction as well. Antilochus' apprehension of this mood is expressed in his fear that Achilles may commit suicide, but Achilles' suicide is only indirect. There are some traces of resentment in him as he sees his rebellion cancelled half-fulfilled, and his heart curbed by its own deepest necessity. He taunts his mother and himself with the ironic implications of his pitiful attempt to escape decision, and its deluding

egoism. This tinge of bitter irony characterizes Achilles through the rest of the story, and is indicative of his increased stature.

After his decisive acceptance of his own destiny, "straightway may I die" (18.98), the hero turns his back on introspection for the releasing surge of action. In his self-abandonment to furious bloodletting on the field there is an element of cynicism which is more terrifying than his physical brutality. Life, he had reasoned in his earlier mood, is more precious than any possession or any ideal; but when life has cheated him of his freedom of choice he is determined to prove to the hilt the utter worthlessness of that dear prize. As before there had been only one foe, death, now there is only one enemy, life (21.99–113); and he has a monstrous impatience of anything, human or divine, which stands between him and the accomplishment of its destruction. This enormous expenditure of emotion drains him, as he realizes with self-reproach, of the capacity to feel grief for Patroclus. He has forgotten Patroclus completely on the battle-field (22.378–390). Unconsciously he has resigned himself to the acceptance of the fact of his friend's death, as he has accepted the fact of his own death. He sleeps, and in his sleep says a last farewell to Patroclus whose spirit has returned to reproach him with his forgetfulness (23.57–107), and wakes to give ritual expression to that farewell in the burial of his friend. With Patroclus he buries his own life, and calmly gives instructions for the future disposal of his own body.

Nothing in the *Iliad* so clearly reveals the poet's subtlety of mind, his profundity of imagination and of thought, as does this intimate probing of the mind and spirit of Achilles. It is significant that the poet spends his best sustained efforts on this analysis of human personality. It is equally significant that the analysis posits and demonstrates the loneliness of the human soul, its dreadful independence and necessitous self-reliance in a universe which offers only futility and defeat.

Achilles is represented in the agony of inner conflict of soul. Hector is the tragic victim of circumstances. Stature is his as the gallant leader of a doomed people in a cause he knows to be doomed. There is no room for deliberation, hesitation, or rebellion in the rôle which war thrusts upon the Trojan chief, but this necessity is converted into heroism by the positive spirit with which he meets it. Hector's passionate patriotism, his "perilous pride" (22.457) in himself and his people, betray him into fatal miscalculation on

the field, but the true tragic effect of this error is minor by comparison with the tragedy his death brings to those who love him. For where Achilles symbolizes defiance, Hector symbolizes acceptance, and the terms in which the patterns of their tragedies are developed are more passionate in Achilles' case, more pathetic in Hector's. It is essentially in terms of his family relationships that the tragedy of Hector is represented.

There is a continuous accentuation of pathos in the contrast of Hector's two rôles, that of chief weighed down by the large responsibilities of state, and that of husband, father, son, obsessed with private anxieties and fears. Aside from Achilles, perhaps the greatest Homeric characters are women. Upon them the poet lavishes those refinements of his art which make them unforgettable individuals. Three of them, Andromache, Hecuba, and Helen, are grouped about Hector, and their individuality is reflected upon him. The most sensitive and most moving expressions of human love are carried by these women. And the tragic pathos of Hector's death is measured by the widowhood of Andromache and the orphanhood of her son, the loss of her dearest son to Hecuba, her only friend to Helen.

Hector is a study of the quiet, hopeless frustration of the human heart by life. The resources of the spirit which he rallies to meet the blows dealt him by circumstances are essentially human and frail—belief and faith in the honour and rightness of expending his energies and his life in behalf of his city and his people. "One omen is best, to fight for our own country" (12.243)—this is the central article of Hector's creed. That it is a desperate faith he recognizes deep within himself but dares not allow himself to express. Instead he bolsters it with the trappings of religion, and desperately tries to translate it into faith in Zeus. The consciousness of defeat leads him into despair, occasionally; it never leads him into irony, as it does Achilles. It is the poet who turns the vanity of his faith to irony, implicitly in the account of his defeat, explicitly in the commentary of the twenty-fourth book.

There could scarcely be a sadder commentary on human life than that of the last book of the *Iliad*. The dominant motif is pessimism, pointed and relieved by irony. Achilles and Priam review the waste and futility of all high effort and all human anguish over the bodies of Patroclus and Hector. Achilles' furious defiance, Hector's desperate courage, Priam's terrible grief have beaten fran-

tically but vainly against the inexorable, relentless progress of life's tragedy and defeat. The dreadful irony of the nullification of all this tortured struggle is manifested in the two dead heroes, Patroclus, whom Achilles would have died to save yet unwittingly committed to death; Hector, whose death cannot undo the death of Patroclus and dooms Achilles. Life does not even leave men room for grief. It demands the reservation of strength in anticipation of an inevitable succession of blows. "This is the lot the gods have spun for miserable men, that they should live in pain; yet themselves are sorrowless. . . . Keep courage, and lament not unabatingly in thy heart. For nothing wilt thou avail by grieving for thy son, neither shalt thou bring him back to life or ever some new evil come upon thee" (24.525–551). This is the sum of Achilles' hard-won knowledge, all that he can pass on to Priam. Achilles has reconciled himself to the loss of Patroclus, to his own death. He has renounced self-pity. He has taken life up again with confidence only in man's capacity to suffer and endure with fortitude.

This is the one positive theme of the tragic solution. It is struck in the introduction of the book by Apollo, who condemns Achilles' continued violence and pitilessness on the score that "an enduring soul have the Fates given unto man" (24.49). The resolution of the tragedy of Achilles is in effect an affirmation of man which in its vehemence repudiates god. And this repudiation is underlined in the details of the book. In no other Homeric passage is man so clearly and persistently elevated at the expense of the gods. Their incapacity to feel sorrow and pain sets an insurmountable barrier between them and human kind. The reality of that barrier is stressed repeatedly: in Thetis' reluctance to parade her sorrow before the gods; in the clothing of her obedience in black; in the apology of Zeus' welcome to her (24.90–106). The terrible humility, the fumbling faith of the broken Priam cast reproach upon the gods which is more scathing than the iron realism of Hecuba's frank disavowal of faith. Divine compassion is, in the end, ineffectual; it cannot really touch these battered souls. Only in the fellow-feeling of their own kind can they find strength and comfort.

In this tragic context the gods have two major functions. They personify the antagonist of man, and they comment on man's tragedy in the rôle of ideal spectators. In their double rôle of

antagonist-chorus they give continuity to the diversified narrative pattern, and serve to maintain an economy of tragic effect in the luxuriance of epic episode. They are, as a group, removed from the human scene and set against it. Thus their corporate characterization serves as a commentary for the human conflict, focussing it more sharply, lending it larger perspective, in the manner of the chorus of later tragedy.

There is a further concentration of the pantheon itself in the person of Zeus. While he does not contain the concept of death and fate which functions through him by virtue of his voluntary submission to its decrees, that submission is almost such, in effect, as to assimilate the god to the impersonal force. The other gods and goddesses are in essence nothing more than extensions of his will, phases of his personality. In his own person he absorbs the function of the chorus until he becomes the personification of brooding pity and compassion. None of the other gods is touched by his deep pity for mankind. Even when he is portrayed as an individual, in relative human terms rather than in objective terms, this element of comprehensive pity and sympathy enters into his characterization. Not only is Zeus' sorrow for his son Sarpedon more human and less selfish than that of other immortals in comparative situations (16.431–461; 644–683), but by an extension of the same sympathetic quality his feeling for Hector, Achilles, and Patroclus approximates to this concern of a father for his son (e.g. 17.198–208; cf. 441–447). In this an important emotional link is established between man and Zeus: Zeus is never so deeply touched by pity for his immortal sons and daughters.

In the passage which reveals the most advanced moral concept of the poem there is the clearest indication of the attempt to resolve the conflict between man and fate in a Zeus who combines the omnipotence of fate and the compassion and the moral sense of man. This passage gives the most abstract expression of a solution which is implicit in many other particulars of the manifold aspects of Zeus. It is a striking anticipation of Aeschylean monotheism. "Moreover Prayers of penitence are daughters of great Zeus, halting and wrinkled and of eyes askance, that have their task withal to go in the steps of Sin. For Sin is strong and fleet of foot, wherefore she far outrunneth all prayers, and goeth before them over all the earth making men fall, and Prayers follow behind to heal the harm. Now whosoever reverenceth Zeus' daughters when they draw near,

him they greatly bless and hear his petitions; but when one denieth them and stiffly refuseth, then depart they and make prayer unto Zeus the son of Kronos that sin may come upon such an one, that he may fall and pay the price" (9.502–512). Yet in spite of this high vision the final statement of the poet is to be found in the last book of the poem. His melancholy view of life precludes the possibility of a final reconciliation between man and god. His pessimism outweighs his high moral concept of justice and pity. Neither justice nor pity alters the fact of suffering; and so man's spirit is schooled by god, not yet schooled to him, and thus escapes heavenly confinement.

Scepticism is reflected in the contrast between the external reality of the Olympians and their inner emptiness. The physical characteristics and the personalities which clothe these administrants of life and death to men are in general as realistically depicted as are those of human beings. Actually, of course, this appearance of realism is illusory; the Homeric technique is suggestive rather than photographic. However, each of the gods is physically recognizable as a unique person; yet all of them give the impression of peculiar lack of substantiality. Their flashing beauty is perfect and unreal. They move with the casual effortlessness of grace and beauty in a bright and glittering whorl of sunshine and laughter. They are the only loveliness unspoiled by life, untainted by suffering. They stir in the poet primarily an enjoyment of their exquisite physical perfection, an aesthetic appreciation tinged with neither bitterness nor affection. One human character is like them in this respect. Paris has the same incredible, non-human quality of unreal beauty, and to the extent that this is true he, like the gods, escapes condemnation and censure; he, like them, is neither human nor superhuman but the fleeting incarnation of beauty itself.

As individual characters they are, superficially, equipped with all of men's faculties and reaction patterns. Yet in context, where they enter the moral environment of man, they chiefly demonstrate man's ignoble qualities pushed to the extreme, so that as members of the family of Zeus they perform a kind of parody of human life. Their cruelty, stupidity, and vanity are mean and absurd because they commit man's sins without man's justification of human frailty and blindness. Even nobility and virtue in the gods are discredited as lacking a basis of secure conviction. Their deepest passions are only superficial in the long run. They prize nothing dearly because

they buy nothing dearly. The Homeric poet believes with Thoreau that "the cost of a thing is the amount of what I will call life which is required to be exchanged for it." The currency of the immortals is valueless in life's market.

The poet's respect for individual gods and goddesses is to be measured by the extravagance of his ridicule of them. Zeus, Aphrodite, and Ares are the gods who feel the full sting of his lash. Zeus is the only god who shares something of the stature of the tragic heroes. He has high dignity by virtue of his comprehension of suffering and his pity for it. Yet this is true of Zeus only in so far as he withdraws from the Olympians and stands apart from and above them. Within the Olympian family he loses stature. As a husband Zeus is at the mercy of his wife, badgered by her, tricked into self-delusion, self-revelation, and bluster; as a father he is over-indulgent or over-severe. His wife, Hera, is one of the most unpleasant characters in the poem. In her, selfishness and cruelty are intensified by a narrowness of vision which is stupid and, on occasion, almost vicious. At best the relationship between her and Zeus is maintained by a compromise which represents the tension of her hatred and fear of him. The father of men and gods makes a poor showing in his home; and this ironic contrast of rôle arouses a most inappropriate, faintly contemptuous feeling of amused sympathy for the ruler of the universe.

The other members of the Olympian family are in essence projections of dynamic into personality, illustrating varying degrees of complexity in concept and characterization, all subordinated to the comprehensive concept of the will of Zeus. Athena and Apollo are most clearly defined, Athena as, primarily, the incarnation of disciplined, directed destruction, Apollo as the personification of reason and intelligence. Both Athena and Apollo are, in the final analysis, instruments of the will of Zeus, component parts of his personality. At the other end of the scale are four gods who wear their Olympian characterizations lightly over the much more real and powerful forces they embody. Like Zeus, Ares and Aphrodite have magnitude not as members of the immortal family, but in spite of that fact. Xanthus and Hephaestus as they appear in the twenty-first book illustrate the same paradox in more obvious terms. As they meet and struggle in their impressive combat there is actually almost a stripping off of the immortal disguise. Yet they are the only gods who are granted dignity and awesome grandeur on the battle-

field. There is nothing ignominious or ridiculous in the warring elements of fire and water. Even Achilles, who brushes aside normal divine interference impatiently or furiously, is struck with terror of Xanthus. Ares and Aphrodite are played upon more revealingly. Like Xanthus and Hephaestus they too are projections, but projections not of natural forces but of psychological forces, Aphrodite, of sexual passion, Ares, of blood lust. Unlike Apollo and Athena they are not inherently channels for the expression of Zeus' will. They evade channeling, Aphrodite slyly, by indirection, Ares with battering and battered obstinacy. They are contemptible to a degree unshared by any of the other gods, stupid, blind, ridiculous; yet this serves only to accentuate their dreadful destructive power—a power beyond the control of Zeus. Like Xanthus and Hephaestus they have an elemental vitality which is unique, self-sustained, evasive of discipline. It is significant that Aphrodite, though she is the most stringently burlesqued of the gods, is nevertheless recognized as the most powerful and fearful of them all.

These great forces are prior to the gods and a perpetual challenge to them, for they command man's respect by his immediate experience of their power. Their reality is actual, not metaphorical; their existence independent of man's belief or faith. Aphrodite and Ares are the personalized, physical prototypes of the Love and Hate of Empedocles, the dynamic in life. They create the conflict which Zeus and the other gods are called upon to guide and direct. And not even Zeus can offer a satisfactory solution of the tragedy they inevitably bring to man. He is the law according to which the tragic pattern of man's life develops, and he is the wise and compassionate commentator on that tragedy. It is a good thing for men to be mindful of the justice and the mercy of Zeus and to pursue these virtues in their own lives; it is a good thing "to lift up hands to Zeus, if haply he will have pity" (24.301). But when men, driven by love and hate, fall into tragic error with tragic consequences to themselves, then there is no reprieve to be expected of Zeus. Men must suffer and endure, not by faith in Zeus, but by faith in their own enduring souls. Hector dies and Achilles lives in that faith. No wonder the poet is ironic at the expense, not only of the forces of love and hate which make for tragedy, but also of the inexorable law according to which it evolves. He sees man as doomed to defeat by forces in life and in himself which are shabbier

than his own best nature. In so far as this is true, and by virtue of his courage to endure his sins, man wins some small victory over his enemies, a victory which the poet expresses in terms of burlesque, ridicule, irony.

Pessimism of outlook allows the evolution of tragedy from epic. It also enlarges the poet's scope where the gods are concerned, contributing to the free play of his artistic technique in manipulating them as individual characters. With self-conscious artistry he makes good use of these gods and goddesses in their individual epic rôles as well as in their corporate tragic rôle. Although the immortals are woven into the epic poem by a habit of mind older than the poet and inherited by him, there is ample evidence in the detail of plot and action to indicate that in human affairs natural causes and effects and the relationship between the two are adequately understood and logically accounted for without inevitable appeal to the supernatural. Moreover, the poet occasionally reveals by his embarrassment (as, for example, in the details of Apollo's rescue of Aeneas in book five) that this supernatural explanation is used with the utmost self-consciousness. Furthermore, by a conscious artistic extension of their primary epic rôle the gods are consistently used to provide relief, frequently comic relief—relief from the tension of tragedy, from the tedium of battle description, from the unities of time and place. This fact of manipulation in itself presupposes a sophistication of artistic technique to parallel the intellectual sophistication which accounts for the manner in which they are manipulated.

The modern reader insists upon investing the *Iliad* with an aura of stark and primitive simplicity. Nothing could be more deceptive. The civilization which produced the poem, far from being primitive and naïve, must have been highly developed and sophisticated. The Homeric poet is earlier in time, and bound within the limits of a traditional genre, but he is none the less a product of the period which holds within it the promise of Ionian philosophy. The philosophers of a later day were not so much rebels against their native tradition as exponents of its maturity of thought. Inherent in the Homeric poem are intellectual discontent with older religious terms of explanation, growing concern for a more satisfying solution of intellectual, moral, and spiritual problems, and the precursory intimations of that investigation of man's universe and God which the philosophers and poets of a later day completed.