

A "BEAUTIFUL DEATH" AND THE DISFIGURED CORPSE IN HOMERIC EPIC

He whom the god loves dies young.
—Menander

BENEATH the walls of Troy that have watched him flee in desperation before Achilles, Hektor now stands still. He knows he is about to die. Athena has tricked him; all the gods have abandoned him. Fate (*moira*) has already laid its hand on him. Even though it is no longer in his power to conquer and survive, he must still fulfill the demands that warrior status makes on him and his peers: he must transform his death into eternal glory, change the fate of all creatures subject to demise into a blessing that is his alone and whose luster will be his forever. "No, I do not intend to die without a struggle and without glory [*akleïōs*], or without some great deed whose fame will live on among men to come [*essomenoisi puthesthai*]" (*Il.* 22.304–5; cf. 22.110).

The *Iliad* calls *aneres* (*andres*) those men who are in the fullness of their masculine nature, both male and courageous, who have a particular way of dying in battle, at the acme of their lives. As if it were an initiation, such a death endows the warrior with the set of qualities, honors, and values for which the elite, the *aristoi*, compete throughout their lives. This "beautiful death," this *kalos thanatos*, to use the term employed in Athenian funeral orations,¹ is like a photographic developer that reveals in the person of the fallen warrior the eminent quality of the *anēr agathos*, the man of virtue and

¹ This piece appeared as "La belle mort et le cadavre outragé" in *La mort, les morts dans les sociétés anciennes*, ed. G. Gnoli and J.-P. Vernant (Cambridge and Paris, 1982), 45–76, and was reprinted in *L'individu, la mort, l'amour: Soi-même et l'autre en Grèce ancienne* (Paris, 1989), 41–79. It appears here by the kind permission of the Maison des Sciences de l'Homme, which published *La mort* in conjunction with Cambridge University Press. Translated by Andrew Szegedy-Maszak. Translations of the *Iliad* are from Richmond Lattimore's edition (Chicago, 1951).

² The present study owes a great deal to Nicole Loraux, *L'invention d'Athènes: Histoire de l'oraison funèbre dans la "cité classique"* (Paris and The Hague, 1981), trans. A. Sheridan under the title *The Invention of Athens* (Cambridge, Mass., 1986), which analyzes the theme of beautiful death in the Athenian funeral oration. Loraux has published several articles on the same topic: "Marathon ou l'histoire idéologique," *REA* 75 (1983): 13–42; "Socrate, contre-poison de l'oraison funèbre," *AC* 43 (1974): 112–211; "HBBH et ANDREIA: Deux versions de la mort du combattant athénien," *Anc. Soc.* 6 (1975): 1–31; "La 'belle mort' spartiate," *Ktêma* 2 (1977): 105–20.

valor.² It guarantees unassailable renown to the man who has given his life for his refusal to be dishonored in battle, or to be shamed as a coward. A beautiful death is also a glorious death (*eukleēs thanatos*). For all time to come, it elevates the fallen warrior to a state of glory; and the luster of this celebrity, this *kleos*, that henceforth surrounds his name and person is the ultimate accolade that represents his greatest accomplishment, the winning of *aretē*. Through a beautiful death, excellence no longer has to be continually measured against someone else or to be tested in combat. Rather, excellence is actualized all at once and forever after in the deed that puts an end to the hero's life.

This is the meaning of the fate of Achilles, whose character is both exemplary and ambiguous, embodying not only the demands but also the contradictions of the heroic ideal. If Achilles seems to push the logic of honor to an extreme—to absurdity—it is because he somehow places himself above the standard rules of the game. As he himself explains, since his birth he has been offered two destinies to carry him to where all human existence finds its limit, two destinies that are mutually exclusive (*Il.* 9.410ff.). He can have either the warrior's imperishable glory (*kleos aphthiton*) but a short life, or a long life in his own home without any renown whatsoever. Achilles did not even have to make the choice; he found himself always leaning toward the short life. Dedicated from the outset—one might say by nature³—to a beautiful death, he goes through life as if he were already suffused with the aura of the posthumous glory that was always his goal. That is why he finds it impossible, in applying the code of honor, to negotiate, to compromise, to yield to circumstances or power relations; craven settlements are, of course, out of the question, but he cannot make even the necessary adjustments without which the system can no longer function. For Achilles every insult is equally intolerable and unforgivable, no matter where it comes from and however high above him the agent's position on the social scale. Any apology, any honorable offer of compensation (no matter how satisfying to his pride it might seem from its size and public nature) remains empty and ineffective. Like a crime of treason, an insult to Achilles can only be repaid, in his eyes, with the complete and utter humiliation of the guilty party. Such an extreme sense of honor makes Achilles a marginal figure, isolated in the lofty solitude of his wrath. The other Greeks criticize this excess as aberrant, an instance of Error personified, of *Atē* (*Il.* 9.510–12). Agamemnon accuses him of pushing the spirit of competition to the point that he has to be first always, everywhere, and in everything,

² For Homer's use of *agathos* as an absolute, without any qualification, see *Il.* 21.280 and the comments of W. J. Verdenius, "Tyrtæus 6–7d: A Commentary," *Mnem.* 22 (1969): 338.

³ As early as book I, Achilles declares, "Since, my mother, you bore me to be a man with a short life, therefore Zeus of the loud thunder on Olympus should grant me honor at least"; like an echo, Thetis replies "indeed your lifetime is to be short, of no length. Now it has befallen that your life must be brief and bitter beyond all men's" (*Il.* 1.352–54 and 416–18; see also *Il.* 19.329, 421).

and that as a result he can think of nothing but rivalry, dispute, and combat (*Il.* 1.288, 177). Nestor reproaches him for his conduct in its disregard of the customary order of precedence, in that he goes so far as to contend with a king to whom Zeus has given not only the scepter, power, and command but also the right to the highest honors (*Il.* 1.278). Odysseus, Phoinix, Ajax, and even Patroklos deplore his intractable hardness, his ferocious resentment, and his savage and inhuman heart that is deaf to pity, and as oblivious to the pleas of his friends as it is to the apologies and reparations that ought to satisfy him. Could Achilles then be immune to *aidōs*? *Aidōs* is the feeling of reserve and restraint that functions like a brake in both upward and downward directions to maintain equilibrium in situations in which differences in status or disparities in strength make open, equal competition impossible. It is also the respectful fear that keeps a safe distance between the weakest and the strongest. In making explicit the inferiority of one of the actors, *aidōs* puts him at the discretion of the other, so that, disarmed by this submissiveness, the stronger might take the initiative in establishing friendly relations (*philia*) by according the one who puts himself under the other's protection the share of honor that is due to him. But conversely, *aidōs* is also the renunciation by the stronger of violence and aggression toward the weaker who is at the other's mercy and therefore is no longer a rival. Now it is the reconciliation between the injured party and the one who has agreed to abase himself by an offer of compensation, and thus publicly to acknowledge the honor (*timē*) he had first insulted. Finally, *aidōs* is the relinquishing of vengeance and the restoration of amity between two groups when, after a murder, the blood price representing the *timē* of the victim has been agreed on and paid in full to his kin.⁴

At an assembly of the gods, Apollo too accuses Achilles of having lost all sense of pity, and thereby of disregarding *aidōs* (*Il.* 24.44).

Nonetheless, the weight of such evidence is not primarily psychological in nature. It has less to do with Achilles' character than with the ambiguities of his position, the equivocation of his role within the value system of the epic tradition. Achilles' attitude and behavior contain a paradox that is disturbing so long as one concentrates on individual psychology. Achilles is completely convinced of his superiority in the realm of warfare, and this occupies the highest position on the scale of qualities that make for excellence in his eyes as well as those of his companions in battle. Moreover, there is no Greek, no Trojan, who does not share Achilles' belief and does not recognize him as the undisputed exemplar of martial *aretē* (*Il.* 2.768–69).⁵ Although his self-confidence is supported by unanimous agreement among others, it hardly guar-

⁴ Ajax contrasts Achilles' inflexible spirit with the softer temper of those who accept a blood price (*poine*) and a settlement (*aidesis*).

⁵ At *Il.* 2.768–69, the poet himself presents Achilles' superiority as an objective truth.

antees him safety and security; it is yoked instead to an edgy irritability and a profound obsession with humiliation.

To be sure, Agamemnon's taking Briseis away is an insult that strikes Achilles at his most sensitive point. It strips him of his *geras*, the special portion awarded him from the communal booty. A *geras* is an extraordinary privilege granted under exceptional circumstances; it acknowledges superiority, either in rank or in status (as for Agamemnon) or in valor and daring (as for Achilles). Over and above any material advantage, a *geras* has value as a mark of prestige and a consecration of a social supremacy: everyone gets a share, determined by lot, but the elite and only the elite receive a *geras* in addition. Confiscating Achilles' *geras*, then, somehow denies his preeminence in battle, the very heroic quality that everyone concedes to him. The other soldiers maintain silence—admittedly tinged with disapproval—in the face of the king's misconduct, and it makes them accomplices with him in the crime for which they will have to pay the price. Nonetheless, Achilles' reaction displays a number of troubling characteristics. Agamemnon is not trying to insult him personally, and never, even at the hottest point of the argument, does he denigrate Achilles' outstanding martial prowess. Achilles demands that Agamemnon give up his own prize, Chryseis, for the sake of the common good; in order to rid the Greek camp of the plague, the girl must be returned to her father, who is a priest of Apollo. Agamemnon is willing to do so, on the condition that he receive a *geras* in return, so that he, the king, might not be the only one who has to live without his portion of honor (*Il.* 1.119). If it means that he will have to get the *geras* of one of his companions—be it Ajax, Odysseus, or Achilles—no matter, although he predicts that the other will be furious (*Il.* 1.138–39; cf. 145–46). It is at this point that Achilles explodes, and his wrath reveals the real split that divides the two men. Achilles sees no common ground between the *timē* inherent in kingly status, the kind of *timē* Nestor extols as coming from Zeus (*Il.* 1.278–79), and the kind the warrior gains by his ceaseless toil "in the front rank" where danger is omnipresent. So far as he can see, in this war that belongs primarily to Agamemnon and his brother, Agamemnon constantly leaves it to others to give their lives in the heart of the fray; lagging back (*opisthe menōn*) in the shelter of the camp (*Il.* 9.332; cf. 1.227–29), near the ships, he is not a man to join his noble companions in an ambush, nor does he offer himself as a combatant in a duel to the death. "All that," Achilles tells Agamemnon, "seems like death to you [*tode toi kēr eidetai einai*]" (*Il.* 1.228).⁶ For all that he is the kingliest (*basileutatos*) among the lords, he has not crossed the boundary that separates ordinary men from the truly heroic. The latter, by accepting from the beginning the fact that life is short, devote themselves completely and single-mindedly to war, adventure, glory, and death. For the man who adopts Achilles' chival-

⁶ Diomedes makes the same assessment of Agamemnon at *Il.* 9.30–50.

ne perspective, it is one's own life itself that is at stake in every test of honor (*Il.* 9.322). Since a reversal means that one has lost once and for all, that one has lost life itself, success must carry value with it at a level that surpasses, and is not measurable by, normal distinctions and awards. The logic of heroic honor is one of all or nothing, and it operates outside of and beyond hierarchies of rank. If Achilles is not recognized as supreme and in a way unique, he feels himself reduced to nothing. Without meeting any overt resistance, he declares himself *aristos Achaiōn*, the best of the Greeks, and he boasts that in the past he has carried the burden of the war and in the future will be the only defense against the Trojan onslaught. Therefore he can present himself not only as dishonored, *atimos*, due to the insult he has suffered (*Il.* 1.171, 356), but also—if he lets it pass without comment—as the feeblest coward, a less than nothing (*outidanos*), a homeless and worthless drifter, a kind of nonperson (*Il.* 9.648). Between the perpetual glory that is his destiny and the lowest degree of contempt there is no intermediate level where Achilles can find a place. Every affront to his dignity brings him from the heights to the depths, because what is being challenged through him is a set of values that must be accepted without reservation or equivocation if it is not to be wholly diminished. To insult Achilles is to put the coward and the champion in the same category and to give them, as he says, the same *timē* (*Il.* 9.319). Heroic action is thus stripped of its function as an absolute criterion, a touchstone that shows what a man is worth.

It is for this reason that Odysseus, Phoinix, and Ajax fail in the mission entrusted to them to soften Achilles' resolve and persuade him to give up his anger. Although they use the same words, Achilles does not speak the same language as the envoys sent to fetch him. Agamemnon has come to his senses, and on his behalf the ambassadors offer all that a king can give and more in such circumstances: first, Briseis herself whom he is ready to give back, just as she was when she was taken, along with an oath that Agamemnon has not slept with her; tripods, gold, pitchers, horses, female slaves and concubines; finally, whichever of Agamemnon's own daughters Achilles might choose as a wife, along with a lavish dowry and, to go with this marriage that would make Achilles his son-in-law, the rule over seven cities in his kingdom. Achilles refuses. If he were to accept, he would put himself on the same ground as his enemy. Such goods are adjuncts to the *timē* of the king and signs both of his power over others and the privileges attached to his rank. To accept the king's offer would be an admission that the sheer quantity of his possessions counterbalances true valor, such as Achilles alone brings to the Achaean army. In all that they symbolize, the gifts are hateful (*Il.* 9.378). Their very abundance seems to express contempt for the warrior, whose participation in battle does not put at risk his sheep or oxen, tripods or gold, but his very life, his fragile *psuchē* (*Il.* 9.322). Agamemnon's treasure, like all the riches the world covets, consists of things that can always be acquired, exchanged, recovered

if they are lost, or obtained in one way or another. The price the warrior pays to attain virtue is of a completely different order: "A man's life cannot come back again, it cannot be lifted nor captured again by force, once it has crossed the teeth's barrier" (*Il.* 9.408–9). It is his life—his very identity, in its heroic form—that Achilles has put at the service of the army. And it is his life that Agamemnon has insulted in treating the hero the way he did. For Achilles, no wealth, no mark of honor, no social distinction could take precedence over a *psuchē* that nothing in the world can match (*ou gar emoi psuchēs antaxion*); by risking his life fearlessly in all the battles that Agamemnon shuns like death, Achilles has already dedicated himself to glory inspired by action.

After Odysseus speaks, old Phoinix argues that if Achilles accepts the reparations, as is customary and correct, and returns to battle, the Achaeans "will honor [him] like a god"; but if he refuses, they will never give him the same respect (*ouketh' homōs timēs esēai*), even if he comes back later and saves them from the misery of war (*Il.* 9.605). It is a wasted effort. By now Achilles sees a sharp division between two kinds of glory, two kinds of honor. The one is ordinary *timē*: public esteem, ready to extol him, to reward him with a literal king's ransom, if and only if he yields. The other is extraordinary *timē*: the eternal glory that is his destiny if he remains the same as he has always been. For the first time, Achilles openly rejects the Achaeans' praise, which he had once sought more than anything else. He tells Phoinix that he now has as little need of this latter *timē* (*ou ti me tautēs chreō timēs*, *Il.* 9.607–8) as he does of Agamemnon and his offer—they mean as much to him as a splinter of wood (*Il.* 9.378). He is concerned only with the honor in the destiny controlled by Zeus (*Dios aisa*, *Il.* 9.608),⁷ the early death (*okumoros*, *Il.* 1.417; 18.95) that his mother had foretold: "Now it has befallen [*aisa*] that your life must be brief and bitter beyond all men's" (*Il.* 1.417–18). Once it has been accepted, however, an early death has its corollary in immortal glory, of which the epic hero sings.

Achilles' refusal highlights the tension between ordinary honor, the societal approval necessary for self-definition, and the much greater demands of heroic honor, in which one still needs to be recognized, but now as set apart on another level, to be famed "among men to come." This tension appears in outline at those points where the two types of honor are so closely linked as to seem almost blended.

This is the case in book 12 when Sarpedon exhorts Glaukos to take the lead among the Lycians in attacking the wall the Greeks have built (*Il.* 12.310–28). Why, he asks, are we honored in Lycia with all the privileges and honors of a king? Why do men treat us as if we were gods? Is it not because we feel obliged always to stand in the Lycians' first line of battle (*Lukioisi meta prōtoisin*) so that all the Lycian warriors can say, "Indeed they are not without

⁷ *Phroneō de tetimesthai Dios aisēi.*

glory [*aklees*], these kings of our Lycia . . . since they fight in the forefront" (*Il.* 12.318–21)? Just as Achilles is a son of Thetis, Sarpedon is a son of Zeus; among the Trojan warriors, in his courage and his prowess in battle, he is like a lion whose gnawing hunger drives him, heedless of danger, after his prey. He does not care that the flock is in an enclosed pasture, guarded by herdsmen armed with pikes and accompanied by dogs. Once he is on the attack, nothing will turn him away. There are only two possible endings: either he will snatch his victim, against and despite all odds, or he will be struck by a spear and fall (*Il.* 12.305–6). The same spirit makes Sarpedon ready to attack the Greeks' barricade, behind which death awaits him. Without hesitation he leaps over the parapet and plunges into the fray. When he sees his companions flee before Patroklos, who is wearing Achilles' armor and is in a murderous fury, he rebukes them; he calls out his intention to go into single combat with the man we know is destined to kill him (*Il.* 16.434). Sarpedon meets him in order to "know" him, to find out what he is, that is, to use a fight to the death to determine his "worth" as a warrior (*Il.* 16.423).⁸ Leaving aside the love Zeus feels for him and the special treatment accorded by the gods to his corpse, Sarpedon's attitude makes him resemble Achilles: both of them belong to the same sphere of heroic existence, and they share a radical definition of honor.

Nonetheless, if we believe Sarpedon's words, there seems to be a direct correspondence between the status of a king and the excellence of a warrior, between the *timē* due to the former and the *kleos* sought by the latter. To fight in the front line, as Achilles and Sarpedon do, underlies and justifies their royal privileges; it could be said that to be a king, one must behave like a hero, and to be a hero, one must be born a king. Such an optimistic vision joins together the diverse factors of social prominence and personal virtue: it also reflects the ambiguity of Homeric terminology, in which, according to their context, the same words—*agathos*, *esthlos*, *aretē*, and *timē*—can denote high birth, wealth, success, martial courage, and fame. There is no clear distinction among the concepts.⁹

Still, in Sarpedon's own speech we find a trace of the fissure that, in Achilles' case, brutally separates heroic life—with its hopes, its demands, its peculiar ideals—from ordinary life controlled by a social code of honor. First Sarpedon lists the advantages granted a king, such as comfort, good land, good wine, renown, and a place of honor, and he says that they are like the price men pay for the benefits wrought by the king's exceptional valor on the battlefield. Sarpedon, however, then adds a comment that lays bare the true nature of heroic activity and thus undercuts the previous statement: "Suppos-

⁸ The phrase is *ophra daeiō tis hode kratei*. Hector displays the same attitude toward Diomedes at *Il.* 8.532 and 535; at *Il.* 3.53, Hector urges Paris to confront Menelaos "to learn what sort of man he is."

⁹ On this point, see the classic studies by A.W.H. Adkins; for example, *Moral Values and Political Behavior in Ancient Greece* (London, 1972), 12–16.

ing that you and I, escaping this battle, would be able to live on forever, ageless, immortal, so neither would I myself go on fighting in the foremost nor would I urge you into the fighting where men win glory. But now, seeing that the spirits of death stand close about us in their thousands, no man can turn aside nor escape them, let us go on and win glory for ourselves or yield it others" (*Il.* 12.322–28).¹⁰ Hence it is neither material advantage, nor primacy of place, nor the tokens of honor that can propel a man to stake his *psuchē* in the pitiless combat where glory is won. If it were only a matter of getting the goods one enjoys during life and loses with its end, there would not be a single warrior, Sarpedon claims, who would not bolt at the moment when, while enjoying life, he would have to risk losing everything along with it. The real meaning of heroic activity lies elsewhere. It has nothing to do with practical calculation or with the need for social prestige. Rather, it is in a way metaphysical. The gods have so arranged it that the human condition is not only mortal but also, like all earthly life after its youthful efflorescence, subject to the debilitating effects of age. Heroic striving has its roots in the will to escape aging and death, however "inevitable" they may be, and leave them both behind. Death is overcome when it is made welcome instead of merely being experienced, and when it makes life a perpetual gamble and endows it with exemplary value so that men will praise it as a model of "imperishable glory." When the hero gives up a long life in favor of an early death, whatever he loses in honors paid to his living person he more than regains a hundredfold with the glory that will suffuse his memory for all time to come. Archaic Greek culture is one in which everyone lives in terms of others, under the eyes and in the esteem of others, where the basis of a personality is confirmed by the extent to which its reputation is known; in such a context, real death lies in amnesia, silence, demeaning obscurity, the absence of fame.¹¹ By contrast, real existence—for the living or the dead—comes from being recognized, valued, and honored. Above all, it comes from being glorified as the central figure in a song of praise, a story that endlessly tells and retells a destiny admired by all. In this sense, the hero, by the fame he has acquired in pledging his life to battle, inscribes his reality as an individual subject on the collective memory of the group; the death that has given his biography its conclusion has also given it permanence. Through the public arena of those exploits in which he was wholly engaged, he continues, beyond the reach of death, to be present in the community of the living. Converted into legend and linked with others like it, his personality forms the skein of a tradition that each generation must learn and make its own in order to enter fully into social and cultural existence. Heroic honor goes far beyond ordinary esteem, the relative and ephemeral

¹⁰ The same theme appears in Callim., frag. 1.12–15 (Edmonds); also Pind. *Ol.* 1.81ff.: "Since we must die, why sit in the shade and uselessly pass a hidden old age, far from all beauty"; also Lys., *Epiaph.* 78.

¹¹ See Marcel Detienne, *Les maîtres de vérité dans la Grèce archaïque* (Paris, 1967), 20–26.

marks of rank; in its quest for the absolute condition of *kleos aphthiton*, it avenges the existence of a tradition of oral poetry, which serves as a repository of shared culture and as societal memory for the group. In what we have come to call the "Homeric world," heroic honor and epic poetry are inseparable. There is no *kleos* except that which is sung, and—except for the praise of the gods—sung poetry has no purpose other than to recall the great deeds, *klea andrôn*, performed by the heroes of ages past. Epic poetry preserves such deeds in memory by making them more vivid than the audience's small quotidian lives.¹² A short life, a feat of arms, a beautiful death: all these have meaning only to the extent that they are contained and celebrated in a song and thereby confirm the hero as *aoidimos*, worthy of being sung. The literary transformation by epic endows the hero with the status, the fullness of existence, and the permanence that alone can justify the extreme demands of the heroic ideal and the sacrifices it entails. When an honor is required that surpasses honor, it has a "literary" dimension. This is not to say that heroic honor is only a stylistic convention and the hero only a fiction. The glorification of a "beautiful death" in Sparta and Athens during the high classical period shows that the heroic ideal retained its importance and its effect on behavior, even in historical contexts as far removed from the Homeric world as the city-state. Still, in order for heroic honor to stay alive at the heart of a society and put its stamp on the whole system of values, poetry has to be more than a pastime. Poetry must continue to play a role in education and upbringing; it serves to transmit, to teach, and to make manifest within each individual the alloy of knowledge, beliefs, attitudes, and values that make up a culture. Only epic poetry has the importance and power to confer on the hero's quest for deathless glory both institutional solidity and societal approval, without which the quest would be merely a subjective fantasy. We might be surprised to find a yearning for an afterlife that was reduced, as we might think, to "literary" immortality; if so, we would be misunderstanding the differences that separate the archaic Greek individual and society from our own. There is a structural relation between the ancient personality—exteriorized, grafted onto public opinion—and epic poetry, that functions as *paideia* in its glorification of exemplary heroes and their will to live on in "imperishable glory." The modern personality—an interiorized ego, unique, apart—has the same structural relation with its "purely" literary genres, like the novel, the autobiography, or the private diary, which preserve the hope of living on as a special immortal spirit.

Of all the characters depicted in the *Iliad*, Achilles is the only one who is

¹² Hes., *Theog.* 100; see Detienne, *Les maîtres*, 21–23. I owe a great deal to the fine book by James Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad: The Tragedy of Hector* (Chicago, 1975), esp. 301f.

shown actually performing poetic song.¹³ When the envoys sent by Agamemnon arrive at the Myrmidons' camp, Achilles is in his tent. Accompanying himself on the cithara, he is singing for himself and for Patroklos, seated across from him. What does Achilles take pleasure in when he sings under such circumstances? The very subject that the *aoidoi*, with Homer prime among them, sing in poems like the *Iliad*: "He sings of the deeds of heroes" (*Il.* 9.189). Achilles is the model of the heroic warrior; in choosing a short life and deathless glory, he embodies an ideal of honor so elevated that, in its name, he will reject both the gifts of the king and the *timē* of his own companions in arms. He is the one the great epic shows, at this critical moment in his career, singing about the exploits of heroes. What a literary tactic, what an image *en abîme*!¹⁴ But the lesson of the episode is clear: Achilles' great deeds are glorified by Homer in the *Iliad*, yet to exist fully in the eyes of the hero who longs to perform them, they must be reflected and preserved in a song that exalts their fame. As a heroic character, Achilles exists to himself only in the mirror of the song that reflects his own image. The song also reflects, in the form of *klea*, the exploits to which he has chosen to sacrifice his life so that he will forever after be the Achilles sung by Homer in the *Iliad* and by all the Greeks to come.

To pass by death is also to escape the process of aging. For the Greeks death and old age go together (Mimn. frag. 2.5–7, Edmonds). Growing old means that one must watch the fabric of life gradually becoming frayed, damaged, torn by the same power of destruction, the *kēr*, that leads to death. *Hēbēs anthos*, says Homer. It has been shown that this formula, taken up and developed by the elegiac and lyric poets, directly inspired the funerary epitaphs that extol the warriors who are taken in "the flower of youth," that is, dying in combat.¹⁵ Just as a flower fades, so do the qualities that make life worthwhile: once vigor, beauty, grace, and agility have shed their glow on a person during his "shining youth" (*aglaos hēbē*), they do not stay fixed and firm but soon wither and then vanish. The flower of age—when one enjoys the full maturity of one's life's strength—is the burgeoning growth of springtime, of which the old man, in the winter of his life, before even descending to his grave, already

¹³ See Pierre Vidal-Naquet, "L'*Iliade* sans travesti," preface to the folio translation of the *Iliad* by Paul Mazon (Paris, 1975), 32.

¹⁴ For a similar action in the *Odyssey* with a different meaning, see Françoise Frontisi-Ducroux, "Homère et le temps retrouvé," *Critique* 348 (May 1976): 542. A parallel to Achilles' song about heroic activity is Helen's depiction of it in weaving: *Il.* 3.125 and 6.357–58.

¹⁵ See Loraux, "Hēbē." She writes: "When it celebrates the *aretē* of a warrior, every verse epitaph tends to use epic formulae, of which *aglaon hēbēn ôlesan* is only one instance among many in the *dēmoxion sēma*" (24). Regarding the use of the formula "he [or they] lost their shining youth" to denote death on the battlefield, she notes: "Such continuity between the aristocratic epitaph, praising an individual, and the collective, democratic epitaph of the *dēmoxion sēma* deserves close attention, because it suggests the persistence of a specific representation of the dead man as young" (20).

feels himself deprived.¹⁶ That is the meaning of the myth of Tithonos: what good is it to have immortality if one is not protected from aging? More shrewdly, Sarpedon tells Glaukos of his dream of eluding both old age and death, of being *agēraos* as well as *athanatos* (*Il.* 12.323; cf. 8.539). Then and only then could it be said of the warrior's exploit that the game is not worth the effort. Poor Tithonos, daily sinking deeper into senility in the heavenly sanctuary where Eos had to leave him, is no more than a specter of a living man, an animated corpse; his endless aging dooms him to an illusion of existence that death has completely destroyed from within.¹⁷

To fall on the battlefield saves the warrior from such inexorable decay, such deterioration of all the virtues that comprise masculine *aretē*. Heroic death seizes the fighter when he is at his *akmē*, a fully adult man (*anēr*), completely intact in the integrity of a vital power still untouched by any decrepitude. He will haunt the memory of men to come, in whose eyes his death has secured him in the luster of ideal youth. Thus the *kleos aphthiton* the hero gains through his early death also opens to him the path to eternal youth. Just as Herakles has to endure the pyre on Mount Oeta in order to marry Hebe—and thereby be confirmed as *agēraos* (Theog. 955)—it is a “beautiful death” that makes the warrior altogether *athanatos* and *agēraos*. In the imperishable glory conferred on him by the song about his deeds, he becomes immune to aging in the same way that, as much as it is humanly possible, he escapes the destruction of death.

This theme of the warrior's guaranteeing himself perpetual youth at the moment he accepts death in battle can also be found again with various modulations, in the rhetoric of the Athenian funeral oration. But, as Nicole Loraux has observed, its origins must be sought in epic; the Athenians do use it at public funerals to praise those who by their civic spirit have given their lives during the year on behalf of their city. When the theme is so used, it is a projection onto the figure of the hoplite—citizen-soldier, adult, and father of a family—of the heroic image of the warrior of epic who is, above all, a young man. Within Homeric society, the contrast between *kouroi* and *gerontes* is not simply a matter of age, and the *gerontes* are not all “aged” in our sense of the term. Nonetheless, there is a sharp distinction between two spheres of activity and competence. Warfare privileges physical strength and valiant ardor, while

planning requires speaking ability and prudence. Between the bold adventurer (*prēktēr ergōn*) and the eloquent advisor (*muthōn rhētōr*), the difference is principally one of age (*Il.* 9.52–61; 11.786–89). The wisdom of the *gerōn* counterbalances the impetuosity of the young men, designated by the term *hoplōteroi*, which defines youth by its ability to bear arms (*Il.* 3.108–10). If the “deep-voiced speaker” from Pylos, old Nestor, offers copious wise advice, and his experience in combat appears more in the form of comments than in exploits, it is because age is weighing him down and he is no longer a *kouros* (*Il.* 4.321).¹⁸ Advising and speaking (*boulē*, *muthoi*) are the province and privilege of the *gerontes*; the younger men (*neōteroi*) have the task of spear-work and asserting themselves in their own strength (*Il.* 8.157).¹⁹ Hence we find the formula, repeated like a refrain, that punctuates most of Nestor's lengthy orations to his troops. Whether giving them instructions or encouraging them in a struggle in which he will play only a marginal role, he says, “Ah, if only I were young again, if only my strength were what it was [*ei th' hōs hēboimi biē de moi empedos eiē*]” (*Il.* 7.157).²⁰ Nestor regrets the loss of his martial prowess along with his vanished youth. In this context, *Hēbē* is less a precisely defined age group than the time of life when one feels oneself in a state of superiority, when success and acclaim (*kudos*) seem to follow you naturally, seem linked to your undertakings (*erikudēs hēbē*; *Il.* 11.225)—more prosaically, when you are in full possession of your powers: physical power, above all, but also suppleness of the body, flexibility, steadiness in the legs, and swiftness in movement (*Il.* 11.669; 13.512–15; 23.627–28). To possess *hēbē* is to combine all the qualities that make a full-fledged warrior. Idomeneus is a formidable fighter but already graying (*mesaipolios*, 13.361), and when he admits his fear before Aeneas's onslaught, he calls to his companions for help and explains, “He has the flower of youth, which is the greatest *kratos* [*kai d' echei hēbēs anthos, ho te kratos esti megiston*]” (*Il.* 13.484). Valiant as he is, Idomeneus feels the burden of age: “no longer in an outrush could his limbs stay steady beneath him [*ou gar ei' empeda guia*] either to dash in after his spear, or to get clear again” (*Il.* 13.512–13). As Emile Benveniste has shown, *kratos* does not merely denote physical strength, like *biē* or *ischus*, but the superiority that enables a warrior to dominate his opponent, to prevail against him and vanquish him in combat. In this sense, the warrior's *aristeia* is to some extent included in *hēbē*, and we can understand more clearly how the heroic point of view conjoins the warrior's death with youth. Just as ordi-

¹⁸ He says, “If I was a young man then, old age has taken me now” (*Il.* 4.321).

¹⁹ *Il.* 4.323–25; cf. 3.150; in Troy the *dēmogerontes* sit in council, because “for them age has put an end to warfare, but they are excellent speakers.”

²⁰ Cf. also 11.670; 23.629; and 4.314–15, where Agamemnon tells Nestor, “Aged sir, if only, as the spirit is in your bosom, so might your knees be also and the strength stay steady within you.” In the same way, at 8.103, Diomedes says “Your strength is broken, and bitter age is on you.”

¹⁶ On the association of youthful military prowess and springtime, see *ibid.*, 9–12; she refers to Pericles' funeral oration (doubtless the *epitaphios* for Samos), wherein the Athenian statesman compares the youth, whom death in battle has stolen from the city, with springtime that has faded from the year. Cf. Arist., *Rhet.* 1.7.1365a31–33 and 3.10.141a1–4.

¹⁷ See *Hom. Hym. Aph.* 1.218–38; also Mimn. frag. 2.5–7 (Edmonds): “For Tithonos Zeus decreed a deathless evil, old age, which is still worse than a horrible death.” The phrase “deathless evil” involves a play on words, *kakon aphthiton*, that recalls and contrasts with *kleos aphthiton*. The young warrior who dies gets imperishable glory; the old man, alive forever, gets imperishable misery.

nary honor is paralleled by heroic honor, ordinary youth—merely a question of age—has a counterpart in heroic youth, which is radiant in combat and finds its fulfillment in death on the battlefield. Here we can quote Nicole Loraux, who has understood and expressed the point superbly:

Homeric epic gives two very different versions of the death of the *kouros*. This is not surprising: while youth is a pure quality for the hero, it is a prosaic physical fact for those whom the gods have less favored. Although the death of young soldiers is a frequent occurrence in the *Iliad*, it is not always touchingly glorious. . . . In some cases youth is only one characteristic among others, which does not distinguish one death from among the vast and ultimately unimportant number of victims. In other words, youth as a quality does not inform the warrior's last moments, and he dies manfully but without any special glory. For the hero, by contrast, death takes place under the sign of *hēbē*: even if youth had not been specifically attributed to the warrior, he possesses it at the exact moment he loses it: *hēbē* is the last word, for both Patroklos and Hektor, whose "spirit flies to Hades, mourning its fate, leaving behind strength and youth" (*lipous'androtēta kai hēbēn*, *Il.* 16.857, 22.363). In fact this mention of a youth that is lost and mourned, but also exalted, is denied to all the other combatants; *hēbē* becomes a type of charisma, reserved for the heroic elite—for Achilles' most valiant opponent and for the man who was not just Achilles' friend but his double.²¹

The *hēbē* that Patroklos and Hektor lose along with their lives is one they possessed more fully than other *kouroi*, though the latter might have been younger. It is this same *hēbē* that Achilles guarantees for himself in perpetuity by choosing a short life and an early, heroic death. While the warrior is alive, his youth appears primarily in vigor (*biē*), strength (*kratos*), and endurance (*alkē*); when he has become a weak, lifeless corpse, the glow of his youth persists in the extraordinary beauty of his body. In Homer the word *sōma* means precisely a body from which life has fled, the husk or shell of a once-living being. So long as the body is alive, it is seen as a system of organs and limbs animated by their individual impulses; it is a locus for the meeting, and occasional conflict, of impulses or competing forces. At death, when the body is deserted by these, it acquires its formal unity. After being the subject of and medium for various actions, more or less spontaneous, it has become wholly an object for others. Above all, it is an object of contemplation, a visual spectacle, and therefore a focus for care, mourning, and funeral rites.²² During the course of a battle, a warrior may have seemed to become a menace, a terror, or comfort, occasioning panic or flight, or inspiring courage and attack. Lying on the battlefield, however, he is exposed as a simple figure with identifiable

²¹ Loraux, "HBB," 22–23.

²² On this point, see the remarks of J.-P. Vernant in *Problèmes de la personne*, ed. J. Meyerson (Paris, 1973), 54, and Redfield, *Nature and Culture*, 178ff.

attributes: this is truly Patroklos, and this Hektor, but reduced to their external appearance, to the unique look of their bodies that enables others to recognize them. For the living man, of course, an imposing presence, grace, and beauty have their place as elements of personality, but for the warrior in action, such attributes are eclipsed by those highlighted by battle. What shines from the body of the hero is less the charming glow of youth (*chariostatē hēbē*)²³ than the sheen of the bronze he is wearing, the flash of his sword and breastplate, the glitter of his eyes, the radiance of the ardor that fires him (*Il.* 19.365, 375–77, 381, 398). When Achilles reappears on the battlefield after his long absence, stark terror seizes the Trojans as they see him "shining in his armor" (*Il.* 20.46). Beside the Scaean gates Priam groans aloud, batters his head, pleads with Hektor to return to the shelter of the walls. Priam has just been the first to see Achilles: "He swept along the flat land in full shining, like that star which comes on in the autumn and whose conspicuous brightness far outshines the stars that are numbered in the night's darkening, the star they give the name of Orion's Dog, which is the brightest among the stars and yet is wrought as a sign of evil and brings on fever for unfortunate mortals. Such was the flare of the bronze that girt his chest in his running" (*Il.* 22.25–32). When Hektor himself catches sight of Achilles, on whom the bronze shines "like flaming fire or the rising sun," he too is terrified: he turns and takes flight (*Il.* 22.134–35). The active, terrifying radiance of the live warrior must be differentiated from the remarkable beauty of his corpse, preserved in a youthfulness that age can no longer mar. Hektor's *psuchē* has scarcely left his body, "losing its strength and its youth," before Achilles strips the armor from the torso. The Achaeans rush together in order to see the enemy who, more than any other, had done them harm, and in order to aim more blows at his body. As they approach the hero, now no more than a *sōma*, an empty and inert cadaver, "they marvel at Hektor's size and at his admirable beauty [*hoi kai thēsanto phuēn kai eidos agēton Hektoros*]" (*Il.* 22.370–71).²⁴ We might be surprised at this reaction if old Priam had not already illuminated the difference between the pitiable and frightful death of an old man and the beautiful death of a warrior cut down in his prime. "For a young man all is decorous [*pant' epeiken*] when he is cut down in battle and torn with the sharp bronze,

²³ *Il.* 24.348: the subject is Hermes, who has disguised himself as a young prince whose beard has just begun to grow. At 3.44–45, Paris's beauty (*kalon eidos*) is no disguise, for he has neither strength nor courage (cf. 3.39, 55, 392). At 21.108, Achilles tells Lykaon, who is pleading for his life, "I too, as you see, am handsome and tall [*kai egō kalos te megas te*]," but this means that Lykaon's death is imminent. Beautiful as Achilles may be, death hangs over his head too: the day is near when his life will be taken in battle. This is not Achilles in the fury of action, but the hero seeing himself under the sign of death. On Agamemnon's beauty, "kingly" rather than soldierly, cf. 3.169–70.

²⁴ Cf. *Od.* 24.44: when Achilles has died, his "beautiful body" is washed in warm water; also *Eur., Supp.* 783: the sight of the dead Argive soldiers is beautiful—*kalon theama*—though bitter.

and lies there dead, and though dead still all that shows about him is beautiful [*panta kala*]" (*Il.* 22.71–73).

In Priam's mind, the description of the young warrior, beautiful in his death, hardly supplies a motive for Hektor to go up against Achilles; rather it should force Hektor to take pity on the horrible death that awaits an old man like Priam if, deprived of his son's assistance, he should die on the sword or the spear of his enemies. The repulsive picture painted by the aged king strikingly explains how unnatural and scandalous it is when a warrior's death, a "red" death, befalls an old man; the latter's dignity calls for an end that is tranquil, almost solemn, surrounded by the quiet of his home and family. The blood, the wounds, and the grime on the corpse of a young hero recall his courage and enhance his beauty with masculine strength, but on an old man—gray-headed, gray-bearded, withered—their ugliness becomes almost obscene. Priam envisions himself not merely dead at his own gates, but dismembered and torn by dogs, not just any dogs but his own dogs, raised and fed by him in his palace, who will revert to savagery and make him their prey, and after feasting on his flesh and gnawing his genitals, will stretch out, sated, in the entryway they so recently guarded. "When an old man is dead and down, and the dogs mutilate the gray head and the gray beard and the parts that are secret, this, for all sad mortality, is the sight most pitiful" (*Il.* 22.74–76). Priam is describing a world turned upside down, with all its values reversed, bestiality installed at the center of the domestic hearth, and an old man's dignity turned into an object of derision in its ugliness and shame, with everything human that belonged to his body destroyed. A bloody death is beautiful and glorious when it strikes the hero in the fullness of youth; it raises him above the human condition and saves him from common death by conferring sublime luster on his demise. The same kind of death, for an old man, drops him beneath the level of humanity and changes his end from a shared fate into a horrible monstrosity.

In one of the surviving fragments of his poetry, Tyrtæus imitates this passage of the *Iliad*, using some of the same formulas.²⁵ The differences that often appear both in the details and in the overall picture derive from the Spartan context: the hoplite in the phalanx, fighting shoulder to shoulder and shield to shield, is no longer the champion of Homeric epic. His duty is to stand fast without leaving his position, not to distinguish himself in individual combat. To ensure that "dying is a fine thing [*tethnamenai gar kalon*] when one has fallen in the front rank, a man full of heart" (frag. 6.1–2 Prato), it must occur in defense of the fatherland. Only then does the dead man's glory remain forever, and only then is the hero immortal (*athanatos*) even though he has gone

²⁵ In addition to the commentary by Carlo Prato on this fragment (see his edition of Tyrtæus [Rome, 1968], 93–102), see C. R. Dawson, "Spoudaiogeloion: Random Thoughts on Occasional Poems," *JCS* 19 (1966): 50–58; Verdenius, "Tyrtæus," 337–55.

beneath the earth (frag. 9.31–32 Prato). Thus there is no longer so radical a breach as there was between heroic honor and honor plain and simple; at Sparta there is no incompatibility between long life and martial valor, between glory (as Achilles defines it) and old age. If the soldiers who are able to stand fast in the line also have the good fortune to return home safe and sound, they share for the rest of their lives in the same honor and glory as those who fell. When they grow old, their excellence deserves the respect of the whole city (frag. 9.39ff. Prato).

Sparta thereby uses the prestige of the epic warrior's achievement and of heroic honor as a means of competition and social advancement. From the *agōgē* on, there is something like a codified rule of glory and shame; judging by military accomplishments, the city apportions and assigns praise or blame, respect or contempt, marks of esteem or of abasement, condemning the "tremblers" (*tresantes*) to the humiliating insults of women and to censure and dishonor (*oneidos kai atimiē*) in the community at large (cf. Herod. 7.231).

For Tyrtæus, moreover, "the man who is older [*palaiōteros*] and more revered [*geraios*]," whose death is contrasted with that of a youth (*neos*), is not the miserable dotard described by Priam to arouse Hektor's pity, but a brave hoplite; this old man courageously fought and died "in the front rank," the place in the phalanx normally occupied by the *neoi*. We could think that his sacrifice only deserves to be extolled even further. On the contrary, if fragment 6 was claiming that it was fine (*kalon*) to die in the first rank, this same death becomes despicable for the older man who falls ahead of the *neoi*. In the "ugliness" decried by the word *aischron* there is a hint of "moral" disapproval: the horror of the scene serves to exhort the *neoi* not to yield their place in the forefront to men older than they. The whole context, however, with its contrast between beautiful and ugly and the "spectacular" quality of the entire description, reveals the persistence of an "aesthetic" vision—in the broadest sense of the term—of heroic death in its close attachment to *hēbē*.

Indeed it is an ugly thing when an old man, fallen in the front rank, lies before the young men, with his white head and gray beard, having breathed out his brave strength into the dust, clutching his bloody genitals—a horror for the eyes and shameful to see [*aischra ta g' ophthalmois kai nemesēton idein*] in his nakedness. For the young men all is proper [*neois de pant' epeiken*] when they are in the brilliant flowering of their youth, an object of admiration for men [*andراسi men thēetos idein*] and desire for women [*eratos de gunaiki*] in life [*zōos eōn*], and beautiful in death in the first rank [*kalos d' en promachois pesōn*]. (Frag. 7.21–30 Prato)

It seems true, then, as Dawson suggests, that there is a double dimension to beauty, just as there is to honor and youth. At the end of his discussion of Tyrtæus, Dawson concludes, "Sensuous beauty may come in life, but true

beauty comes in heroic death."²⁶ Beauty in heroic death—this is certainly the source of the rule ascribed to Lycurgus, according to which Spartan warriors allow their hair to grow long and flowing, without cutting it, and give it special care on the eve of battle. The hair on a man's head is like the flower of his vitality, the foliage of his age. Hair shows the age of the person whose head it adorns; at the same time, it is a part of the body that has a growth and a life of its own—when cut it grows back, it preserves itself without decaying—so that it can represent the individual. One can offer a clipping of one's hair as if it were a gift of one's self. Just as the old man is identifiable by his white head and beard, *hēbē* too is marked by the first appearance of a downy beard and by an adult's haircut.²⁷ There is a well known connection between *kouros* and *keirō*, "to cut one's hair"; more generally, the great phases in a person's life, changes in status, are highlighted by the cutting and offering of a lock of hair, or sometimes even by cutting all of it off, as in the case of a new bride at Sparta. In the *Iliad*, the companions of Patroklos, including Achilles himself, cut off their hair over the corpse of their dead friend before consigning him to the pyre. They cover the whole body with their hair, as if they were clothing it for its last journey with their own youthful, manly vitality: "his corpse completely covered with hair that they cut from their heads and then placed on him" (*Il.* 23.135–36).²⁸

His companions adorn the dead man with that which most embodies their nature as fierce warriors, while his wife (if he has one) or his mother (as in Hektor's case, for example) offer the precious garments they have woven for him; thus they connect him, even in the hereafter, with that female realm to which he was linked by being a son or a husband. When Xenophon explains the wearing of long hair as a way of making the Spartan soldiers look "taller, nobler, and more terrifying" (*Rep. Lac.* 11.3),²⁹ he does not contradict the criterion of beauty this custom confers on them; he only emphasizes that it is not a matter of any kind of attractiveness, like Paris's sensuous beauty or feminine loveliness, but of the beauty unique to a warrior. It is this latter kind, no doubt, that was sought by Homer's warriors, those the epic calls "long-haired Achaeans [*karē komoōntes Achaiōi*]."³⁰

Herodotus offers us a revealing episode (7.208–9). Before testing the resistance of the Spartan squadron guarding Thermopylae, Xerxes sends a Persian horseman to spy on them. On his return, the spy reports that he saw the Spar-

²⁶ Dawson, "Spoudaiogeloion," 57.

²⁷ Cf. Aesch., *Ag.* 78–79: "What is an aged man when his foliage is all withered?"

²⁸ For Achilles' own hair, cf. 23.144–52; cf. Andromache's laments for her husband Hektor (*Il.* 22.508–14).

²⁹ Cf. Loraux, "La 'belle mort,'" 105–20.

³⁰ *Il.* 2.443, 472; 18.359; 3.43. The last passage is particularly telling, for the "long-haired" Achaeans justly laugh at the youthful beauty of Paris, who, far from being a brave warrior, has no courage, strength, or tenacity.

tans exercising in the palaestra and combing out their long hair. The king, astonished, summons the exiled Spartan ruler Demaratos and asks him for an explanation. "It is a Spartan custom," Demaratos says, "that when their men are about to risk their lives, they groom their hair." Victory or death was the law at Sparta, and at Thermopylae the choice was reduced to one of its terms: to die well. On the eve of a battle in which life is at stake, it is one and the same thing to impress the enemy with a "tall, noble, terrifying" appearance and to prepare to die on the battlefield, to leave a beautiful corpse, in its youth, like that of Hektor admired by the Greeks.³¹

If the youth and beauty of the fallen hero's body reflect the shining glory for which he sacrificed his life, the mistreatment of an enemy's corpse takes on a new meaning. Charles Segal and James Redfield have emphasized the importance in the *Iliad* of the theme of the mutilation of the corpse: in the course of the poem it steadily increases in force until it culminates in the deranged fury of the abuse Achilles inflicts on Hektor's corpse. There can be no doubt that the poet is using this motif to convey the ambiguities of heroic warfare. When battles become more heated, chivalrous combat—with its rules, its code, its prohibitions—is transformed into savage struggle, in which the bestiality that lurks in violence comes to the surface in all the participants. It is no longer enough to triumph in a lawful duel, to confirm one's own *aretē* over another's; with the opponent dead, one attacks his corpse, as a predator does its prey. Since the victor can not fulfill the formulaic wish to devour the body raw, he dismembers and consumes through the mediation of dogs and birds. Thus the epic hero is doubly threatened with the loss of his humanity; if the hero dies, his body might be given over to the beasts, not in a beautiful death, but in that nightmarish horror described by Priam; if the hero kills and then mutilates the corpse, he risks a descent into that very savagery Priam ascribed to his dogs. All this is true enough, but we must ask whether the link is not even tighter between the heroic ideal and the mutilation of the corpse: does not the hero's beautiful death, which grants him eternal glory, have as its necessary corollary, its sinister obverse, the disfigurement and debasement of the dead opponent's body, so as to deny him access to the memory of men to come? If, in the heroic point of view, staying alive means little compared with dying well, the same perspective shows that what is most important is not to kill one's enemy but to deprive him of a beautiful death.

Aikia (Homeric *aeikeiē*), the action of *aikizein*, of disgracing or doing outrage to the corpse appears, even on the linguistic level,³² as the negation of that propriety, *pani' epeoiken*, that Homer and Tyrtæus attribute to the body

³¹ Cf. Plut., *Lyc.* 22.1: long hair will make the handsome more noble, and the ugly more terrifying.

³² Cf. Louis Gernet, *Recherches sur le développement de la pensée juridique et morale en Grèce* (Paris, 1917), 211. The terms contain, with an alpha privative, the root *-weik*, which marks concurrence, conformity, resemblance.

of the *neos* exposed on the field of battle, and the replacement of *panta kala* by *aischron*. *Aikizein* is also *aischunein*, “make ugly,” “debase.”³⁴ It involves obliterating from the body of the dead warrior those marks of manly youth and beauty that are manifested there like visible signs of glory. In place of the beautiful death of the hero suffused with *hēbē*, the effort is made to substitute the vision of the frightful doom that haunts old Priam’s thoughts: a body stripped of all youth, all beauty, all masculinity (that is the meaning of the strange allusion, in both Tyrtæus and Homer, to the genitals devoured or held blood-soaked in the hand), and finally of all humanity. Why such relentlessness against what Apollo calls inert clay (*kōphē gaia*, *Il.* 24.54)? Why the desire to ferret out the person from an enemy’s corpse whose *psuchē* has already fled and is now only an empty husk? Why, unless the person remains connected to this dead body and to that which its appearance, its *eidōs*, represents? For the hero to attain *kleos aphthiton*, it is essential that his name and exploits be known by men to come, that they persist in memory. The first condition is that they be celebrated in a song that will never perish; the second is that his corpse have received its portion of honor (*geras thanontōn*, *Il.* 16.457, 675), that he not have been deprived of the *timē* that is owed to him and that will let him enter into the farthest reaches of death, bringing him to a new state, to the social status of death, all the while remaining a bearer of life’s values, of youth, of beauty that the body incarnates and which, on him, have been consecrated by heroic death.

What does it mean to enter into the furthest reaches of death? The fatal blow that strikes the hero liberates his *psuchē*, which flees the limbs, leaving behind its strength and youth. Yet for all that, it has not passed through the gates of death. Death is not a simple demise, a privation of life; it is a transformation of which the corpse is both the instrument and the object, a transmutation of the subject that functions in and through the body. Funerary rites actualize this change of condition; at their conclusion, the individual has left the realm of the living, in the same way as his cremated body has vanished into the hereafter, and as his *psuchē* has reached the shores of Hades, never to return. The individual has disappeared then from the fabric of social relations in which his existence was a strand. In this respect, he is henceforth an absence, a void, but he continues to exist on another plane, in a form of being that is released from the attrition of time and destruction. The hero survives in the permanence of his name and the luster of his renown, both of which remain present not only in the memory of those who knew him when he was alive, but for all men in ages to come. This inscription in societal memory takes two interdependent and parallel forms. The hero is committed to memory, memorized, in the field of epic song which, to celebrate his immortal glory, is placed under the sign of Memory, making itself memory by making him memorable. The hero is

³⁴ Cf. *Il.* 22.75, which can be compared to 22.336; also 18.24, 27; 24.418.

also commemorated in the *mnēma*, the memorial constituted at the end of the funeral rites by the construction of a tomb and the raising of a *sēma*, serving like epic to evoke for men to come (*essomenoisi*) a glory that is now certain not to perish.³⁴ Its very fixity and stability contrast the grave marker with the fleeting, transitory nature of the values that graced the human body during life. “It remains without moving, changeless [*empedon*], once it has been placed over the tomb of a man or a woman who has died” (*Il.* 17.432–35). *Empedos* means “intact” or “immutable”; if the qualities that comprise a warrior’s *aristeia*—ardor (*menos*), might (*biē*), the limbs (*guia*)—had this character of *empedos*,³⁵ the warrior hero would be immune to old age. He would not have to lose his youth and beauty in a heroic death in order to acquire them definitively in the world beyond. In its own way, by the immutability of its material and shape, and by the continuity of its presence, the *mnēma* conveys the paradox of the values of life, youth, and beauty, which one can ensure for oneself only by losing them, which become eternal possessions only when one ceases to be.

The treatment of the corpse in the funerary ritual derives from a paradox of the same kind. First it is beautified; it is washed with warm water to cleanse it of soil and stain; its wounds are effaced with an unguent; the skin, rubbed with oil, takes on a special sheen; perfumed and adorned with precious materials, the corpse is then laid out on a litter to be viewed and mourned by the dead man’s near and dear ones (*Il.* 18.346–53; *Od.* 24.44–46). In the Homeric tradition, the corpse is then burned on a pyre whose flames consume all that is made of flesh and blood, that is, everything both edible and subject to decay and thus attached to that ephemeral kind of existence where life and death are inextricably mingled. All that remains is the “white bones,” incorruptible and not entirely burned to ash; these are easy to distinguish from the ashes of the pyre so they may be collected and deposited in a tomb. If we compare sacrificial ritual with funerary practices, we can say that “the fire’s part” is reversed: the flames of the funerary pyre consume that which the sacrifice preserves to be consumed by men. The victim’s flesh, laden with fat, is the share of “mortal men” who dine on it, since they must eat in order to subsist, obeying the exigencies of a perishable being that must be nourished indefinitely if it is not to be extinguished. The “white bones” of the sacrificed animal, inedible and incorruptible—inedible because incorruptible—are burned on the altar as the share of the immortal gods who receive them in the form of fragrant smoke. In funeral rites, these same white bones remain under the earth as the trace—extended by the burial mound, the *sēma*, the stele—that is left behind

³⁴ The same formula to describe the *sēma* appears at *Od.* 11.76 and *Il.* 22.305: *kai essomenoisi puthesthai*; at *Od.* 4.584, Menelaos orders the erection of a tomb for Agamemnon, “so that his glory [*kleos*] might remain forever,” and at *Il.* 7.91, Hektor believes that the tomb of an enemy he has beaten will remind future generations of his triumph, so that his *kleos* will not die.

³⁵ For the use of *empedos*: with *menos*, *Il.* 5.254; with *biē*, 4.314; with *guia*, 23.627.

by the person of the deceased; in his absence, it is the form in which he remains, present to the world of the living. The fire of the funerary pyre, by contrast, consumes and sends into the realm of the invisible, along with the perishable flesh and blood, a person's entire physical appearance and the attributes that can be seen on the body: stature, beauty, youth, individuality, glamor, flowing hair. These corporeal aspects incarnate values that are at once aesthetic, religious, social, and personal, and define the status of a singular individual in the eyes of the group. These values in turn are all the more precious for being so fragile and newly in bloom, as the life that made them flower immediately withers them. The visible form of the body, such as is displayed when it is laid out for viewing at the beginning of the funeral rites, can only be saved from corruption by disappearing into the invisible. If the beauty, youth, and masculinity of the corpse are to be definitively his and are to be attached to the figure of the deceased, they require that the body have stopped being a living hero.

This finality of funerary practices is most clearly revealed precisely where they are missing and especially where they are ritually negated in the procedures of outrage visited on the enemy corpse. In its attempt to deprive the enemy of access to the status of a glorious death his heroic end had earned for him, his mistreatment, by the nature of the cruelty it inflicts, allows us better to understand the means that funerary rites normally use to immortalize the warrior in his beautiful death.

One kind of cruelty consists in defiling the bloody corpse with dust and in tearing his flesh, so that the enemy will lose his individual appearance, his clear set of features, his color and glamor; he loses his distinct form along with his human aspect, so that he becomes unrecognizable. When Achilles begins to abuse Hektor, he ties the corpse to his chariot to tear off its skin,³⁶ by letting it—especially the head and the hair—drag on the ground in the dust: “A cloud of dust rose where Hektor was dragged, his dark hair was falling about him, and all that head that was once so handsome [*paros charien*] was tumbled in the dust” (*Il.* 22.401–3). By dirtying and disfiguring the corpse, instead of purifying and anointing it, *aikia* seeks to destroy the individuality of a body that was the source of the charm of youth and life. Achilles wants Hektor to be like Sarpedon: “No longer could a man, even a knowing one, have made out the godlike Sarpedon, since he was piled from head to ends of feet under a mass of weapons, the blood and the dust” (*Il.* 16.637–40). The reduction of the body to a formless mass, indistinguishable now from the ground on which it lies, not only eradicates the dead man's unique appearance; such treatment also eliminates the difference between lifeless matter and a living creature. Thus the corpse is no longer the visible aspect of the person but the inert clod of which Apollo spoke. Earth and dust defile the body because their contact

³⁶ *Il.* 24.21 and 23.187; both passages contain the verb *apodruptō* (flay, lacerate).

pollutes it, inasmuch as they belong to a realm that is the opposite of life. During the process of mourning, at the point when the relatives of the dead man bring him closer to life by making one last reflection of life glow on his corpse, they in turn draw closer to the deceased by simulating their own entry into the formless world of death: they inflict on their own bodies a kind of fictive outrage by defiling themselves and tearing their hair, by rolling in the dust, by smearing their faces with ashes. Achilles does the same when he learns of Patroklos's death: “He befouls his charming face [*charien d'ēischune prosōpon*]” (*Il.* 18.24) just as he defiles the fair face of Hektor in the dust.

There is another type of *aikia*: the body is dismembered, hacked up, torn into pieces; the head, arms, hands, and legs are removed, chopped up piece by piece (*melēisti tamein, Il.* 24.409).³⁷ Ajax, in fury, cuts the head of Imbrios from his delicate neck and hurls it like a ball (*sphairēdon*) to roll in the dust (*Il.* 13.202). Hektor would like to impale Patroklos's head on a stake after having severed it from his neck (*Il.* 18.176–78). Agamemnon kills Hippolochos and then “cuts off his hands and severs his neck with his sword, and rolls him like a piece of wood [*holmon hōs*] through the crowd” (*Il.* 11.146–47). A head like a ball, a torso like a log: in losing its formal unity, the human body is reduced to the condition of a thing along with its disfigurement. In *Pythian* 4, Pindar says, “He comes to cut the branches of a great oak with a sharp-edged axe and defile its astounding beauty [*aischunei de hoi thaēton eidos*]” (4.263–64). It is precisely such beauty that astonishes the Greeks when they look on the dead Hektor, and that is the target of the outrage directed at the corpse, an attack on the integrity of the human body.

The dismemberment of the corpse, whose remains are scattered here and there, culminates in the practice described in the first verses of the *Iliad* and recalled throughout the poem: leaving the body as food for dogs, birds, and fish. This outrage carries horror to its height. The body is torn to pieces and devoured raw instead of being consigned to the fire that, in burning it, restores it to wholeness in the world beyond. The hero whose body is surrendered to the voracity of wild animals is excluded from death while also having fallen from the human condition. He cannot pass through the gates of Hades, for he has not had his “share of fire”; he has no place of burial, no mound or *sēma*, no location for his body that would mark for his society the site where he is to be found; there he would continue his relations with his country, his lineage, his descendants, or even simply with the chance passers-by. Excluded from death, he is equally banished from human memory. Moreover, to hand someone over to wild animals does not mean only to deprive him of the status

³⁷ We will pass over the problems of *maschalismos*, for which one should consult E. Rohde, *Psyche: The Cult of Souls and Belief in Immortality among the Greeks*, 8th ed., trans. W. B. Hillis (New York, 1925; reprint, 1966), vol. 2, app. 2, 582–86; these problems occupy another level of analysis which will be the subject of a future study.

of a dead man by preventing his funeral. It is also to dissolve him into confusion and return him to chaos, utter nonhumanity. In the belly of the beasts that have devoured him, he becomes the flesh and blood of wild animals, and there is no longer the slightest appearance or trace of humanity: he is no longer in any way a person.

There is one last kind of outrage. Free rein is given to the powers of corruption that are at work in the bodies of mortal creatures; the corpse, deprived of burial, is left to decompose and rot on its own, eaten by the worms and the flies that have entered into his open wounds. When Achilles is preparing to re-enter combat, he worries out loud to his mother. What will happen to Patroklos's body while the battle lasts? "I am sadly afraid, during this time, for the warlike son of Menoitios that flies might get into the wounds beaten by bronze in his body and breed worms in them, and these make foul the body, seeing that the life is killed in him, and that all his flesh may be rotted" (*Il.* 19.23–27).³⁸

The body abandoned to decomposition is the complete reversal, or inversion, of a beautiful death. At one extreme is the youthful and manly beauty of the warrior whose body inspires amazement, envy, and admiration, even among his enemies: at the other is that which surpasses ugliness, the monstrousness of a being become worse than nothing, of a form that has sunk into the unspeakable. On one side is the imperishable glory that raises the hero above the common fate by making his name and individual appearance endure in human memory. On the other side is an infamy more terrible than the oblivion and silence reserved for the ordinary dead, that indistinct cohort of the deceased normally dispatched to Hades where they merge into the mass of those who, unlike the "glorious heroes," are called the "nameless," the *nōnumnoi*.³⁹ The mutilated corpse shares neither in the silence that surrounds the ordinary dead nor in the song praising the heroic dead. Neither living, because it has been killed, nor dead, because it has been deprived of funeral rites; as a scrap of matter lost on the edge of existence, it represents that which can neither be celebrated nor forgotten—the horror of the indescribable, absolutely unspeakable, which cuts you off altogether from the living, the dead, and the self.

Achilles, the glorious warrior, the fighter for heroic honor, exerts all his energy in dishonoring the corpse of the Trojan champion, who was his opposite number in the enemy camp and who, by killing Patroklos, killed someone like Achilles' other self. The man of imperishable glory plans to doom his rival to the most extreme kinds of disgrace. He will not succeed. There is much talk in the *Iliad* of dead warriors surrendered to dogs and birds. But

³⁸ Cf. also *Il.* 22.509 and 24.414–15.

³⁹ Hes., *WD* 154; Aesch., *Pers.* 1003; cf. J.-P. Vernant, *Mythe et pensée chez les Grecs: Études de psychologie historique*, 10th ed. (Paris, 1985), 35, 68–69.

whenever threats of disfigurement are specified and abuse is committed, it involves a warrior whose body is ultimately saved. The horror of the disfigured corpse is evoked for Sarpedon, Patroklos, and Hektor—that is, for the three characters who share with Achilles the quality of a hero. In these three cases, the allusion to disfigurement leads, by a contrastive effect, to an emphasis on the beauty of a heroic death, which, in spite of everything, brings the dead man his tribute of immortal glory. When Sarpedon falls to Patroklos's spear, it is his valor and courage that induce the Achaeans to lay hold of him to abuse his corpse (*Il.* 16.545, 559). In the ensuing fracas, Sarpedon is already unrecognizable, covered as he is from head to foot with blood and dust. Zeus dispatches Apollo to wipe off the black blood, to wash him in the river's running water, to anoint him with ambrosia, to dress him in splendid garments, and to hand him over to Sleep and Death, who are to transfer him to Lycia. There his brothers and parents will bury him in a tomb, under a stele, "for this is the honor due to the dead [*to gar geras esti thanontōn*]" (*Il.* 16.667–75).

To counter Achilles' anxiety about the possibility that Patroklos's body may rot, eaten by worms, Thetis replies: "Even if he lies here for a full year, his flesh will remain always intact [*empedos*] or even better than before [*ē kai areion*]" (*Il.* 19.33). Supporting her words with deeds, the goddess infuses ambrosia and rosy nectar into Patroklos's nostrils, so his flesh may remain intact (*empedos*, *Il.* 19.38–39). During the whole time Achilles is relentlessly abusing Hektor's corpse, dragging it in the dust, giving it over to the feasting of dogs, Aphrodite drives the animals away from the dead man night and day. "She anoints him with divine oil, fragrant of roses, fearing that Achilles would tear off his skin by dragging him" (*Il.* 23.186–87). For his part, Apollo brings a dark mist from the heavens. "He did not want the heat of the sun to dry the skin too quickly around the muscles and the limbs" (*Il.* 23.190–91; 24.20–21). "Too quickly" means before the body is returned to Priam and undergoes the funeral rites that will send it into the hereafter intact, in the integrity of his beauty, *eumorphos*, as Aeschylus says in the *Agamemnon* about the bodies of the Greeks buried under the walls of Troy.⁴⁰ As he is making his way toward Achilles' tent, Priam meets Hermes, disguised as a young horseman. Priam asks him if his son has already been cut to pieces and thrown to the dogs. Hermes replies:

Aged sir, neither have any dogs eaten him, nor have the birds, but he lies yet beside the ship of Achilles at the shelters, and as he was [*keinos*]; now here is the twelfth dawn he has lain there, nor does his flesh decay nor do worms feed on him. . . . It is true, Achilles drags him at random around his beloved companion's tomb . . . yet he cannot mutilate him [*oude min aischunei*]. You yourself can see

⁴⁰ The fallen Greeks rest *eumorphos* in Trojan soil—so *Ag.* 454, which recalls the *eumorphos* *kolossoi* of line 416.

[*thēoio ken autos*] when you go there how fresh with dew [*eerseēeis*] he lies, and the blood is all washed from him, nor is there any corruption [*oude pothi marios*]. So it is that the blessed immortals care for your son, though he is nothing but a dead man: because in their hearts they loved him. (*Il.* 24.411–24)

In all three cases the scenario is about the same. The gods miraculously save the hero from the shame of abuse that—by disfiguring, denaturing, his body until it is no longer recognizable as his own, or even as a human body, or even as a body at all—would reduce him to a state of nonbeing. To preserve him as he was (*keinos*) when death took him on the battlefield, the gods perform the human rituals of cleansing and beautification but use divine unguents: these elixirs of immortality preserve “intact,” despite all the abuse, that youth and beauty, which can only fade on the body of a living man, but which death in battle fixes forever on the hero’s form, just as a stele remains erect forever to mark a tomb.

Epic uses the theme of the disfigurement of the corpse to underscore the exceptional position and status of heroic honor, of a beautiful death, of imperishable glory: they far surpass ordinary honor, death, and renown. In that agonistic culture, one proves one’s worth only against another’s, on top of and to the detriment of a rival. As a result, the heroic qualities imply their opposite, a radical form of dishonor, as far beneath the norm as heroism is above it: an absolute annihilation, a definitive and total disgrace.

With the constant allusions to bodies devoured by dogs or rotting in the sun, the story uses the theme of the mutilated corpse to outline the place where the double inversion of the beautiful death occurs. In the case of the hero, however, this vision of a person reduced to nothing, plunged into horror, is rejected at the very moment it is described. War, hatred, and destructive violence cannot prevail against those who are inspired by the heroic definition of honor and are pledged to a short life. From the moment a great deed has been accomplished, its truth cannot tarnish; it becomes the raw material of epic. How could the body of the hero have been disfigured and his memory eradicated? His fame lives in memory forever, and it inspires the direct vision of the past that is the privilege of the epic poet. Nothing can spoil a beautiful death: its aura stems from and continues to shine through the diffusion of epic language, which speaks of glory and thus makes it real forever after. The beauty of *kalos thanatos* does not differ from that of the song, which in celebrating such beauty transforms itself into deathless memory in the unbroken chain of generations.

Chapter 3

INDIA, MESOPOTAMIA, GREECE: THREE IDEOLOGIES OF DEATH

IN ORGANIZING a joint colloquium on funerary ideology with our friends from the Istituto Orientale of Naples, our intention was to proceed together to two sorts of confrontations: first, between archaeological documents and written sources, and second, between different civilizations, especially Greek and those of the East.

These two different kinds of comparative studies could not quite mesh together. Each posed singular problems of method and substance. Above all, a notion of ideology was put into play that, according to the perspective adopted, entailed different implications and required strategies of research that in some respects were quite dissimilar.

The debate between archaeologists and historians of ancient societies in the field of funerary studies is well defined and its subject sufficiently precise. How can this mass of mute documents retrieved from tombs and necropolises be made to speak? What relations are there between this special “language” of *Realia* and that other, ordinary, language that historians, attuned to texts, have to know? To what extent does this dual documentation, once the necessary adjustments have been made, allow us access to society as a whole, with its stratifications, hierarchies, opposing categories of statuses, age-classes, and gender, and also, in the background, its history with its changing course? Bruno d’Agostino and Alain Schnapp undertook to present this array of questions.¹ My remarks will be limited, therefore, to another side of the inquiry. I will emphasize one point only. The objective in the line of research I have just outlined was to assemble, under the rubric of funerary ideology, all the significant elements that, in practices as in discourses pertaining to death, refer to forms of social organization and structures of the group, reflect the gaps, balances, and tensions within a community, and attest to its dynamic nature, the influences it has received, and the changes that have taken place. Through the grid of questions imposed on it, the world of the dead (or at least that which

This text was the introduction to the collection volume *La morte, la memoria, la vita* (1977) published by the Istituto Orientale di Napoli. It was given in 1977 at a colloquium in Naples on the occasion of the centenary of the death of the philosopher Benedetto Croce.