

Achilles in Vietnam

It's something of a commonplace for those of us who love to read that the jacket notes on most books—even the most thoughtful and influential—tend toward puffery. But *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*, by Dr. Jonathan Shay, is different: indeed, when the jacket commentary claims that *Achilles in Vietnam* “should transform any and all future discussions of the Vietnam War,” it underestimates Dr. Shay's insight about how literature may help us to live the ordinary good life. True enough, one can't argue about Shay's devotion to traumatized Vietnam vets, nor should we overlook the clinical and historical worth of his research. But I think we devalue his work when we place it merely as a commentary on the Vietnam War. There are undoubtedly more comprehensive—or popular—books about how-tough-life-was-then-and-is-now-for-the-Vietnam-vet; and Dr. Shay probably will hear from colleagues who dispute this or that medical point. Instead, we ought to applaud Shay's work because it helps us to properly value literature. Shay makes Homer his centerpiece because of *The Iliad's* brutal honesty about human nature: despite the chasms of time and culture that separate our worlds, Homer's epic poem illuminates truths about ourselves that few—if any—contemporary works can.

That Shay proves himself to be an insightful moral/philosophical literary critic (in the vein of Samuel Johnson) is for him, however, a subordinate enterprise; rather, he wrote *Achilles in Vietnam* so that Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (or PTSD: a collection of symptoms—drug abuse, suicidal tendencies, etc.—that essentially entail estrangement from society), which according to Shay afflicts some 250,000 Vietnam vets, might join the ranks of leprosy and polio as a menace to humanity largely defeated:

[M]y principle concern is to put before the public an understanding of the specific nature of catastrophic war experiences that not only cause lifelong disabling

psychiatric symptoms but can *ruin* good character. I have a specific aim in doing this: to promote a public attitude of *caring* about the conditions that create such psychological injuries, an attitude that will support measures to prevent as much psychological injury as possible. (xiii)

By themselves, Shay's intentions are noble but a bit redundant given the popularity of movies such as *The Deer Hunter*, the fiction of Tim O'Brien, and the influence of the Department of Veterans Affairs. But these things are entirely creatures of their age; Shay on the other hand is a philosopher, a humanist: his book illuminates the enduring wisdom of Homer and so reminds us of the stability of truth and the constancy of human nature.

Take, for instance, Parts I and II of his book, which establish the similarity between Homer's portrayal of the Trojan War and the circumstances of front-line combat in Vietnam (Part III comprises a contemporary, strictly clinical discussion of PTSD). Specifically, Shay argues that the decay of Achilles' character exemplifies the etiology of PTSD. The violation of "what's right" by commanders (grossly negligent or unprincipled conduct), combined with the obstruction of what Shay terms "griefwork" (a public mourning ceremony for a close friend-in-arms), drives even the most principled warrior into the berserk state—a condition under which revenge becomes a soldier's driving motivation and all sense of humane restraint is cast away. Finally, Shay asserts that contempt for one's enemy—a prominent feature of modern wars but absent in *The Iliad*—also contributes to PTSD.

Shay opens *Achilles in Vietnam* by identifying *The Iliad*, quite rightly, as principally an ethical work:

We begin in the moral world of the soldier—what his culture understands to be right—and betrayal of that moral order by a commander. . . . Achilles' experience of betrayal of 'what's right,' and his reactions to it, are identical to those of American soldiers in Vietnam. (3)

In these opening sentences, Shay liberates *The Iliad* from conventional or superficial readings: how often do we—and, for teachers, our students as well—see Achilles as petulant,

unscrupulous and self-serving, one who jeopardizes the welfare of the Greek army to sate a trivial grudge? From such a presumption, it is easy to read *The Iliad* as the tragedy of Achilles: a great warrior, brought down by his excessive pride, who develops his ethical sense (in the weeping scene with Priam, Book 24, where Achilles relents and allows the father to retrieve his son's body) only after his close friend Patroclus dies and after he behaves shamefully, illustrated by his killing of Lycaon and his unreasonably brutal treatment of Hector's corpse (Fagles Book 21—ff.). And so we finish the epic with a prevailing sense of disgust: the moral of the story being how dangerous it is to have martial skills divorced from conscience and how Achilles' capacity for greatness is thwarted by his narcissism. But thanks to Dr. Shay's experience with and sympathy for Vietnam combat veterans, *Achilles in Vietnam* introduces us to a highly principled Achilles whose keen sense of honor and humanity are destroyed by Agamemnon's disgraceful conduct and by the death of his comrade-in-arms Patroclus. Achilles' magnanimous nature is largely—though not entirely—*recovered* by properly grieving for Patroclus. *The Iliad*, in Shay's words, is really "the story of the undoing of Achilles' character" (26).

Based on careful marshaling of evidence, Shay's thesis is impregnable: he claims that, in the case of both Vietnam vets and Achilles, combat trauma (PTSD) and the berserk state (which prompts atrocities) are brought on by the violation of "what's right"—the corruption of a distinct moral order that all armies depend on—and the failure to grieve properly for the loss of one's close comrades. He begins by claiming that Agamemnon's wrongful seizure of Briseis, Achilles' prize of honor which the troops awarded to him, triggers the collapse of Achilles' *good* character. Indeed, Shay cites often-overlooked evidence in *The Iliad* to illustrate Achilles' high-mindedness. For instance, Shay points out that Achilles calls the assembly of the army to find out what needs to be done to stop the divinely-sponsored plague—brought on by Agamemnon's rash contempt for Apollo's priest—that is thinning the Greek ranks (24). During the debate, when Achilles uses the term "we," he speaks for the entire Greek federation (25). Only after Agamemnon unjustly deprives him of his honor prize does Achilles withdraw into his own circle of loyal followers, the Myrmidons; later,

the social space shrinks to merely himself and Patroclus. Shay accounts for Achilles' social and psychic isolation in the following way:

After betrayal of *themis* [culturally accepted moral order: "what's right"] in warfare, an us-against-them mentality takes hold in which everyone, no matter how close before, is either an absolute ally or an absolute enemy. . . . Achilles' wrath has numbed him to any responsiveness to the catastrophes of his fellow Greeks, for whom he has formerly cared deeply. (25)

Here, then, we have Achilles suffering because he abides by principle; that the Greek army later pays the price for his withdrawal is properly Agamemnon's responsibility. Indeed, Agamemnon's character here—a brave but self-destructively impetuous king—is consistent with other Greek legends. In *The Cypria*, Agamemnon shoots a stag and, afterwards, brags that in doing so he has surpassed Artemis. Artemis angrily sends stormy winds which prevent the Greek expedition from leaving for Troy; Agamemnon is forced to sacrifice his daughter, Iphigenia (though some legends contend that Artemis spares her by placing a stag in her place), to atone for his impiety and arrogance (Hesiod 493-5).

Further evidence of Achilles' good character before the events in *The Iliad* centers on his treatment of enemy soldiers. For instance, the blood-thirsty Achilles that we remember from the latter books of *The Iliad* is, according to Shay, the result of both the betrayal by his commander and the death of Patroclus. Indeed, Shay points out that Achilles normally spared the lives of enemy prisoners and that he respected the bodies of enemy dead (26; also see 28-30). In sum, Achilles' withdrawal from the Greek ranks and his amoral rampages result from psychological injuries—not from some intractable character flaw.

Regarding the death of Patroclus and Achilles' subsequent brutality, Shay contends that the violation of "what's right" by the military hierarchy, when followed by the obstruction of a proper period of grieving for one's friends, seems to condition soldiers for the berserk state (96). Shay defines the berserk state as the loss of one's humanity in combat conditions—examples of some of its

characteristics include being “inattentive to one’s own safety,” “cruel, without restraint or discrimination,” “exalted, intoxicated, frenzied,” and “crazy, mad, insane,” (82). In Shay’s view, Achilles’ taunting of Hector in Book 22 illustrates the berserk state:

“Hektor, I’ll have no talk of pacts with you, . . .
 As between men and lions there are none,
 no concord between wolves and sheep, but all
 hold one another hateful through and through,
 so there can be no courtesy
 between us . . .” (Shay 83)

Shay argues that the defining feature here—and in other instances where Achilles rages—is the absence of *normal* human responses, even given the stresses of combat: “No restraint of any kind limits Achilles during his berserk state—no prudence, ethics, piety, personal gain, compassion, fatigue, or physical pain, not the rational requirements of victory nor even fidelity to his dead friend” (88). In further characterizing the berserk state, Shay compares Achilles’ “demonic” (97) behavior here with the nobility of Diomedes’ conduct when he meets Glaucus in Book 6 of *The Iliad*, and with other warriors who are courageous but are restrained by humanity, pain, piety, or self-preservation (87).

What provokes the berserk state in Achilles? It is the loss of his close friend Patroclus combined with the psychic isolation that Agamemnon’s insult entails. Before accounting for the extreme grief of Achilles when Patroclus dies, Shay spells out the unparalleled friendship that combat engenders:

We can never fathom the soldier’s grief if we do not know the human attachment which battle nourishes and then amputates. As civilians we have no native understanding of the soldier’s grief. Combat calls forth a passion of care among men who fight beside each other that is comparable to the earliest and most deeply felt family relationships. (39)

This commentary explains the extreme emotional response of Achilles when Patroclus dies—the centerpiece of which is rage at Hector and self-condemnation for letting Patroclus die in Achilles’

place (Fagles 18: 92-117). From this point forward, Achilles enters the berserk state. Indeed, he delays the funeral ceremony for Patroclus until he has taken revenge on Hector. When Odysseus tries to broker a rapprochement between Agamemnon and Achilles, Achilles seems apathetic about everything except score-settling:

“I, by god, I’d drive our Argives into battle *now*,
starving, famished, and only then, when the sun goes
down,
lay on a handsome feast—once we’ve avenged our
shame.

Before then, for me at least, neither food nor drink
will travel down my throat, not with my friend dead,
there in my shelter, torn to shreds by the sharp bronze . . .

.....

You talk of food?

I have no taste for food—what I really crave
is slaughter and blood and the choking groans of men!”
(Fagles 19: 246-56)

By the beginning of Book 23, Achilles has killed countless Trojans—including Hector. Finally, after dragging the body behind his chariot, Achilles pauses from defiling Hector’s corpse so that Patroclus’ funeral ceremony might take place (Fagles 23: 41-3).

This event, which Shay calls communalizing grief, is crucial to preventing—or, in the case of Achilles, minimizing the damage done by—combat trauma (PTSD):

There is a growing consensus among people who treat PTSD that any trauma . . . will have longer-lasting and more serious consequences if there has been no opportunity to talk about the traumatic event, to express to other people emotions about the event and those involved in it, or to experience the presence of socially connected others who will not let one go through it alone. This is what is meant by communalizing the trauma. (55)

Close comrades in Homer's poem regularly take part in elaborate ceremonies that honor the dead soldiers, a circumstance which Shay argues helps them successfully deal with their grief (58; 59; 63; 65). "I believe that the emergence of rage out of intense grief is a biological universal," writes Shay, "and that long-term obstruction of grief and failure to communalize grief can lock a person into chronic rage" (54-5).

In fact, Shay's theory especially makes sense in light of Book 24 of *The Iliad* (Fagles 24: 592-ff.). Achilles' public mourning of Patroclus and his sharing of grief with Priam precede his generous treatment of Priam: his inviting Priam to stay for the night, his permitting the retrieval of the body, the eleven-day truce for burial ceremonies, the shroud Achilles allows for Hector's transport, all exemplify Achilles' change of heart (Fagles 24: 592-ff.). Only once in this scene does Achilles revert to his choleric temperament, and Shay's theory about combat trauma may explain this lapse as well. When Achilles asks Priam to sit down (Fagles 24: 609), Priam declines the offer and impatiently demands to see his son's body; Achilles angrily responds:

"No more, old man, don't tempt my wrath, not now!
My own mind's made up to give you back your son.
.....
So don't anger me now. Don't stir my raging heart still
more.
Or under my own roof I may not spare your life, old
man—
suppliant that you are—may break the laws of Zeus!"
(Fagles 24: 655-56; 67-69)

Here Achilles seems to "snap;" his disposition jumps from one of compassionate generosity to belligerence as a result of what would be, at worst, a slight but understandable breach of manners. However therapeutic griefwork might be, it can't, in Shay's analysis, overcome the psychological damage that the berserk state imposes: "once a person has entered the berserk state," writes Shay, "he or she is changed *forever*" (98). That Achilles treats Priam with humanity and respect is but a temporary circumstance: given Shay's explanation of Achilles' behavior and

the circumstances that provoke it, Achilles' outburst is within character; he is as much a victim of PTSD as are Dr. Shay's patients.

Having analyzed Shay's reading of *The Iliad*, we arrive at the point where Shay's professional wisdom merges with his literary insight: what happened to Achilles happened on a much larger scale in Vietnam. Despite obvious differences about what caused each war (Helen vs. the Containment policy), Shay finds remarkable similarity between the motivations of the soldiers he treats and Homer's warriors. Both, for instance, were driven by honor: regarding the Greeks "the quest for social honor and avoidance of social shame are the prime motives" (14). In much the same manner, most of Dr. Shay's patients volunteered—about ten percent were drafted—for military service out of a contemporary sense of honor: as a rite of passage that they saw themselves fulfilling, given the experiences of the World War II generation; as an act of patriotic or religious idealism—fighting the "good fight" against anti-democratic and godless communism; or, out of sheer altruism, the concrete expression of an "heroic ideal of human worth"—jeopardizing one's life for democracy (9).

Whatever species of honor motivated the Vietnam warriors, they, like Achilles, witnessed time and again the betrayal of "what's right" by their leaders. But unlike *The Iliad*, where one incident of betrayal drives the epic's action, Shay identifies several less dramatic but equally damaging anecdotes where violation of "what's right" cost lives and corroded morale. According to Shay's patients, troops in the field suffered from among other things poor-quality weapons (in one instance, a GI's M-16 jams at the precise moment when he encounters a North Vietnamese soldier); a peculiar officer rotation system that transferred platoon and company leaders just as they might benefit from their experience; friendly fire incidents; and the abuse of access to supplies by rear-echelon units who would see to their own comfort at the expense of front-line troops' needs (10-19). Shay concludes from this clinical evidence that such moral injury was a substantial factor in his patients' psychological suffering: "veterans can usually recover from horror, fear, and grief once they return to civilian life, so long as 'what's right' has not also been violated" (20). Shay

shows us that, irrespective of time or place, military leaders have the potential to be their own force's worst enemy.

So much for the similarities between Vietnam and the plains of Troy: Homer, in Shay's reading, has much to teach us about how we should treat combat fatalities and how we should view our enemies. That Achilles largely recovers from his berserk state is the result of his working out his grief during the funeral ceremony of Patroclus. Indeed, Patroclus is honored to the point of brutal absurdity (for example, the execution of twelve Trojan prisoners at the pyre, *Fagles 23*: 200-201). In Vietnam, such formal grieving was never encouraged: Shay contends that the quick evacuation and shipment of corpses from the battlefield traumatized survivors, especially close friends. Often, soldiers were killed and their bodies evacuated before even their close friends knew that they were dead. Shay says that communal grieving—perhaps merely a brief, informal eulogy by the dead soldiers' friends—would spare much suffering, especially given the kind of intense friendships that develop under combat conditions (see 39): "My guess is that the company, a unit roughly a hundred, about the size of Myrmidons, is the largest group that can promptly meet the mourning needs of the bereaved soldier with a richness and authenticity that will make a difference in the rest of the soldier's life" (68). Indeed, Shay recommends that one of the best ways to prevent PTSD is for commanders at all levels to encourage grieving for the loss of a comrade-in-arms—if only the reading of a prayer at a brief ceremony in the field (199).

Shay offers one additional insight regarding the nature of PTSD—its relation to how soldiers are encouraged to view their enemy. Homer's poem, for instance, is reluctant "to make anyone a villain" (118). Specifically, Homeric adversaries view each other with respect; and while it is true that corpses are occasionally dishonored and armor is usually confiscated, the opposing sides never identify each other with dehumanizing names; in fact, such behavior would've been self-deprecating—the reputations of an Achilles or Hector were made by the status of their victims (106-110). In contrast, Shay illuminates the connection between the U.S. military's relentless badmouthing of the North

Vietnamese—terms such as “Gook,” “Dink,” or “Slope,” were common—and PTSD (110).

While other things are obviously needed as well, asserts Shay, the veteran’s self-respect never fully recovers so long as he is unable to see the enemy as worthy. In the words of one of our patients, a war against subhuman vermin “has no honor.” (115)

Shay’s commentary (along with *The Iliad*) would make fruitful reading for military leaders at all levels. And, undoubtedly, Shay has contributed something worthwhile to any comprehensive understanding of the Vietnam War. But to return to my opening comments, *Achilles in Vietnam* shows us how literature might transmit wisdom to succeeding generations. Specifically, Homer’s *Iliad* helps explain how we can contain combat casualties even though to read it is to conclude that war is inevitably part of human nature (the combat springs from timeless features of human nature: venality, pride, competing notions of honor). The issue Shay’s book tacitly raises, though, is that the means by which we learn and teach literature is a crucial matter.

Shay’s literary standards are indeed refreshing: his judgments of and approach to the literature remind me most of Samuel Johnson, the eighteenth-century English literary critic, lexicographer, and moralist. I specifically cite Johnson—I might have easily cited Horace, Sir Philip Sidney, or Matthew Arnold—because he represents (as do the others) a way of thinking about literature that seems to have faded from popularity, though I believe the concepts will endure. Essentially, Johnson believed that the best literature—the kind that would survive the tastes and presumptions of a given age and would continue to be read for centuries—would both teach and delight, provided that it was faithful to human nature. Shakespeare’s plays, in Johnson’s appraisal, exemplify literary excellence because of their true-to-life characters; they

are not modified by the customs of particular places, unpractised by the rest of the world; . . . or by the accidents of transient fashions or temporary opinions: they are the genuine progeny of common humanity,

such as the world will always supply, and observation will always find. (7:62)

In addition to a faithful representation of human life, the best literature also makes vivid moral excellence—in this citation from *Rambler* No. 4, Johnson expresses his standards of good fiction:

In narratives, where historical veracity has no place, I cannot discover why there should not be exhibited the most perfect idea of virtue; of virtue not angelical, nor above probability, for what we cannot credit we shall never imitate, but the highest and purest that humanity can reach, which, exercised in such trials as various revolutions of things shall bring upon it, may, by conquering some calamities, and enduring others, teach us what we may hope, and what we can perform. (3: 24)

Good literature pleases our imagination because the characters, in some ways, are like us—they are what we are; when we see them triumphing over, or surviving, adversity, we are reminded what we might be.

I particularly admire Shay's work because it validates Johnson's critical principles. When Shay demonstrates for us the striking similarities between Achilles' undoing and the psychiatric casualties of the Vietnam war—and what we can do to prevent them—he reminds us that the great questions that face human beings today are not new and that our literature (history, philosophy, fiction) may help us to handle our difficulties more wisely. This is not to say that reading good books will solve all of our problems: we recall, for instance, Shay's acknowledgment that war is an inevitable part of human nature; rather, the best literature gives us the opportunity to live better lives by setting forth experiences from which we might learn.

What is more, Shay not only resembles Johnson the literary critic, but he also reflects Johnson's editing practices; Shay respects the integrity of *The Iliad's* form and content—and so converses with it on its own terms. For instance, in his introduction Shay assures us that his analysis of *The Iliad* derives from a sound understanding of Homer and a careful consideration of Homeric

studies: "Homer's poem does not mean whatever I want it to mean," writes Shay; "I respect the work of classical scholars and could not have done my work without them" (xx). When Shay pays tribute to both Homer's imagination and the scholars who have helped us to acquire a surer knowledge of Homer's greatness, his observations recall Johnson's distaste for conjectural reading and editing and his admiration for Shakespeare's mimetic genius. Johnson's approach to his edition of Shakespeare—which is Johnson's greatest critical endeavor, along with his *Prefaces, Biographical and Critical, to the Works of the English Poets*—intended to transmit Shakespeare's wisdom—not to improve Shakespeare's plays or to break them to the saddle of a given critical ideology. How many of today's literary theorists could bring themselves to make like declarations?

Most impressive is Shay's manifesto of how he approaches a literary work—one that has survived the burning of the library at Alexandria, the fall of Byzantium, the popularity of MTV, and other menaces to civilization: "Homer has seen things," admits Shay, "that we in psychiatry and psychology have more or less missed" (xiii). A modest assertion, one might say, except when one recalls those theories—very popular today—that try to "explain" works of literature in light of prevailing social or political orthodoxies, or which analyze literary characters with the presumption that they are motivated entirely by this or that economic, political, or sexual impulse. That Shay reads Homer with an open mind—he has no theoretical apparatus to validate nor resentments to nurture—is why he *appreciates* Homer. So Dr. Shay deserves our praise not only for his medical and historical scholarship, but also because of the simple but crucial lesson he demonstrates for those of us reared in an age of jargon-filled schools of criticism: how to read a book well. □

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