CAN ONE EVER FORGET? HOMER ON THE PERSISTENCE OF PAINFUL MEMORIES

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Abstract. This paper takes as its subject Homer’s engagement with and representation of one of the troubling aspects of memory: its persistence (that is, our inability to forget what we want to forget). An account of persistence, as it is understood in cognitive terms today, is followed by a number of relevant case studies from Homer: Penelope, Helen, Aias and Achilleus.

In a number of earlier studies of the Homeric epics I attempted to throw light on the way in which an oral poet such as Homer may have exploited the resources of memory available to him as he rehearsed and then performed stories from his traditional repertoire. Much of the evidence presented in those studies was drawn from the poems themselves, from observations of the habitual practices of a poet who had worked with short- and long-term memory, and visual, spatial, and rote memory to facilitate composition in performance. In examining the poems, however, we find that Homer too has reflected on the acts of reminding and remembering. There are those rare self-reflexive moments when he speaks—through his characters—of the craft that he has mastered and its multiple connections with memory. And on occasions in the epics he refers to the capacity of song to record the past with the future in mind, acknowledging the oral epic tradition that carries the memories of his society’s semi-mythological past.

1 See E. Minchin, Homer and the Resources of Memory: Some Applications of Cognitive Theory to the Iliad and the Odyssey (Oxford 2001). Homer (I use this name to refer to the poet of both the Iliad and the Odyssey) is our sole informant on this subject, as the sole exponent of this tradition whose songs survive to us.

2 For an important discussion of the ways in which Homer reflects on his craft, see C. Macleod, ‘Homer on Poetry and the Poetry of Homer’ in C. Macleod, Collected Essays (Oxford 1983) 1-15.

3 Helen recognizes this when she says, at Il. 6.357f., that she and Paris will be ὠς καὶ ὀπίσσω ἀνθρώποισι πελώμεθ’ ἀοίδιμοι ἐσσομένοισι (‘the things of song for the men of the future’); old Alkinoos, king of the Phaiakians, refers to the Trojan war as a creation of the gods to generate subjects of song for generations to come (Od. 8.579f.). Even the young and still unworldly Telemachos invokes this epic theme when he speaks of Orestes’ avenging of his father’s murder: Orestes’ deed of vengeance, he says, will be celebrated by singers of the future; thus his fame will be ensured (Od. 3.202-04). That is, even Telemachos knows the
But there is another side to Homer’s preoccupation with memory. He has an interest in its functions beyond the creative routines of epic composition, to the extent that he acknowledges in his poems the power of memory, whether for good or for ill, and he reflects on the phenomena of remembering and forgetting in the world that he evokes. We should, therefore, follow the poet’s interests and investigate his understanding of the workings of memory, comparing his observations of the way the mind remembers and forgets with what we can learn today from current studies in psychology. This, clearly, cannot be achieved within the compass of a single paper. Therefore, I have selected just one aspect of memory, its persistence, as a focus for the present study. Persistence (that is, our inability to forget what we want to forget) has been identified by Daniel Schacter as an imperfection of memory, one of its so-called ‘seven sins’. I shall begin by making some comments on the persistence of memory and then give a series of examples of the various ways in which Homer uses his understanding of this phenomenon in his construction of character and in the development of narrative action.

I

What is it that makes events memorable? One of the factors influencing memorability is involvement. It is known that our recollection of events in which we have played an active role is more enduring than our memory for events in which we have played the role of bystander or observer. A second factor in memorability is emotion. When an event is accompanied by some kind of emotional response on our part, it is (other things being equal) more securely encoded. For this reason emotionally charged events are better remembered in the long term than those that are mundane. This may have both positive and negative consequences. We will remember—even involuntarily—events that have happy associations. These are a source of pleasure to us. But events that
have caused us pain in the past (such as those that leave us with memories of humiliation, emotional distress, or terror) will also intrude unbidden into our daily lives at unexpected moments; in fact, we tend to remember them in greater detail than positive experiences. For this reason we are all at some time likely to be plagued by persistent memories, in painful detail, of the very events that we would prefer to forget. For many people the repeated intrusion of such memories into their lives is a source of continuing, and debilitating, distress.

How can we put these events behind us? Recent studies confirm that simply trying to forget a painful memory, such as a difficult or embarrassing encounter, will not help us—although that is what we most want to do. A more effective therapy for individuals troubled by persistent memories is to encourage them to re-experience the traumatic incident, now in a secure context. Thus the initial physiological response to the trauma can be dampened; it will lose some of its sting. Although in the short term unhappy memories will continue to be distressingly persistent, in the long term our efforts to confront these experiences by re-telling them and in this way integrating them into our lives will prove to be the most effective counter. A similar perspective on the treatment of post-traumatic stress is described by the applied linguist Ruth

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9 Schacter [4] 164. J. Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam* (New York 1994) 166, lists some of the event types that can result in severe post-traumatic stress: serious threat to one’s life or physical integrity; sudden destruction of one’s home or community; seeing another person who has recently been, or is being, killed as a result of accident or physical violence.

10 K. Ochsner, ‘Are Affective Events Richly Recollected or Simply Familiar? The Experience and Process of Recognizing Feelings Past’, *Journal of Experimental Psychology: General* 129 (2000) 255-58; Schacter [4] 164f. Ochsner [above, this note] 256 suggests that recollection and remembering are enhanced by negative affect (and to a lesser extent by positive affect). Cohen and Faulkner [5] 280 record that twenty-three per cent of all memories involve psychological trauma. These include the deaths of people and animals; quarrels and partings; being lost, afraid or humiliated.

11 Schacter [4] 177 notes that attempts to avoid thinking about a horrendous experience are common in trauma survivors, but that these attempts are more likely to amplify, rather than lessen, later problems with persisting memories.

12 Cf. Shay [9] 39, 45, 187f. Shay brilliantly captures the trauma of Vietnam veterans by simply allowing them to speak for themselves. Not all trauma is of comparable severity; but, whatever the experience has been, it constitutes trauma for the affected individual. In the case of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Vietnam veterans, Shay cannot guarantee recovery, but, he says, it is important that the treatment be moral and social, as were the original injuries of PTSD (184-87). He stresses the need for society to acknowledge the reality of the trauma through formal social ceremony (39) and for the individual to construct a personal narrative (187), and that he or she be provided with a trustworthy community of listeners to hear it (188). Recovery depends on ‘communalization’ (55), the telling of one’s story to socially connected others (39).
Wajnryb, in her account of the ways in which Holocaust survivors have learned to communicate their pain. She has observed that by talking to ‘insiders’, to people who have ‘been there’ too, trauma victims are ‘most able to be themselves’. In the company of insiders, she notes, ‘words would flow freely—as would the tears, at other times kept so firmly in check’. Even silence, under these circumstances, is an active, and a comfortable, choice.

In the *Odyssey*, a story that takes the pain of recollection as one of its themes, Penelope, the wife of Odysseus, is a study in sorrow. During Odysseus’ twenty-year absence she has remained at home on Ithaka, suffering the grief of loss. She is surrounded by countless cues that at every moment prompt memories of Odysseus. With memory comes sorrow and longing. Hence her frequent tears:

> Τηλέμαχ’, ἦ τοι ἐγὼν ὑπερῴου εἰςαναβάσα
> λέξαμαι εἰς εὐνήν, ἢ μοι στονέσσα τέτυκαί,
> αἰεὶ δάκρυσ ἐμοίσι περφυμένη, ἐξ οὗ Ὀδυσσεὺς
> ὕξεθ’ ἀμί Ατρεΐδησιν ἐς Ἄιαι
> (Hom. *Od*. 17.101-04)

Telemachos, I will go back now to my upper chamber, and lie down on my bed, which is made sorrowful, always disordered with the tears I have wept, ever since Odysseus went with the sons of Atreus to Troy.

17 When he speaks of Penelope’s grief, Homer does not make the necessary association between visual cue and memory; he leaves it to us to supply the link. But there is no doubt that he recognizes the association of durable signs and memory (Eurykleia and the scar in *Od*. 19.392-468 assures us of that). For useful discussion from a Homeric perspective, see R. Scodel, ‘Homeric Signs and Flashbulb Memory’ in I. Worthington and J. M. Foley (edd.), *Epea and Grammata: Oral and Written Communication in Ancient Greece* (Leiden 1988) 99-116; and see also M. Conway, *Flashbulb Memories* (Hove 1995).
As she says to Phemios, when she begs him to cease his sad song, which afflicts her with πένθος ἄλασσον (‘unforgettable sorrow’, 1.342), she longs for Odysseus’ dear head whenever her memory is stirred (μεμνημένη οἰεί / ἄνδρός, ‘whenever I am reminded of my husband’, 343f.). In his representation of Penelope, Homer shows us that there are times when it is impossible to halt the flood of memory and the pain it brings. Although Penelope grieves for her husband, she is preoccupied with a complex cluster of problems that her present circumstances have forced upon her. She faces problems caused by the absence of her husband: the crowd of suitors seeking her hand, despite her reluctance to remarry; their reckless consumption of palace stores; her own future and that of her son. She is obliged to live her life in the present. It is this—the obligation to defend herself and her son—that keeps her, stricken as she is, from succumbing to grief. By contrast, the Helen of the Iliad appears, for much of the time, to be trapped in her past. Near the end of her stay in Troy, she still finds it impossible to forget that she forsook the land of her fathers and a worthy husband for someone whom she now despises (Il. 3.173-76, 428f.; 6.344-51; 24.765f.); nor can she put out of her mind Alexandros’ blind act (6.356) or their joint kakὸν μόρον (‘vile destiny’, 357). Her memory of those events is sharpened by the emotional associations that she felt. At that distant time, twenty years before (24.765), it had been sexual desire. But this has now turned to scorn. And, since she has been in Troy, she has felt shame, intensified by the continuing contempt of the Trojans (apart from Hektor and Priam) for herself and for her behaviour (24.768-72). She laments her past; she wishes that everything were different. Again and again she takes refuge in what is termed by psychologists ‘counterfactual thinking’, whereby she envisages alternative scenarios of what might—or should—have happened. This kind of thinking generally recurs as a

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18 Penelope gains no comfort from Phemios’ song, since it does not address her distress (her grief and longing for Odysseus) but reminds her, rather, of the fact of his absence.

19 For example, she devises her trick—the weaving and unpicking of the shroud of Laertes—for deceiving the suitors (Od. 19.137-58) in order to delay the moment at which she must, as it were, consent to be courted. And later, to the ‘beggar’s’ delight, she works to exploit her power over the suitors to win valuable gifts from them (18.250-303). Penelope, like her husband, is alert to the opportunities that the present moment offers.

20 As Schacter [4] 175 describes the phenomenon, she is ‘stuck’ in the past. He notes that victims who remain focussed on the past for years after a traumatic event exhibit higher levels of psychological distress than those who focus on the present and future. This behaviour in turn stimulates even greater focus on the past, thus setting up a destructive self-perpetuating cycle of persistent remembering like that in observed cases of depression.

consequence of a negative and possibly avoidable experience (in our world, for example, failing an examination or losing money in an investment) and is associated with negative emotions: that is, the emotion, ‘feeling bad’, makes us think ‘if only’, and we think of ways in which we could have avoided what is making us feel bad. 22 One of the immediate consequences of counterfactual thinking is, in fact, an exacerbation of that unpleasantness, especially when such thinking reflects self-blame. 23 We observe this in Helen. The Helen of the Iliad is for the most part absorbed in her memories and preoccupied by the regret they bring. In her reproach to her husband, her first and most powerful counterfactual thought is that she should have been swept away at birth; her second expresses her contempt for the man who seduced her, Paris: 24

δ’ ἐμείο κυνὸς κακομηχάνου ὀκρυοεσσῆς,
ὡς μ’ ἵθελ’ ἰματι τῷ ὅτε με πρῶτον τέκε μῆτρ
οίχεσοι προφέρουσα κακῇ ἀνέμῳ θύελλα
εἰς ὅρος ἢ εἰς κύμα πολυφλοίσσῳ θαλάσσης,
ἐνθὰ με κύμ’ ἀποφέρεσ πάρος τάδε ἐργα γενέσθαι.
αὐτάρ ἐπεὶ τάδε γ’ ὅδε θεοὶ κακὰ τεκμήριαν,
ἀνδρὸς ἐπεὶ ὅφελλον ἁμεῖνον εἶναι ἁκοιτίς,
ὡς ἐδὲ νέμεσίν τε καὶ αἴσχεα πόλλα’ ἀνθρώπω ν.

(Hom. II. 6.344-51)

by marriage to me, who am a nasty bitch evil-intriguing,
how I wish that on that day when my mother first bore me
the foul whirlwind of the storm had caught me away and swept me
to the mountain, or into the wash of the sea deep-thundering
where the waves would have swept me away before all these things had
happened.

Yet since the gods had brought it about that these vile things must be,
I wish that I had been the wife of a better man than this is,
one who knew modesty and all things of shame that men say.

There is, however, another aspect to Helen. Along with her lingering regret and remorse for what she and Paris have done, she has a strong sense of the great tragedy in which she is implicated. She is able—on occasions—to distance herself sufficiently from her grief to be able to create the tapestry that will record

23 Roese [21] 143. Roese [21] 143 also observes that counterfactual thinking may be a motivating force, energizing action. That is, such thinking may be beneficial. This does not appear to be the case for Helen.
24 W. Leaf and M. Bayfield, The Iliad of Homer 1 (London 1895) 397f. ad 350 express appropriately Victorian views on Helen’s current state of mind (‘the not uncommon sequel of a lawless attachment’). But they rightly commend the subtlety of the poet’s insight into human behaviour.
for the future the struggles of the Trojans and the Achaians for her sake (οὐς ἔθεν εἰνὲκ’ ἐποσσχов, ‘which they endured for their sake’, II. 3.128) and to be able to appraise her destiny, and Paris’, as the subject of song for future generations (ὡς καὶ ὀπίσσω / ἀνθρώποις πελώμεθ’ ἀοίδιμοι ἐσσομένοις, ‘so that hereafter we shall be made into things of song for the men of the future’, 6.357f.).  

This capacity in Helen is exceptional. It is the complexity of the poet’s conception of her character, which draws together her exceptional beauty and charm, her perceptiveness, her guilt and her suffering, and her capacity for looking at her life dispassionately, that makes her so interesting to us.

The Helen of the Odyssey, by contrast with the Helen of the Iliad, is more proactive in her management of memory, although perhaps no more successful. She does not allow herself to suffer the persistence of memory’s pangs as she had in the Iliad. Instead, from the security of Menelaos’ palace in Sparta, the Helen of the Odyssey advocates the blocking of the pain of memory. She knows of a drug that will counter the grief that comes with intrusive memories such as her own, or those of others. It is this drug that she uses when Telemachos and Peisistratos are visiting her and Menelaos in Sparta. At Odyssey 4.219-34 she has her attendants serve hosts and guests with wine to which she has added the drug heartsease. This will stay their tears: αὐτίκ’ ἥρ ἐἰς οἴνον βάλε φάρμακον, ἔνθεν ἐπινόν, / νηπενθὲς τ’ ἄχολόν τε, κακών ἐπίληθον ἀπάντων, ‘into the wine of which they were drinking she cast a medicine / of heartsease, free of gall, to make one forget all sorrows’, 220f.). As they drink, she and her husband and the young men are able to share reminiscences of Odysseus without sorrow. But, as we know and as the poet recognizes, dulling the emotions for a day is simply a temporary measure; it is not a cure for the

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25 For discussion of Helen’s use of this epic motif, see J. Griffin, Homer on Life and Death (Oxford 1980) 97: ‘What she makes in Book 3 is exactly what she says in Book 6.’

26 I suggest that it is her part-divine nature that endows her with this capacity. Homer does not let us forget that this exceptional woman, so unlike any of the other women in the epics, is a daughter of Zeus (II. 3.199; Od. 4.184).

27 Drugs that dull the pain of memory, or even destroy it, can be used also for malign purpose. Thus we encounter in the Odyssey magical ways of freeing individuals from responsibility as well as care: the lotus (Od. 9.82-104, esp. 94-97); and the drug that Kirke offers Odysseus and his men (10.233-36), to make them forgetful of their own country (ἵνα πάγγες λαθοίαστε πατρίδος αἰνεῖ, 10.236). For discussion of the drink that Kirke offers and the drug, see Heubeck in A. Heubeck and A. Hoekstra, A Commentary on Homer’s Odyssey 2 (Oxford 1989) 56f., where Heubeck notes inter alia that when Odysseus’ companions forget their home they lose their memory of their previous life and their sense of identity.

28 For discussion of the conversation that Helen and Menelaos and their two young guests enjoy, see M. Gumpert, Grafting Helen: The Abduction of the Classical Past (Madison 2001) 37-39.
pain of remembering. Telemachos will be himself again the next morning; and his sorrows will return.

Homer, however, knows that although forgetting is impossible for most of the characters in the *Odyssey*, there is for a lucky minority a more effective way of coping with the past. The swineherd, Eumaios, commends the healing power of re-experience through storytelling. After Eumaios and his master have shared a number of stories—and sorrows—in the swineherd’s hut, Odysseus asks the swineherd to tell him the story of how he came to Ithaka (*Od. 15.381-88*). Eumaios is very ready to do so and adds, significantly, that he and his guest will entertain each other remembering and retelling their sad sorrows (κήδεσιν ἀλλήλον τερπῶμεθα λευγαλέοις / μνωμένο, 15.399ff.). For, he says, *afterwards* a man who has suffered much and wandered much has pleasure out of his sorrows (μετὰ γὰρ τε καὶ ἄλγεσι τέρπεται ἀνήρ, / ὃς τις δὴ μᾶλα πολλὰ πάθη καὶ πολλ’ ἔπαληθή, 400ff.). That is, when that particular episode has reached its conclusion, when one’s trials are at an end, only then can one look back on unhappy experiences with some serenity.29 Eumaios confirms what psychologists and psychiatrists tell us today, that to take the sting out of painful memories of the past we should create a secure environment in the present and, in this context, work through these memories, as story. Thus the swineherd is able to tell, without present distress, the story of his cruel abduction from a happy home by Phoinikian pirates, because this tale ends well, with his ‘rescue’ by Laertes (15.457-84). Likewise, at the end of the *Odyssey*, when Odysseus and Penelope are reunited and have enjoyed their lovemaking (23.300), Penelope gives Odysseus her account of their years of separation, and Odysseus tells her the story of his adventures (306-341). Both are tales of great hardship, but, as the poet observes, husband and wife can find some pleasure now in telling these tales (τερπέσθην μύθοις, ‘they took their pleasure in talking’, 301) since this long and unhappy episode in their lives has at last come to an end. They are together again.

Although Eumaios and Odysseus and Penelope are able, eventually, to look back to their past with some equanimity, others amongst Homer’s characters demonstrate the obsessive and corrosive nature of memory’s persistence. Telamonian Aias belongs to the latter group. When Odysseus encounters him in the underworld (*Od. 11.543-67*), Aias, even in Hades, is still smarting over the decision that awarded the arms of Achilles to Odysseus rather than to him. Whereas in the underworld the souls of Agamemnon and Achilles in turn have

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29 But such calm is impossible before resolution. Note, for example, how Odysseus weeps, at *Od.* 8.521ff., when Demodokos tells stories of the Trojan war. For Odysseus, who has not yet reached his homeland after the conclusion of the fighting ten years before, the war continues to be unfinished business.
come up to Odysseus and addressed him readily, Aias stands apart from the hero (νόσηται ἀφεστήκει, ‘he stood off at a distance’, 544). His body language and his refusal to address his former comrade speak for his state of mind. In fact, these actions are the only indication that Aias himself gives about his feelings.\(^{30}\) We rely on the narrator to remind us of the cause, namely that he is resentful still about a decision that went against him (κεχολωμένη εἴνεκα νίκης, ‘angry on account of that favourable decision’, 544), and on Odysseus to give us an outline of the affair (545-51). Aias had been deeply wounded by the implication that his efforts in battle had been deemed less valuable than those of Odysseus. It cut to his heart. He was bitter, naturally, that his contributions to the Achaian war effort should have been undervalued and unrewarded; but what was more significant was that his self-image as the strong defender of his Achaian comrades had been undermined. For this reason, above all, the award of Achilleus’ arms to Odysseus endured as a vivid memory, even after death.\(^{31}\) He is angry still. The persistence of this memory and of his associated pain makes him deaf to Odysseus’ words of reconciliation: Αἴας, παῖ Τελαμώνος ἀμύμωνος, οὐκ ἄρ’ ἐμελλέες / οὐδὲ θανῶν λῆσεσθαι ἐμοὶ χόλου εἴνεκα τευχέων / οὐλομένου; (‘Aias, son of stately Telamon, could you then never even in death forget your anger against me, because of that cursed armor?’, Od. 11.553-55).\(^{32}\) What is remarkable in this image of Aias is his stern silence. Is it that he does not wish to communicate his pain? We know that Aias is a man who is sparing with his words: his gruff but powerful speech, the final appeal of the embassy (Il. 9.624-42), illustrates this. Or is his hurt a pain beyond words? Aias’ behaviour bears all the marks of that obsessive recycling of thoughts and memories that are described as ‘ruminations’ or flashbacks.\(^{33}\) The persistence of memory—even in the underworld—can bring enduring pain; and such pain can stand in the way of reconciliation.

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\(^{30}\) Aias refuses to address Odysseus on meeting him; he also refuses to respond to Odysseus’ conciliatory words. For comment on the scene, see F. Ahl and H. Roisman, The Odyssey Reformed (Ithaca 1996) 145f.

\(^{31}\) Odysseus, as narrator, refers obliquely to Aias’ suicide (Od. 11.549). For commentary, see Heubeck [27] 109f.

\(^{32}\) One must wonder, however, whether Odysseus was extraordinarily tactless in reminding Aias so bluntly of the incident and thereby increasing his pain; and whether he himself was seeking some sign that Aias bore him no grudge. If this latter proposition is the case, Odysseus is denied his wish.

Perhaps this unhappy situation could have been completely avoided at the time, as Odysseus now wishes (Od. 11.548). In the Iliad we see that it is possible to negotiate potentially difficult situations, provided that one has the presence of mind and the tact to do so. Antilochos, who is very perceptive in his relationships with others, is alert to others’ readiness to harbour resentment at tiny slights and perceived wrongs. He makes every effort to avert a similar outcome in his dispute with Menelaos at the end of the chariot race (Il. 23.539-613). He offers Menelaos the mare that Achilleus had presented to him (a prize that Menelaos has disputed), arguing that he would rather give up the mare he has won than fall from Menelaos’ favour and be alienated all his days (σοί . . . ἡματα πάντα / ἐκ θυμοῦ πεσέειν, ‘[than] all my days fall from your favour’, 594f.) Antilochos knows that perceived injuries can live on in memory: hence his prompt action and his ready words of compromise. He acknowledges Menelaos’ seniority (587f.) and his higher status (588); and he excuses his own behaviour on the grounds of youthful impulsiveness and folly (588f.). But at no point will he concede that Menelaos actually won the mare (591f.). Even Antilochos, for all his charm, can go only so far towards reconciliation.

Finally, we come to the Achilleus of the Iliad, who has taken to heart Agamemnon’s insult to his honour. He has withdrawn from the fighting and he holds firm in his resolve not to return to the battlefield, despite the appeals of the embassy (Il. 9.182-657). His heart, he says, swells up in anger, when he remembers the way in which he was humiliated by Agamemnon before the Achaians: ἀλλὰ μοι οἶδάνεται κραδίη χόλο όππότε κείνων / μνήσομαι ὅς μ’ ἀσφυῆλον ἐν Ἀργείουσιν ἔρεξεν / Ἀτρεΐδης ὃς εἶ τιν ἀτίμητον μετανάστην (‘Yet still the heart in me swells up in anger, when I remember the disgrace that he wrought upon me before the Argives, the son of Atreus, as if I were some dishonoured vagabond’, 646-48). It was the accepted social custom in the heroic world, apparently, to erase from memory an insult or a wrong, for this reason he is prepared to give up the prize to Menelaos.

Antilochos insists still on his right to the prize; but he recognizes that we all have a long memory for wrongs that we believe have been done to us. For this reason he is prepared to give up the prize to Menelaos.

For other examples of Antilochos’s sensitivity to others’ feelings, see Il. 18.32-34 (he holds Achilles’ hands lest he try to kill himself); 23.785-92 (his good humour on coming last in the footrace; and his careful tribute to Achilles).

Note particularly Aias’ strong ‘appeal’ to Achilleus (Il. 9.624-42). He makes the point that Achilleus has chosen not to accept the gifts that Agamemnon has offered; any other man would accept them and curb his pride and his anger (9.634-36). Achilleus, he says, has forgotten the affection and honour of his friends (9.630-32). For commentary, see B. Hainsworth, The Iliad: A Commentary 3 (Cambridge 1993) 142f. Achilleus, in reply, says that he will not return to the fighting until the Trojans set fire to the vessels of the Achaians (Il. 9.650-53).
once one had received an apology (or a stated desire to make amends) and gifts. Achilleus does not follow custom. By refusing the offer the embassy conveys and by remaining out of the fighting, he in fact places himself in the wrong. It is only later, when he observes the battle going against the Achaians (Il. 11.596-601) and sees Patroklos’ distress at the situation (16.2-45), that he judges the time has come when he can think again of taking up arms. At this point he does not deny his bitterness (16.52, 55) or his sense of having been wronged, but he is prepared, he says, to let Agamemnon’s insult be a thing of the past. He will ‘give over’ his anger:

(Allá tâ meû protetúxhâi éásosem òuð’ ára ðwz òn ésperekhes kekolóswðhâi énì fressìn’ ëtòi éfèn ãe òu ðrì mënhìmðn kàtàpàsaúsemèn, álì’ ópòt’ ãn ðh ñhìs ëmáçs ãfkìkhtai áúthì te pòlèmòs te.

(Hom. Il. 16.60-63)

Still, we will let all this be a thing of the past; and it was not in my heart to be angry forever; and yet I have said I would not give over my anger until that time came when the fighting with all its clamour came up to my own ships.

So he sends Patroklos into the fighting with firm instructions to return when he has turned the battle from the ships (16.95f.). Patroklos in his zeal forgets this command (16.686-691). His forgetfulness leads to his death. Achilleus then resolves to return to battle himself and before the assembled Achaians he addresses Agamemnon (19.56-73) and announces an end to their quarrel. He regrets it, he says, and he adds that in his view it will be remembered by the Achaians all too long: oútòr ’Αχαιοûs / ðèròn ëmìs kai sëhì ërìdòs mëhìssthèthì òòw (‘Yet I think the Achaians will too long remember this quarrel between us’, 19.63f.).

He speaks now of how he will cope with his memory of the insult that lay at the heart of the quarrel. He will put an end to his anger; he will beat it down ‘by constraint’ (ánågykē). It is an emotional response unbecoming to him:

(Allá tâ meû protetúxhâi éásosem òxwymînoi per ðwìmûn éni stêkses fìlòn ðàmàsantès ånàykkê)

37 This, at the very least, is what Agamemnon and the embassy think should happen: see Il. 9.115-61, esp. 157 (Agamemnon), 259-63 (Odysseus), 602-05 (Phoinix), 628-42 (Aias).

38 Achilleus points out how retentive our memories can be for critical events in our lives. The quarrel of Achilleus and Agamemnon will live on in cultural memory in the same way as do personal disputes at a high level in our own world. I think here of a personal disagreement in the 1990s between the then Prime Minister of Australia and the leader of Malaysia at the time that, although a bystander memory for all but one Australian (the Prime Minister himself), has embedded itself in cultural memory.
He will make what has happened between him and Agamemnon a thing of the past (19.65; cf. 16.60). This may have been his claim; and the Achaians appear to have seen it that way: they rejoiced at Achilleus’ ‘unsaying his anger’ (μὴνιν ἀπειπόντος, 19.74f.).\(^{39}\) But the reality is, I suggest, different. As Loraux notes, in her examination of the amnesty of 403 BC in Athens, ‘such a forgetting leaves traces’.\(^{40}\) Bitter memories are never erased; one cannot ever forget completely. And I do not believe that Achilleus forgets Agamemnon’s insult—nor that he tries to do so.\(^{41}\) Indeed, in the subsequent exchanges between Achilleus and Agamemnon we observe a certain stiffness on Achilleus’ part. His reply to his commanding officer’s ‘apology’ and offer of recompense (19.137-44) is close to ungracious (δῶρα μὲν αἱ κ’ ἐθέλησα παρασχέμεν, ὡς ἐπιεικές, / ἡ τ’ ἐχέμεν παρὰ σοὶ, ‘the gifts are yours to give if you wish, and as it is proper, or to keep with yourself’, 19.147f.),\(^{42}\) his compliment to Agamemnon at the close of the funeral games has a perfunctory ring (23.890-93),\(^{43}\) and his words to Priam soon after suggest that he has little respect for his own leader:

\(^{39}\) And indeed Agamenon, in accepting Achilleus’ ‘unsaying’ admits himself that he had been troubled by memories of his own failure, or as he presents it, the way he was deluded (οὗ δυνάμην λέλοθσθ᾽ Ἀτης ἣ πρῶτον ἁσθήν, ‘I could not forget Delusion, the way I was first deluded’, Il. 19.136).


\(^{41}\) Shay [9] 185 makes this point in the Vietnam context: ‘[a]ny knowledge is potentially transforming; the knowledge of evil, particularly in trusted authorities, custodians of thémis, and within oneself, brings irreversible change’. Once Achilleus has felt insulted and betrayed by his leader there can be no return to the way things were before that injury. Trust can no longer be assumed.

\(^{42}\) This ungraciousness is observed. Note that Odysseus is quick to step in to soften the effect of Achilleus’ words by turning to the practical steps that should be taken before battle: food and eating (Il. 9.155-72).

\(^{43}\) M. M. Willcock, *A Companion to the Iliad* (Chicago 1976) 265 ad 890-94, observes that Achilleus brings the games to an end with a compliment to Agamemnon. Achilleus’ words ἵμεν γὰρ ὅσον προβέβηκας ἀπάντων / ἡδ’ ὅσον δυνᾶμει τε καὶ ἡμᾶς ἐπελευ ἄριστος (we know how much you surpass all others, by how much you are the greatest for strength among the spear-throwers’, Il. 23.890f.) are superficially a compliment, but they are
Achilleus of the swift feet now looked at Priam and said, in a gently mocking tone,

‘Sleep outside, aged sir and good friend, for fear some Achaian might come in here on a matter of counsel, since they keep coming and sitting by me and making plans; as they are supposed to. But if one of these come through the fleeting black night should notice you, he would go straight and tell Agamemnon, shepherd of the people, and there would be a delay in the ransoming of the body.

But how is it that Achilleus can set aside his anger, or beat it down, so promptly, given that Agamemnon’s insult had been so profound? Achilleus’ return to the fighting after the death of Patroklos was not a matter of a long and careful consideration on Achilleus’ part. His return was inevitable. But, even under these new, and urgent, conditions, this return still required a nominal ‘reconciliation’ with Agamemnon. And in the light of that greater sorrow, the death of Patroklos, which had engulfed him and swamped the hitherto persistent memory of Agamemnon’s insult, it was not so difficult for Achilleus to unsay his wrath. His sense of outrage had become almost irrelevant: this was signalled, as we noted above, by Achilleus’ haste to return to battle and his complete lack of interest in Agamemnon’s gifts. Instead, he wanted arms; he wanted battle;

not from the heart. His words certainly allude to the quarrel that has been the subject of the Iliad and its issues: see N. Richardson, The Iliad: A Commentary 6 (Cambridge 1993) 269f.; and J. Tatum, The Mourner’s Song: War and Remembrance from the Iliad to Vietnam (Chicago 2003) 162, who speaks of Achilleus’ ‘elegant flattery’. 44 On ἐπικερτομέων (Il. 24.649) as ‘sarcastic’, see Richardson [43] 344f. ad 649, who sets out possible interpretations for the word in this context. On this see more recently M. Clarke, ‘Heart-Cutting Talk’: Homeric κερτομέω and Related Words’, CQ 51 (2001) 329-38; M. Lloyd, ‘The Politeness of Achilles: Off-Record Conversation Strategies in Homer and the Meaning of Kertomia’, JHS 124 (2004) 75-89. The sense of ἐπικερτομέων is ‘taunting’. But the mockery is, rather inexplicably, directed to Priam; it is not intended for Agamemnon. Nevertheless, Achilleus’s reservations about Agamemnon are clear at 24.653-55: as Richardson [43] 345 ad 653-55 points out, Achilleus’ words καὶ κεν ἄναβλητης λύσιος νεκροὶ γένηται (24.655) are a reminder of Agamemnon’s ‘brutality in the early parts of the poem’. 45 To avenge a fallen comrade is the automatic response of a hero. Even before Achilleus speaks to his mother about his intentions (Il. 18.88-93) she knows what he will do and what the consequences will be (18.59f.).
and he wanted Hektor. Achilleus would try to blot out the pain and the sorrow associated with the loss of Patrokl os and his failure to defend him (Il. 18.98f.) by an act of vengeance. But, as he discovered, even that act—the killing of Hektor—was not enough; nor were the potentially healing ceremonies of the funeral games. The problem is that Achilleus is now besieged by memory, marked by the kinds of flashbacks described above:

\[
\text{αὐτάρ Ἀχιλλεύς}
\]

\[
κλαίει φίλου ἐτάρου μεμνημένος, οὐδὲ μιν ὑπνὸς
\]

\[
ήρει πανδαμάτωρ, ἄλλ’ ἐστρέφετ’ ἔνθα καὶ ἔνθα
\]

\[
Πατρόκλου ποθέον ἀνδροτήτα τε καὶ μένος ἦ, ἢδ’ ὑπόσα τολύπευσε σὺν αὐτῷ καὶ πάθεν ἄλγεα ἀνδρῶν τε πτολέμιους ἄλγεινά τε κυματα πείρων
\]

\[
(\text{Hom. Il. 24.3-8})
\]

Only Achilleus wept still as he remembered his beloved companion, nor did sleep who subdues all come over him, but he tossed from one side to the other in longing for Patroklos, for his manhood and his great strength and all the actions he had seen to the end with him, and the hardships he had suffered; the wars of men; hard crossing of big waters.

The cruel persistence of his memories of Patroklos is in time made somewhat more tolerable by meeting and talking with someone who is suffering in the same way—in this case, Priam, the father of Hektor. This night-time meeting, in private, between the two, is an example of ‘insider-talk’, described above, and of the healing power of silence in such circumstances:

\[
\text{αὐτάρ ἐπει πόσιος καὶ ἐδήτως ἐξ ἔρων ἑντο,}
\]

\[
ὅποι Δαρδανίδης Πρίαμος θαύμαζ‘ Ἀχιλῆα
\]

\[
ὁσσος ἐν οἷς τε θεοί πάσοι γάρ ἄντα ἑσκει,
\]

\[
αὐτάρ ὁ Δαρδανίδην Πρίαμον θαύμαζεν Ἀχιλλεύς
\]

\[
eἰσορών ὡργῆν τ’ ἀγαθήν καὶ μύθων ἁκοῦνων.
\]

\[
αὐτάρ ἐπει τάρπησαν ἐξ’ ἀλλήλους ὁρόντες . . .
\]

\[
(\text{Hom. Il. 24.628-33})
\]

But when they had put aside their desire for eating and drinking, Priam, the son of Dardanos, gazed upon Achilles, wondering at his size and beauty, for he seemed like an outright vision of gods. Achilleus in turn gazed on Dardanian Priam

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46 On Achilleus as a berserker, on the death of Patrokl os, see Shay [9] 77, 89f. (‘During berserk rage, the friend is constantly alive; letting go of the rage lets him die’: Shay [9] 90.)

47 For comment on the need for social ceremony as a necessary part of what Shay [9] passim calls ‘griefwork’.

48 For the symptoms of PTSD, see Shay [9] 166f. These include intrusive recollections of the event itself, detachment/estrangement from others, restricted range of affect, sense of foreshortened future, difficulty in sleeping, outbursts of anger—all could apply to Achilleus.
and wondered, as he saw his brave looks and listened to him talking.  
But when they had taken their fill of gazing one on the other ...

Thus, in hearing the sorry tale of Priam (*Il. 24.486-506*), a man who reminds Achilleus of his own old father, and in comforting him (599-620), Achilleus finds comfort himself. For now at last, like Priam, he is able to sleep: αὐτῷ Ἀχιλλεύς ἐνδέ μυχῷ κλησίης ἐὐπήκτον· τῷ δὲ Βρισῆς παρελέξατο καλ-λιπάρης (‘But Achilleus slept in the inward corner of the strong-built shelter, and at his side lay Briseis of the fair colouring’, 675f.). Do we discern a spirit of forgiveness here? Not at all. Achilleus has not forgiven Agamemnon; nor has he forgiven Hektor. And there is no question of Priam forgiving his host. As Griffin notes, in another context, ancient literature is ‘not much interested in forgiveness’. 49 What Achilleus and Priam share is a moment of mutual understanding, of insight into what it is to be human. 50 Neither man will forget his pain—ever. 51 But each one has taken a first step in learning to live with it.

3

It is clear that the poet of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (drawing, I suggest, to a greater or a lesser extent on both his experience of everyday life and on the tradition in which he worked) had learned much about memory and its virtues and vices. He certainly knew something about the persistence of unwanted memories. Today, psychologists and psychiatrists have formalized this knowledge; they can identify and, through a range of narrative-based therapies, can help us manage intrusive and painful memories of failure, disappointment, regret and grief. But, as we have seen, these symptoms are not new: they have been part of life ever since people first experienced trauma. Indeed, we can observe these same emotions and behaviours realized vividly in Homer’s representations of Penelope, Helen, Aias, and Achilleus. We can see each one of them struggling to deal with the painful consequences of memory’s persistence, as we do today, with more or less success. This poet—indeed, this tradition—knows from experience that memory can be a power for good; but there is recognition also that its defects, if unchecked, can be devastating.

49 See J. Griffin, *Virgil* (Oxford 1986) 88 (a comparison between the encounter of Achilleus and Priam of *Il. 24.471-76* and the encounter between Aeneas and Dido in the underworld as Virgil describes it in *Aen. 6.450-76*. Here Griffin argues that the Aeneas/Dido encounter is ‘one of the few scenes in ancient literature which hinge on forgiveness’.


51 Shay [9] 183 uses the evocative phrase ‘aching reconciliation’ to describe the particular nature of this moment.