

Chapter 2

A Father Begs for his Son's Corpse in the *Iliad*

Dialogic freedom: a two-sided act, chosen within a field of unifying and fragmenting forces along a continuum of minimal to maximal layers of knowing that are never final.

Homer's *Iliad* allows us to examine a central feature of dialogic freedom—its two-sidedness—as it is presented in one of the earliest texts of the Western tradition.¹ In doing so, we should note that Bakhtin himself did not identify two-sidedness with the epic. On the contrary, he called Homer's world² monologic, dominated by a "valorized epic past," and the "sacrosanct tradition" of the classical Greek heroic vision.³ In "Epic and Novel," distinguishing this epic vision from the polyphonic world of the novel, Bakhtin described the epic with unappetizing adjectives like "congealed" (14), "ossified" (7), "stilted" (10) or "half-moribund" (14). In "Discourse in the Novel," he described it as "static," "dead," (342), "narrow," "cramped" (266) and "naïve" (334).⁴ To him, it was the genre of closedness, by implication the last place we would look for dialogic freedom. True, he left us a loophole in "Discourse in the Novel," where he allowed that "heteroglossia⁵ . . . spills over even into the high poetic genres" (383), and I intend to squeeze through this loophole. But we need to respect Bakhtin's apparently dismissive words as an indication of just how strongly he might disagree with the argument I am about to make.

For Bakhtin, epic traditions focused on "heroizing," which he saw as representing the "pre-packaged and unchanging nature of their heroes" (EN, 10). To him the epic hero was closed off from us in a remote world of "peak times," where "everything is finished, already over" (EN, 16). Though Bakhtin meant to provoke idolizing readers who genuflect before the Homeric bard and fail to appreciate the unique accomplishments of modern novels, he loved reading the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, and he was far from the first to notice that the heroes that populate them, whether Trojan or Greek, all seem to be part of a distant world, larger than life, saturated with shared traditional values of courage, honor, friendship, fame, family, oaths, obligation, and reverence for elders. Compared with the diversity of orientations in Bakhtin's time or today, this archaic world, which was distant even from Homer (who described it centuries after it had disappeared), seems much more unified and stabilized by the centripetal force of shared values. If Bakhtin saw in the epic one singular belief system, so have many others. This does not mean, however, that we need to agree with him that the genre is "ossified" or that "there is no place in the epic for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy" (EN, 16). Nor do we need

to agree that in terms of ideology “naïve conflictlessness . . . characterizes the epic” (DN, 335). The scene we are about to examine is filled with “openendedness” and is anything but “ossified,” as two characters struggle in each other’s presence to negotiate internal conflicts within some of their deepest shared values.

The *Iliad* presents a violent world, where warriors routinely kill each other in the name of their shared values. The role of dialogic freedom in this bloody process could be examined scene by scene throughout the work, but one scene in particular throws into relief most clearly the two-sidedness of choice: the encounter between Achilles and Priam, in which the Trojan king begs for the corpse of his son Hector. This scene appears almost at the end of the story, after Hector has been killed in battle by Achilles. Against everyone’s advice, King Priam decides to risk the perilous journey behind enemy lines to confront the man who has killed his son and to beg him to release the corpse. This meeting between Priam and Achilles, which is the climax of the *Iliad*, seems at first like a letdown. It presents not a battle between heroes or even a fortress in flames, but negotiations for a funeral. Only when we see what it takes to make this funeral happen do we realize that this negotiation requires the most intense confrontation in the epic. Nicholas Richardson calls it “not the most obvious ending,” yet also “the most dramatic moment in the whole of the *Iliad*.”⁶ For ten years Hector had led the effort to repel the Greek assault on Troy. Only days earlier he was cut down by Achilles, who now spends a good part of his time dragging Hector’s body by its heels round and round the tomb of Patroclus, killed in battle by the Trojan prince. The theme of the *Iliad*, the anger of Achilles, is vividly on display, with Hector’s head bouncing in the dust behind Achilles’ chariot, as Achilles takes his revenge on a corpse. Into this volatile situation comes Hector’s father Priam, unarmed, in the dead of night, across enemy lines, past sentries, with a wagonload of treasure to ransom the body of his son. Priam has been urged not to attempt such a feat, because it is highly unlikely that an unguarded man far beyond his warrior years could make it through the encampments of thousands of soldiers, to reach and return from an enemy whose main object is to destroy him.

Yet this is exactly what happens. Chalk it up to the intervention of the gods if you like, since Zeus sends Achilles’ mother, the nymph Thetis, to urge her son to accept the ransom and return the body, while Apollo protects the corpse from being shredded as Achilles drags it around, day after day. Zeus also sends his messenger Iris to tell Priam to embark on this mission, and he sends Hermes to accompany and protect the old man—shrouding him in mist when needed, or drugging a sentry. Faced with such blatant interventions, readers often blame fate and the gods for the confrontation between Priam and Achilles and other critical events in the *Iliad*, as if it does not really matter what the human beings in the story want, say, or choose. In the introduction to his translation, Richard Lattimore suggests another possibility: “We simply do not know how seriously

Homer took his Olympian gods, to what extent they are his divinities, or those of his tradition, or those of his audience. . . . But one thing the gods-as-persons of Homer do not do: they do not change human nature. . . . The choices are human; and in the end, despite all divine interferences, the *Iliad* is a story of people.”⁷⁷ Here, Lattimore emphasizes the importance of human choice, despite the interventions of the gods. In his introduction to the Robert Fagles translation, Bernard Knox elaborates: “These gods. . . are figures symbolic of those aspects of our lives that seem incomprehensible and uncontrollable.”⁷⁸ If it is passion that sweeps Helen and Paris away, blame Aphrodite; if it is anger, blame Ares; if it is a hurricane, blame Zeus. According to Knox, the Greek deities can be understood literally, metaphorically, or psychologically. The point is that, however we interpret their role, there is still room for human responsibility, which is at the center of the encounter between Achilles and Priam, when the old man begs for his son’s corpse.

It is significant that what matters most here is not the personalities of Priam and Achilles but their situations: Achilles’ role as the Achaian military leader, whose best friend has been killed by the son of the Trojan king; and Priam’s role as the Trojan king whose son led the city’s defenses until Achilles killed him. Unlike a novel that opens a door on the personality and psychology of a character—Elizabeth Bennet’s irony, Dimitri Karamazov’s anxiety, or Humbert Humbert’s obsession—the *Iliad* presents characters in terms of their roles: king, lover, warrior, wife, prisoner, father, guest, or host. There are differences between the wily Odysseus and the angry Achilles, but both warriors share the same heroic vision. In fact, all the characters in the *Iliad*, whether Greek or Trojan, make sacrifices to the same gods, speak the same language, and share the same customs about fighting, feasting, and burying the dead. What characters in the *Iliad* say and do arises more from their situations than from their personalities. To put it differently, though living people surely have personalities, the only traces in the *Iliad* of the personalities of the people who are supposed to have lived in the twelfth century BCE are the outlines of a few key decisions and actions, passed from one rhapsode to another and eventually written down, revised, translated, and read by us several millennia later.

Thus it is that we can look at the encounter between Priam and Achilles not in terms of their personalities but in terms of the roles they occupy at the moment they meet. Achilles is the chief Greek warrior, the only son of a mortal and a deity, a friend to Patroclus, a host to Priam, and an angry, dangerous man. Priam is the Trojan king, a father, a husband, a guest, a suppliant, and an old man who was once a great warrior. The meeting between them is a function of the intersection between the perspectives entailed in the various roles they occupy. Whether the roles are public (king, chief warrior), private (father, son), or emotional (a grieving man, or an angry one), the characters in the *Iliad* are presented to us in terms of the perspectives on the world

these roles invite. Whereas a hero in a Dostoevsky novel might do something out of character, capricious, or entirely unexpected, Homer's characters make their choices within the range of possibilities suggested by the values in their culture and their roles within it. Achilles can choose to return Hector's body or not to return it, but not according to whim.⁹

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Being Heard

Twelve days after Hector's death, Priam draws his wagonload of treasures through the Greek defenses, to the tent of Achilles, where he throws himself at the feet of his enemy:

The majestic king of Troy slipped past the rest
and kneeling down beside Achilles, clasped his knees
and kissed his hands, those terrible, man-killing hands
that had slaughtered Priam's many sons in battle.¹⁰

Here, Priam is the "majestic king," with the public function of representing the people of Troy to Achilles, who also has a public role as the preeminent Greek warrior. Whatever else this encounter will be, it will be a confrontation between leaders with well-established public identities, who speak from the perspectives of those public roles. Priam does not enter with a king's ceremony, however. Instead, he assumes the traditional posture of suppliant, kneeling at his enemy's feet, clasping his knees. Throughout the *Iliad*, people in this pose are routinely decapitated and only occasionally spared.¹¹ It would be as easy as snapping a twig for Achilles to break the old man's neck. Simone Weil registers the full force of the danger in this encounter, between one who has the power to snuff out the other's life, and the other, who must fear at every moment that it might be his last. She talks about the power of might "to transform man into a thing" and calls this power "double ... it cuts both ways; it petrifies differently but equally the souls of those who suffer it, and those who wield it."¹² Here, Priam must make a heroic effort, not just to influence Achilles, who might be turned to stone by the power of a young warrior over his elderly guest, but to master his own petrifying fear, moment by moment. Norman Postelthwaite calls Priam's kiss "the supreme act of forgiveness and reconciliation,"¹³ but it is much more. Focusing on the darker possibilities, Michael Lynn-George speaks of "the ambivalent complexities of reconciliation and repudiation" in this scene, as well as the paradox of "the separation of shared grief as each mourns the losses which bring them together and keep them apart."¹⁴

We need to examine these complexities. Kneeling before Achilles, Priam asks him to remember his own father, Peleus, no doubt plagued by the warlords around him, defenseless, while his warrior son, his only

child, spends a decade laying siege to a distant city. As desperate as Peleus must be, at least he can rejoice to hear from time to time that his son is alive. Priam explains that he can never again rejoice in this way, but he can hope to take his son's body home to bury. He asks Achilles to remember his own father, pity Priam as a father, and release Hector's body. Priam goes so far as to kiss Achilles' hands, saying, "I have endured what no one on earth has ever done before—/ I put my lips to the hands of the man who killed my son."¹⁵ In this act we see not only that Homer has given Priam a gesture to perform that he has given no other suppliant in the *Iliad* or *Odyssey*, but also that Priam is presented as aware that his action is unique. He is aware that Achilles will register it as unique, though within the context of the traditional suppliant who grasps his knees. Priam carefully balances the traditional with the unnerving. The effect on Achilles is immediate:

Those words stirred within Achilles a deep desire
to grieve for his own father. Taking the old man's hand
he gently moved him back. And overpowered by memory
both men gave way to their grief. (XXIV, 592-595)

In this volatile situation, when the sudden appearance of the enemy king could lead to carnage, Priam is able to touch Achilles with the shared value of the bond between father and son, which, as Weil has noted, for the moment trumps violence. They weep together, and when "Achilles had had his fill of tears" (XXIV, 600), he invites Priam to rise and sit in a chair, while Achilles laments their mutual sorrows. The anger of a warrior is held at bay by the grief of a son sympathizing with his own father, which allows Achilles to empathize with Priam in his loss of a son. The tears of Achilles are also for Patroclus, whose death he now registers, perhaps for the first time, as a cause for grief, rather than anger.

Yet, the balance of empathy is delicate, the anger of Achilles never far from the surface. Emboldened by his host's shared tears, Priam insists on the point of his mission:

Don't make me sit on a chair, Achilles, Prince,
not while Hector lies uncared-for in your camp!
Give him back to me, now, no more delay—
I must see my son with my eyes.
Accept the ransom I bring you, a king's ransom!
Enjoy it, all of it—return to your native land,
safe and sound . . . since now you've spared my life. (648-654)

Priam's insistence awakens the wrath of his host, who struggles with himself and warns his guest:

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! (656-657, 667-669)

Achilles is internally at war with himself; the forces for piety--respecting a father's grief, fulfilling the host's role, obeying the gods' laws—chafe against the warrior's desire for revenge and his capacity to enact it in the blink of an eye.

There is also the darker, more chaotic force of rage itself, which lies within us all, and threatens to obliterate all sense of order and self-control. Rage is Achilles' special nemesis. The more Priam calls Achilles' attention to the identity of this particular corpse, the more Achilles wants to hook it back up to his chariot, drag it by the heels, and watch its head bounce. At this moment he feels the tenuousness of his commitment to follow "the laws of Zeus," the god of hospitality, who calls on the host to protect his guest, on the son to respect the grief of a father, and on the powerful to heed the plea of a suppliant. One flash of anger could crush Priam. Homer makes us feel the intensity and fragility of this highly charged equilibrium. Achilles is aware of the problem himself, as he frets about Priam seeing the corpse of his son before it has been properly prepared:

He feared that, overwhelmed by the sight of Hector,

wild with grief, Priam might let his anger flare

and Achilles might fly into fresh rage himself,

cut the old man down and break the laws of Zeus. (684-687)

So Achilles convinces Priam to wait until morning to leave, and he feasts him and beds him down outside his tent, where the other Greek soldiers are less likely to discover him. Before dawn, the old man slips away with his son's royally dressed body and the pledge of a twelve-day truce, which will allow time for Hector's funeral ceremonies before the Trojan War resumes.

Who is responsible for the success of this mission? The retrieval of the body, up in the air until the final moment, is coauthored by Zeus, who has forged the laws of hospitality and piety and has sent several gods to intervene between Priam and Achilles; by Achilles, who must make the hard choices to break or follow "the laws of Zeus"; and by Priam, who must establish the father-son connection with Achilles, then insist on it, though not enough to unleash his host's rage. The challenge here for Priam is to extricate the body of Hector, pack it up and cart it home, without reminding Achilles too much that Hector is the warrior who killed the man

Achilles loved. Both men are acutely aware of the dangerousness of the situation and the difficulty of their roles as they speak with each other, anticipating what each other will think, or say, or do. The words they coauthor respond to the gods and the traditions that are their superaddressees, anticipate the receptions they expect from each other, respond to the receptions they get from each other, and create the action they take together, returning Hector's body for burial.

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Dialogic Freedom in the *Iliad*

This encounter between Priam and Achilles, besides thrilling readers, offers us a window into understanding the nature of dialogic freedom as *a two-sided act, chosen within a field of forces for unity and chaos*. To begin with, the conversation between Priam and Achilles is the two-sided act of two public leaders. Priam is not merely transmitting a message to Achilles, communicating information from inside his own mind to another's. The receptivity of Achilles is an equal factor in Priam's act of speech. This is why the Trojan king begins with the traditional posture of the suppliant, kneeling at the foot of the preeminent warrior, embracing his knees, begging for mercy. In a Greek epic, it is bad form not to hear out a suppliant, whether or not his or her request is granted. Any Greek hero who fails to heed "the gods" or "the laws of the gods"—a superaddressee that demands respect for the suppliant—is asking for trouble. If Priam could not expect that the shared values of the culture would incline Achilles to listen to the kneeling suppliant, he would not have used the suppliant's posture to preface his plea. But he knows that he and Achilles are both answerable to the gods. He chooses to begin by kneeling and embracing Achilles' knees, under the expectation that Achilles will listen. Thus before anyone says one word, Achilles and the gods coauthor Priam's first freely chosen act.

Once Priam speaks, he begs for mercy not for himself but for the corpse of his son. Achilles will listen to what Priam has to say only if Priam can get Achilles to think about his own father, Peleus, in far-off Phthia. Once again, they have a shared superaddressee, this time in the form of familial piety. Priam must make Achilles imagine the anxiety of old Peleus, waiting ten years for every shred of news that his warrior son is still alive, and the indignities the man must be suffering at the hands of neighboring warlords who take advantage of his frailty in the absence of this only child. Because Priam is so focused on how Achilles will be listening to his words, he is able to come up with this powerful approach, which Achilles coauthors by being receptive to it. Priam thus adds an epistemological layer to the supplicant role by getting Achilles to remember his own father, then draw the connection to Priam as a suffering father (rather than enemy king).

There is no guarantee, however, that this approach will work, because there is a competing perspective that draws the attention of Achilles and threatens to undermine Priam's project. As much as Achilles is a loving son, he is also a warrior and an angry man. At any moment, he might take revenge on the father of the enemy who killed his best friend. Priam is aware of the warrior perspective, not to mention the deep reservoirs of rage, both of which compete in Achilles with empathy for a grieving father. He also knows that Achilles shares this awareness of conflicting perspectives, as well as a sense of his own anger. The challenge will be to trump killer with father: to get Achilles to see his killer role (which can not be erased from his consciousness) as secondary to a more benign father/son relationship. To do this, Priam must take the risk of drawing Achilles' attention to the killer in himself, even as Priam asks him to show mercy. Thus it is that Priam says, "I put my lips to the hands of the man who killed my son." The killer role gets reframed from the position of the vulnerable old father who loves his son so much that he is willing even to kiss the hands of the man who killed that son. The father/son and killer perspectives merge, but the former takes precedence. Priam makes Achilles register just how hard it is for the father to kiss the hands of his son's killer. This gesture expresses a love worth respecting, worth deferring to, in spite of a warrior role that would turn the enemy's father into just another corpse. Within Achilles, these two entirely different centripetal perspectives compete to unify his thinking. Priam's job is to keep Achilles focused not on the concept of warrior as avenger, but on the concept of father—the young warrior's own father in particular, and Priam as a father—thereby helping him succumb not to anger but to grief. As Priam does this, the response anticipated or received from Achilles coauthors his every move. Achilles and Priam speak and act freely, but always in response to, or anticipating, a response from each other.

As they negotiate the terms of the release—the corpse will be cleaned and dressed in fine robes, Priam will have twelve days to bury it and return to war, Achilles will keep the treasure brought as ransom—they reach mutual agreements that benefit both sides. The effects will be global, with consequences for all the people of Troy, as well as their Greek attackers. The Trojans will be able to bury their most noble hero, while the Greeks will gain wealth and see their main warrior liberated from an obsession. This negotiation would not have been possible if both Priam and Achilles had not been able to navigate the the most subtle layers of each other's perspectives. It also would not have been possible if both leaders had not respected the enormous destructive potential of the anger of Achilles, a force for chaos that threatens all centripetal attempts at order, even within the world of war. Destruction is limitless chaos, but the warrior's destruction is limited by, confined to, war and the rules of engagement. The anger of Achilles is useful in war when unleashed on the enemy, but it is also a threat to the warrior life precisely because it challenges the discipline of war. Anger can lead either to

the warrior withdrawing from battle (which dominates the first half of the *Iliad*), or to the warrior being trapped in a repetitive ritual of revenge (dragging the corpse behind his chariot). In either case, anger undermines the forces for order in war. By getting Achilles to imagine war from a father's perspective and release the corpse, Priam not only succeeds in retrieving his son's body, but he also helps Achilles cope with the chaotic force of his own anger, so that he can be free to return to the battlefield.

Thus, the moment when Achilles releases Hector's body to Priam for burial is one in which Achilles and Priam coauthor each other's choices. Both in words and in deeds their freedom is dialogic, in that it is a two-sided act, chosen within a field of unifying and chaotic forces along a continuum of perspectives within the ancient Greek heroic world. Its two-sidedness encompasses not just Priam and Achilles, who coauthor the release of Hector's body, but also Zeus and the gods, who are superaddressees for both heroes as they seek to make hard choices. In this process, filial piety is the centripetal force that prevails against the competing ideal of warrior aggression and against the more directly centrifugal force of rage. That Priam has the flexibility to imagine Achilles' love for his father, and uses this epistemological mobility to help Achilles see things from Priam's fatherly perspective, is a significant element of Priam's success. Adopting the terminology of Bakhtin's early philosophical manuscripts, we could say that Priam in this encounter is able to see behind Achilles well enough to help him fill out and "consummate" an identity that is more loving son than angry warrior (AH, 23). Priam uses the "excess" of his seeing to "render the other complete precisely in those respects in which he cannot complete himself by himself" (24). In the process, Priam must "empathize or project" himself "into this other human being, see his world . . . as he sees this world . . . and then, after returning to" his "own place, 'fill in' the hero's 'horizon'" (25). This "consummation" is quite precarious, however, as both men understand. Priam "authors" Achilles as "hero" just long enough to retrieve Hector's body. In this encounter, both Priam and Achilles engage in "active empathizing"¹⁶ and "sympathetic understanding" (AH, 102), which I discuss in chapter 1, running no risk, however, of the "pure empathizing" (*TPA* 15-16) that Bakhtin rejected as "fruitless and senseless" (AH, 26), and that could have caused them to lose themselves in each other's perspectives.

The complexity of the two-sided co-authorship of dialogic freedom presented at the climax of the *Iliad* challenges Bakhtin's centripetal conclusion that "there is no place in the epic for any openendedness, indecision, indeterminacy" (EN, 16). In a brilliant reading of this scene, Michael Lynn-George sees it as part of the "contested closure" of the poem (244), whose last line Lattimore translates: "Such was their burial of Hektor, breaker of horses." According to Lynn-George, "the fiction of closure breaks apart once more in frictions which keep the text open" (248). When Achilles attempts to console Priam for the loss of his son, "the speech is also

a recognition of the inconsolable” (250). In the end, they bury Hector, but “the text does not stage a final, full revelation of meaning” (252). Rather, it “combines a sense of finality with the awareness of what is still to come” (255), of what is not included in the *Iliad*: the death of Achilles and the destruction of Troy. Just how open-ended the scene between Priam and Achilles is, in terms of the possibilities that each participant weighed, considered, anticipated, feared, and responded to, becomes horrifyingly clear when we consider the creative reception and reading this encounter got from Virgil centuries later.

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A Different Outcome

At every moment in this encounter between Priam and Achilles, Homer makes us register that the outcome could be far different, that in the shadow of Achilles’ decision to send Hector’s body home with Priam, lay another, darker alternative. This thought was not lost on Virgil when he decided to write an epic for his own time, in Latin instead of Greek, to glorify Rome. Based on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the *Aeneid* imitates Homer both in subject matter and in form. Far from being an oral composition-in-performance, though, it was painstakingly written out first in prose, then in poetry, a project that was not quite complete when Virgil died in 19 BCE. Unlike Homer, who shuns presenting the fall of Troy at the end of the *Iliad* in favor of a funeral, Virgil describes in detail the fire that destroyed the city and the bloodbath that finished it off. Troy’s demise is told by the Trojan hero Aeneas, who has fled the flames, carrying his father and his household gods, in order to fulfill his destiny to establish Rome. His audience, which listens to the horrors of the final collapse, includes the Carthaginian queen Dido, who is in the process of falling in love with him, largely because of his ability to tell this story.

Aeneas explains that after the Greek warriors burst from the bowels of the Trojan horse to lay waste to the city, fires rage and the Trojans themselves pull down the walls of their palaces to crush their attackers. When it becomes apparent that the ten-year war is about to end with the destruction of Troy, Priam takes refuge with his family in the upper reaches of his palace, where the household gods are kept on the altar stone. The king is in the process of throwing on his armor, “long unused,/across his shoulders, tottering with age,”¹⁷ when his wife Hecuba dissuades him:

This is no time for such defense and help,
not even were my Hector here himself.
Come near and pray: this altar shall yet save
us all, or you shall die together with us. (II, 701-704)

Whereas in the *Iliad* Priam persisted in his quest, despite Hecuba's pleas to desist, here he bows to her wishes. He joins her "upon the sacred seat" just in time to see their son Polites enter the chamber, frantically fleeing the son of Achilles, Neoptolemus (also called Pyrrhus). Achilles is now dead, struck down by an arrow from the bow of Priam's son Paris, who hit Achilles in the vulnerable spot above his heel. His goddess mother had held him by the heels as a babe, when she dipped him head-first in the waters of immortality, leaving that spot untouched by the waters. This detail of the story was widely known among Greeks and Romans, though only obliquely referred to by either Homer or Virgil. At any rate, in the *Aeneid*, Pyrrhus is now intent on avenging his father's death by killing as many of Priam's offspring as possible, and, if the occasion arises, Priam himself.

Aeneas' narrative of what follows not only seduces Dido, but it allows Virgil to suggest why a Trojan prince who is Hector's cousin would choose not to martyr himself in Troy, but rather to round up his father, wife, and child, and flee.

With the breathlessness of an eyewitness,¹⁸ Aeneas puts us in the middle of the action:

But then Polites, one of Priam's sons
who had escaped from Pyrrhus' slaughter, down
long porticoes, past enemies and arrows,
races, wounded, across the empty courts.
But after him, and hot to thrust, is Pyrrhus;
now, even now he clutches, closing in;
he presses with his shaft until at last
Polites falls before his parents' eyes,
within their presence; he pours out his life
in streams of blood. Though in the fist of death,
at this, Priam does not spare voice or wrath;
'If there is any goodness in the heavens
to oversee such acts, for this offense
and outrage may you find your fitting thanks
and proper payment from the gods, for you
have made me see the murder of my son,
defiled a father's face with death. Achilles—
you lie to call him father—never dealt

with Priam so—and I, his enemy;
for he had shame before the claims and trust
that are a suppliant's. He handed back
for burial the bloodless corpse of Hector
and sent me off in safety to my kingdom.'
The old man spoke; his feeble spear flew off—
harmless; the hoarse bronze beat it back at once;
it dangled, useless now, from the shield's boss.
And Pyrrhus: 'Carry off these tidings; go
and bring this message to my father, son
of Peleus; and remember, let him know
my sorry doings, how degenerate
is Neoptolemus. Now die.' This said,
he dragged him to the very altar stone,
with Priam shuddering and slipping in
the blood that streamed from his own son. And Pyrrhus
with his left hand clutched tight the hair of Priam;
His right hand drew the glistening blade, and then
he buried it hilt-high in the king's side. (707-743)

On display here are the same Homeric values that were shared by the Greeks and Trojans: respect for the gods, family, father/son relationships and obligations of the powerful to the suppliant. These are the very values that Aeneas will transport with him when he escapes the flames of Troy to found a new civilization. Once again, Priam is also the suppliant before a wrathful enemy. But where the old king was able to gain a hearing from Achilles in the *Iliad*, here (weeks later in the story, centuries later in the telling of it) Pyrrhus is deaf to his pleas. The impieties pile up as the son of Achilles kills a child before his parents' eyes, then drags the father through his son's blood to slaughter him on the altar of the gods.

Why is it that the son's treatment of Priam is so different from his father's? To begin with, the situation has changed dramatically. Whereas in the *Iliad* Priam made his way into Achilles' camp during a lull in the action, this encounter between Priam and Pyrrhus comes in the heat of battle, with the ten-year assault on Troy on the threshold of success. Pyrrhus has every reason to want to be the warrior to clinch the victory. Also,

although Priam can be presumed to have witnessed Hector's death from the parapets of Troy, as Hector and Achilles fought before the city gates, he had time after that death to plan an approach to Achilles before actually encountering him in his tent. The present slaughter of Polites, only a few feet away, within the most sacred chamber of the palace, leaves no time for any planning, and it unleashes in Priam not a suppliant's plea but a father's curse as he calls down upon Pyrrhus "proper payment from the gods." He also invokes the father's shame of a dead Achilles. Polites' death elicits not a kiss for the killing hands, a unique and arresting gesture, but the feeble flight of a harmless spear, which must seem to Pyrrhus almost laughable. Priam has faced an unspeakable outrage, and his anger does nothing to deflect Pyrrhus from his murderous intent.

It is as if Virgil has Homer's text open before him, where Achilles ponders what might happen if Priam were to be overwhelmed by the sight of his dead son, flare with anger, and unleash the rage of the Greek warrior:

...overwhelmed by the sight of Hector,
wild with grief, Priam might let his anger flare
and Achilles might fly into fresh rage himself,
cut the old man down and break the laws of Zeus. (*Iliad*, XXIV, 684-687)

Centuries later, Virgil gives a local habitation and a name to the thoughts of Achilles, as his own son dares to do what he hesitated to imagine. As Priam's anger feeds the anger of Achilles' son, Virgil shows that anger, as well as grief, is a two-sided act. He also shows that in the openedness of conflict, the tension between two competing perspectives—respect for a father and thirst for revenge—can resolve itself in the direction of revenge. Even as Priam tries to remind Pyrrhus of the earlier encounter with his father, which led to the "burial of the bloodless corpse of Hector," Pyrrhus readies himself to drag a father through his son's blood. Pyrrhus glories in this defilement, hurling at the soon-to-be-dead Priam a sarcastic message for the shadow of Achilles in the underworld: "let him know/ my sorry doings, how degenerate." Just before the slaughter of Priam, Pyrrhus shows contempt for the underworld, the dead, the gods, the family, and the decency that spares the suppliant. These are the superaddressees which Priam and Achilles shared, to which Achilles felt answerable. These are the superaddressees that Priam knew he could rely on Achilles taking into account as he weighed the relative merits of hearing Priam out or snapping his neck.

Pyrrhus is not unaware of these invisible presences. He has just chosen to disregard, or even defy them. They are not *his* superaddressees. This complete breakdown of values is registered in the deafness of Pyrrhus to Priam's call for him to honor the "the claims and trust/ that are a suppliant's." This lack of receptivity, on

vivid display, convinces Priam in advance that any plea for mercy will not be heard. Thus Priam curses Pyrrhus instead of kissing his hands, fanning his anger rather than quelling it. Their exchange is still a two-sided act, yet dysfunctional. It shows how dialogic freedom breaks down when the speaker and listener are deaf to each other's words, when they refuse to see things from each other's perspectives, and when speaking becomes not an effort to communicate but an announcement of the end of communication. If the enemy does not register the humanity of the opponent, dialogue, to the extent that it takes place, only reinforces hostilities, promotes violence, and signals domination.

Pyrrhus is free in the sense that he exerts his will over Priam. He turns his back, however, on the kind of dialogic freedom coauthored by Priam and Achilles in the *Iliad*. He embodies instead the destructive might that Simone Weil describes when she says, "He who possesses strength moves in an atmosphere which offers him no resistance. Nothing in the human element surrounding him is of a nature to induce, between the intention and the act, that brief interval where thought may lodge" (163). Weil draws our attention to the dialogic deafness of the warrior who feels no need to anticipate, listen to, or respond to any voice that might offer resistance. Pyrrhus hardens himself in the midst of the "human element surrounding him." To the extent that his encounter with Priam is dialogic, Priam co-authors Pyrrhus' rage by insulting him; but the encounter really is not very dialogic at all, because Pyrrhus, unlike his father in the *Iliad*, appears to give only perfunctory thought to what Priam is saying. Pyrrhus refuses to listen not only to Priam's call to live up to the memory of Achilles, but also to the superaddressees of tradition and the gods that are part of his culture and that Priam is trying to invoke.

For Aeneas, the point of this story is not the death of Priam, or even the destruction of Troy, but the necessity to avoid the breakdown of civilization personified by Pyrrhus, who has become a force only for destruction. Seeing this carnage, which he is powerless to prevent, Aeneas bolts for his father's palace, where he will rescue him and his household gods, to found a civilization beyond the burning walls of Troy. His decision to flee is a response to the encounter between Pyrrhus and Priam and hence is coauthored by them. Where Homer gave us dialogic freedom under explosive circumstances, Virgil emphasizes the fragility of that freedom. He emphasizes the extent to which it depends both on people's efforts to articulate, acknowledge and respect shared values, and on their ability to empathize enough to anticipate, respond to, and coauthor each other's choices. If dialogic freedom is a two-sided act that involves deliberation from multiple perspectives, within a field of forces for unity and chaos, Homer emphasizes the unity forged through shared values, while Virgil, in his creative reception to Homer's story, and in his meticulous reading and retelling of it, emphasizes

the chaos those values hold at bay. When all efforts to coauthor choice break down, the alternatives reduce to destroying a way of life, illustrated by the death of Priam and the fall of Troy, or embracing a vocation to establish a new civilization, illustrated by the flight of Aeneas from Troy. For both Homer and Virgil, dialogic freedom is a matter of life and death.

<break>

Protocols for Reading

The discussion above reflects my attempt to read one scene from the *Iliad* for and with dialogic freedom. I read *for* dialogic freedom in the sense that I am on the lookout for situations that present the complexities of the process of coauthoring choice experienced by speakers in relationship both to each other and to the superaddressees they answer to. This chapter is intended to be evidence of how one might begin to do that by focusing on a key element of the definition of dialogic freedom as a two-sided act in the encounter between Priam and Achilles as they negotiate the conditions of burial for Hector's corpse. I read *with* dialogic freedom in the sense that, at every moment in my reading I make choices that are coauthored by the responses I anticipate from editors, readers, students, colleagues, etc. My choices are also coauthored by the theoretical traditions that have shaped me as a reader (originally new criticism, then political theory, Bakhtinian analysis, and certain elements of cultural analysis, new historicism, deconstruction, feminism, etc.). In this process I am also answerable to superaddressees like honesty and "making a contribution." Just as characters in an epic experience the push and pull of a complex array of unifying and chaotic forces in the decision-making process, so do readers.

In *Protocols of Reading*, Robert Scholes describes some of these forces. He quotes Jacques Derrida in *Positions*, where he argues that "reading is transformational. . . . But this transformation cannot be executed however one wishes. It requires protocols of reading."¹⁹ Here, we see the tension for Derrida between the centrifugal force of reading "however one wishes" and the centripetal force of "protocols of reading," which limit one's choices. Derrida concluded, "I have not yet found any [protocols] that satisfy me," suggesting that the search for the right methods is not easy. Listing dozens of phrases from Derrida's *Speech and Phenomena*, *Grammatology*, and *Positions*, all of which contain the word "rigor," Scholes nevertheless tries to identify one of Derrida's protocols of reading. Scholes argues that "rigor is Derrida's talisman against relativism and historicism" (86). The centripetal force of "rigor" resists the centrifugal force of "anything goes," or "it all depends." According to Scholes, for Derrida reading also involves a tension between the centripetal force of "doubling commentary," which seeks to "recapitulate the meaning that is already given in a text," and the

centrifugal force of a “critical reading” that “produces a new signifying structure.” It is a real balancing act, because the rigorous critical reading includes the respectful “doubling commentary” as a “guardrail” (77).

In his own search for protocols of reading, Scholes focuses on the distinction between centripetal and centrifugal forces: “Centripetal reading conceives of a text in terms of an original intention located at the center of that text. . . . Centrifugal reading, on the other hand, sees the life of a text as occurring along its circumference, which is consistently expanding, encompassing new possibilities of meaning” (8). He goes on to say that “our notion of reading depends upon some irreducible minimum of recuperation or centripetality in the process of generating meaning” (60) and that “we have no choice but to read both rigorously and exorbitantly, centripetally and centrifugally at the same time” (88). Applying these distinctions to my readings above of the *Iliad* and the *Aeneid*, we might say that a reading of the *Iliad* that focuses on Priam as the successful suppliant of Achilles (a reading shared by virtually all commentaries on the *Iliad*) cannot be repeated as is once we read Virgil’s creative reception and reading of the scene. Rereading this scene from the *Iliad* under the influence of Virgil, we feel an increased sense of dread in the face of the potential explosiveness of Achilles’ wrath. We also gain a new respect for Achilles’ effort at self-control, which allowed Priam to retrieve his son’s corpse. We also imagine the ways in which this story, with a different, more bloody outcome, contributes to Virgil’s agenda for heroizing Rome and its mythic founder. In any case, reading Virgil’s reading of Homer makes us into different readers of the *Iliad*, as it expands the work for us as a text, “encompassing new possibilities of meaning.”

Reading with dialogic freedom encompasses both the centripetal force of a particular theme, story line, or intention, and the centrifugal force of various competing theoretical orientations, each with its own internal centripetal forces. Reading in this way also involves taking into consideration the centrifugal forces of the different circumstances of different readers, of the endless rereadings possible for a single reader under changing circumstances, and of approaches to reading that can themselves be centrifugal. Within this force field of centripetal and centrifugal forces, a reader must choose how to read.

Under these circumstances, reading for and with dialogic freedom becomes a protocol for reading that we can test throughout this book. Just as dialogic freedom ultimately calls for the ability to navigate diverse epistemological layers of meaning in the perspectives of others, so reading with dialogic freedom requires cultivating the ability to navigate the veritable sea of diverse theoretical approaches to reading currently available. It also requires that we hold on to whatever “guardrails” we can find to give us the bearings we need to be the kind of reader Kafka imagines “crouching in the corner.” Scholes quotes T.S. Eliot’s letter to Stephen Spender in 1935, in which he says, “You have to give yourself up, and then recover yourself, and the

third moment is having something to say, before you have wholly forgotten both surrender and recovery” (78). Here, Eliot enters into a dialogue with Bakhtin’s distinction between “author” and “hero.” The “author” must empathize, but not too much, with the “hero,” entering into the hero’s perspective, then returning from it to represent it. Reading for and with dialogic freedom, we seek to enter the field of centripetal and centrifugal forces that circulate about and through a work of literature, but not travel too far into it, so that we can return to ourselves with something to say.

(Endnotes)

1 2 . See note 1. Gregory Nagy in *Homeric Questions* is particularly annoyed by people who refer to “Homer’s world,” as if there were one Homer, or one such world. This practice “risks the flattening out of the process of oral poetic creation” (20). Bakhtin did just this.

3 . Mukhail. Bakhtin, “Epic and Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist; tr. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1981), 16-17. Citations to “Epic and Novel” are to this text, with the abbreviation EN.

4 . Mikhail Bakhtin, “Discourse in the Novel,” in *The Dialogic Imagination*. Citations to “Discourse in the Novel” are to this text, with the abbreviation DN.

5 . Bakhtin defines “heteroglossia” as “specific points of view on the world” (DN, 291).

6 . Nicholas Richardson. *The Iliad: A Commentary*. Vol. VI, Books 21-24. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 272, 323.

7 . Richard Lattimore, tr., *The Iliad of Homer* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 54.

8 . Bernard Knox, Introduction, *The Iliad*, tr. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1990), 42.

9 . Here my dispute with Bakhtin, or in a sense his dispute with himself, about whether or not the epic is an “ossified” genre, is clearest. In “Author and Hero in Aesthetic Activity” Bakhtin discusses the “classical hero” as a function of the roles he plays, and he goes on to conclude that these roles totally determine him. “His entire life is given, given in the sense of what it might ultimately achieve.” He is “motivated not by his moral free will, but by his determinate being.” *Art and Answerability: Early Philosophical Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, ed. Michael Holquist and Vadim Liapunov; tr. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1990), 176. Further citations to “Author and Hero” are to this text with the abbreviation AH. This characterization of

the “classical hero” as unfree is for Bakhtin an aesthetic issue, involving the already finished nature of people described as classical heroes, from the perspective of the author. From the internal perspective of the hero himself, his life is not yet finished, and from this perspective “an ethical determination defines a given human being from the standpoint of what-is-yet-to-be accomplished” (AH, 226). The hero can feel himself to be free with regard to decisions not yet made, while the author, looking back on history (or on an oral tradition), presumably knows what those decisions will be. My discussion focuses on Homer’s presentation in this scene of “what-is-yet-to-be accomplished” from the characters’ perspectives, which is an open question, depending on a host of variables that must be delicately balanced by both Priam and Achilles. The outcome that from the perspective of centuries later seems inevitable (since it *did* happen) might not have happened. Homer implies that in the “sideshadow” —a term coined by Gary Saul Morson in *Narrative and Freedom: The Shadows of Time* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1994)—of the decision to send Hector’s body home with Priam, lies the corpse of Priam in the dust beside his son.

10 . *Iliad*, tr. Lattimore, XXIV, 559-562.

11 . Richardson points out that although the pose of suppliant is common in the *Iliad*, this is the only place in the Homeric epics where the suppliant kisses the hands of the person in addition to grasping his knees. The line is sometimes translated instead, “to reach with my hand to the mouth of my son’s killer” (Richardson, 326-7).

12 . Simone Weil, “The *Iliad*, Poem of Might,” in *The Simone Weil Reader*, ed. George A. Panichas (New York: David McKay Company, 1977), 173-207.

13 . Norman Postelthwaite. *Homer’s Iliad: A Commentary on the Translation of Richmond Lattimore* (Exeter: University of Exeter Press, 2000), 302.

14 . Michael Lynn-George. *Epos: Word, Narrative and the Iliad* (Atlantic Highlands, NJ: Humanities Press International, 1988), 237, 243-44.

15 . Fagles, *Iliad* XXIV, 590-591. Further citations of the *Iliad* to are to this text.

16 . Mikhail Bakhtin, *Toward a Philosophy of the Act*. ed Vadim Liapunov and Michael Holquist; tr. Vadim Liapunov (Austin: University of Texas, 1993), 15. Citations to *Toward a Philosophy of the Act* are to this edition, with the abbreviation TPA.

17 . Virgil. *The Aeneid of Virgil*, tr. Allen Mandelbaum Virgil (New York: Bantam, 1971), II, 684-685. Citations to *The Aeneid* are to this text.

18 . Here Aeneas fills the role not of warrior but of rhapsode, or epic singer, except that instead of doing

what Demodocus is praised by Odysseus for doing in the Fagles translation of the *Odyssey*, singing “as if you were there yourself or heard from one who was” he sings as one who really was “there himself” (though presumably not in a position to help Priam). Homer, *The Odyssey*, tr. Robert Fagels (New York: Penguin, 1996), I. 374-376. Andrew Ford describes the “distinctive rhetorical stance of the poet toward the audience” as that of one who has “eyewitness knowledge from the Muses.” “Epic as Genre,” in *A New Companion to Homer*, ed. Ian Morris and Barry Powell (New York: Brill, 1997), 409, 406. In the case of Aeneas no Muses were needed. 19 . Robert Scholes, *Protocols of Reading* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991), 78.