

Originalni naučni rad
UDK 821.14'02.09-13 Homer
316.7:[572.5:111.852
305-055.1

Marko Teodorski*
*Institute for Literature and Art
Belgrade, Serbia*

ACHILLES AGAINST TIME: ON THE *ILIAD*, SOCIAL NETWORKS AND GYM

Abstract: The essay discusses Achilles' image from the perspective of my fear of aging and midlife body crises. Achilles is the protagonist of the *Iliad* who remained famous in popular culture by choosing glorious and song-worthy death at the plains of Troy over the long life in obscurity. By discussing his various representations (from the *Iliad* to contemporary novel, cinema and gyms) I show the profound impact the semantics of Achilles had on my self-perception and body identity. Due to my fear of aging I chose a highly auto-destructive path towards a muscled body, one that deemed me "worthy of praise" (*oidimos*) on social networks; similarly, Achilles chose to let his body be destroyed in order to be worthy of the *Iliad*. Social networks and epic poetry are in the essay considered illusory meta-physical extensions of the body, centered on the rejection of aging and praising of youth.

Keywords: Achilles, epic poetry, social networks, body politics, gym culture, Homeric studies, literature.

Over and again, for the fifth time as if it were the first, the pain returns. We have become old friends by now, acquiring over the last few years intimate knowledge of each other. So I let it arrest me; I know there is nothing else to be done. When it happens, the pain's movement – its pulse-like kinetics – imposes on me like a frame: everything I am gets defined against it and filtered through its demands, intensity and meaning. For those few minutes before it subsides, the pain delimits my identity, parasitically turning my back to stone.

I am leaning against the dumbbell rack and stare at the gym wall behind it, a pitch black bottomless surface with a negative white human warrior in the

* teodorskimarko@gmail.com



center. The contrast conceals everything but the muscles and I stare at his humongous thighs, overinflated arms, shoulders, chest and bulging abs. His slightly forward-bending posture is accentuated by the tip of his Achaean crest, while his physique exudes strength and power, vitality and aggression. Unconsciously, I bend my shoulders forward in emulation, than immediately recoil from pain. Nevertheless I continue repeating this miniscule movement, back and forth, to

and from, staring at the man-beast whose dominance rolls over me, and by this locomotion I reiterate the opening of David Wills' *Prosthesis* and his father who shifts legs in anticipation of pain from his prosthetical limb. He recites a verse from Virgil as a distraction – *quadrupedante putrem sonitu quatit ungula campum* – so I begin chanting my own Virgil Chesty Puller – *pain is weakness leaving my body* – in circles over and again until meaning of the words sinks so deep I cannot perceive it any more, the syllables of the proverb disconnecting from each other and turning into a perpetual rocking to and from the muscular demi-god, a litany of pain between

its intensities that articulate the frame of my movement, leaving me stuck in-between, hurting, anxious, desirous.

And then it's gone.

When the pain subsides I consider leaving; I look at the bulging muscles in front of me and then at my own nearly forty-year-old body; I pick up the dumbbell with my left hand and throw it against the sore, hurting muscle. Pushing myself through the passing pain, I glance at the gym walls covered in motivational proverbs: “No pussies”, I read; “It's you vs. you”; “No pain no gain”. Pain is weakness leaving my body and I am forcing these muscles to comply. Auto-destructive – like the proverbs around me, like the warrior in front of me.



That is the song of Achilles.

When I stepped into the second half of the thirties I began working out intensely. The awareness of being close to forty turned into haunting anxiety. Due to meditation, yoga, clean diet, overall self-care and healthy lifestyle my face was still young-looking and I was fairly fit, but an internal anxious force signaled me



that it would not last, that I was stepping into the second half of life and that, as far as my body was concerned, it was all downhill from there. I began spending ever more time at the mirror searching for wrinkles and checking that nothing changed, that my face was still young and that my body was attractive. Gay community, in Serbia and elsewhere, was ruthlessly focused on youth and muscularity and it was hard repelling these expectations. However, outwardly I smiled to the signs of aging and professed that “when the time came” I would age gracefully, because that was an inevitable part of life. My telomeres would shorten and my cells would age, but I would accept the physical decline with all its limitations and benefits.

Then I paid a professional trainer and hit the gym.

The name of the gym was – Achilles.

Over the next few years I treated my body horribly, exposing it to tremendous exhaustion and pain. I am not talking about healthy exercising as a technique of body care; my health had always been frail and I had known my body limits, but now I consciously decided to neglect all the alarms and continue overeating and overexercising. An unconscious script kept convincing me that going against myself (against my self-preservation instinct, being auto-destructive) would earn me extra-ordinariness: the pain was weakness leaving my body in this “no pussies” battle with myself and as long as it was there I was in charge, defenses were up and the fear was at bay. The fear of what? Of growing old, becoming unattractive, insignificant and unworthy of attention.

As long as there was pain I remained young.

I want to show that the choice I made concerning my body had been Achilles’ choice as well; and I also want to show that we both chose *illusions*. My unconscious fear of aging forced me to attempt to prevent it and, since corporal decline was inevitable, the youth I tuned to was beyond physical – meta-physical; Achilles suffered the same impulse. We both chose to detach ourselves from our bodies, to externalize them, so we can remain young forever. Eventually, we both, in different manners, aged and learned of the deed’s emptiness.

For me, the choice happened between the onset of anxiety and hitting the gym. This in-between space (that is the space I am interested in here) is the one of libido and semantics, but, as I will show, it is also the one contoured and conditioned by Achilles or, rather, by his signifier, the ceaselessly rhizomatic Achilles-as-text. In this essay I am pioneering a particular seam where Achilles(-as-text) and I overlap, where my identity opens its prosthetical ridges to his and where my most intimate fears are articulated through fragments of his historical spreading. Freud claimed (1981 [1900], 20) that everything perceived, or otherwise mentally possessed, leaves a trace in the unconscious, like a “photographic exposure which can be developed after any interval of time and transformed into a picture” (1981 [1939], 126); thus this essay – the in-between space of my choice – is the development of my photographic exposure of Achilles. Unconscious knows no time and Achilles-as-text – all his various, jumbled, frequently contradictory and still piling versions – stretches indefinitely within me, open on all ends, traversing the Achilles that Homer, Aeschylus, Apollonius of Rhodes, Statius and numerous ancient authors wrote about; Achilles I watched being portrayed by Bred Pit, the muscled hunk Hollywood sex symbol of my time, but also the earlier one portrayed by Gordon Mitchell; Achilles the “quantum freak” who battles the gods in Dan Simmons’s *Ilium/Olympos* and the one who is romantically involved with Patroclus in Madeline Miller’s *The Song of Achilles*; Achilles who stares at me from the gym wall framed by auto-destructive fitness proverbs; Achilles I have been surrounded by ever since I was able to read and Achilles that followed me through my studies of classical archaeology.

The point is that just as the gym’s name choice was not accidental (but rested on wider semantics of ancient Greek heritage and on extensive and complex narrative history of Greek heroes), neither was my choice of this particular gym over so many others as this one semantically responded to my pre-existing fear. On the trail of Thomas van Nortwick’s “Achilles in Oberlin: The Hero Story as a Metaphor” (1995) and *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled: The Hero’s Journey* (1996), I want to explore the power and capacity of Achilles signifier to elucidate my resolutions and articulate (which means to present an artificially stilled cross-section of) my midlife fear of aging. This in-between space of my decision, which is my unconscious proper, is the arena of the Achilles-as-text, my private plains of Troy, the *Iliad* sung by muscle pain.

Achilles’ Choice

In contemporary popular culture, Achilles chooses between a brief glorious life and a long obscure one: science fiction novel *Achilles’ Choice* (1991) by Larry Niven and Steven Barnes, for instance, eponymously articulate this trope. People love hearing about Achilles choosing glory over life and that is one of

the reasons this trope keeps inspiring after three thousand years. In Madeline Miller's *The Song of Achilles* (2011), Achilles chooses between going to the plains of Troy to die gloriously and staying behind to watch his "godhead" wither in him unused; the Olympiad contender Jillian Shomer of *Achilles' Choice* chooses between a "boost" – that will give her unprecedented strength and intelligence (but potentially shorten her life) – and non-boosted obscurity; in *Ilium* (2003) by Dan Simmons, though the war is nearly over, Achilles can seemingly still choose between death/glory and long life (the course of events, however, takes an unexpected turn); Achilles from *Troy* (2004) is shown choosing between eternal glory/death and explicit obscurity/life.

What makes this trope so captivating? The issue has numerous layers. Whitman (1958, 188), for instance, argues that Achilles' choice symbolizes the "self-conscious acceptance of one's own aspirations". As much as I agree, I want to translate his idea into gym semantics: Achilles' choice is a possibility to physically and existentially restructure oneself *no matter the price* – a possibility to do body-building, to build the body. In a culture focused on "physical capital" (Bourdieu and Wacquant 1992) this layer of Achilles' choice is bound to be worshipped. Its power increases further with the fact that it inevitably faces the audience with their own passing mortality, signaling its intensity and gravity which can meta-physically (in text and praise) surpass what biology has limited cellularly. Lastly, it is the articulation of contemporary identity (and body) politics resting on the narrative of self-improvement and change.

Precisely due to the emphasis on this trope in contemporary readings of Achilles I will say upfront that, as far as the original content of the *Iliad* is concerned, Achilles had no choice whatsoever (Burgess 2008, 43–55; Edwards 1991, 101; Leaf 1900, 341). From Book I where Achilles' fate is first mentioned (1.352–354) to the very end of the poem, Achilles is painfully aware that he is going to die. This knowledge, in fact, persistently fuels the narrative of the *Iliad* and is on many occasions reiterated by Achilles (1.352–354; 9.410–416; 21.110–113; 21.277–278), certain mortals under special circumstances (dying Hector 22.359–360, the ghost of Patroclus 23.80–81), gods (Thetis 1.415–418; 1.505–506; 18.95–96), divine animals (Xanthus 19.416–417) and the narrator himself (17.194–197). Throughout the poem, details about Achilles' death are either explicitly stated (1.352–354) or hinted at (17.194–197, 21.588), relying on the audience's familiarity with his pre-Homeric myth;¹ as we read, we are aware he is destined not to witness the sack of Troy (17.401–409) and to be shot and killed by Paris and Apollo (19.417, 21.278, 22.359–360). Achilles might have been given the choice in the past leading to the events of the *Iliad*, but we possess no textual evidence of this event and his presence at Troy (especially in the tenth year of the war) testifies to his decision.

1 According to Burgess (2008, 46) audience must have had a pre-existing knowledge about the myth of Achilles or would otherwise be completely puzzled by the poem's lack of authoritative stance on his fate.

The issue would be considered unambiguous, were there not for the notorious Book IX on embassy to Achilles in which Odysseus, Phoenix and Ajax plead for his return to battle. Achilles refuses them all because, as he confesses, he was given a choice. “My mother Thetis tells me,” says Achilles,

that there are two ways in which I may meet my end. If I stay here and fight, I shall lose my safe homecoming [*nostos*] but I will have a glory [*kleos*] that is unwilting [*aphthiton*]: whereas if I go home my glory [*kleos*] will die, but it will be a long time before the outcome of death shall take me. (9.411–416)

Finally, after Patroclus’ death, Thetis tells Achilles about his *terminus post quem*: “Then, my son, is your end near at hand – for your own death awaits you full soon after that of Hektor” (18.95–96). Achilles is fated to die *after* Hector he himself is destined to kill.

The embassy scene raises questions about the time and nature of Achilles’ choice; the terminus scene, however, might be understood as conditioning of the concept of fate by allowing for the possibility of Achilles *not* killing Hector and returning to Phthia after all. These two scenes complicate not only the issues of Achilles’ choice and fate, but the *Iliad*’s focus on human (im)mortality, as well as the Homeric narratology and character building. Has Achilles’ destiny been decided for him or had he chosen it for himself? Are the events of the *Iliad* – Achilles’ rage and vengeance – just words in an already fixed narrative? (Was the choice to abuse body for the sake of illusion mine or was it preconditioned by a complex of unconscious fears? Have I reached for the Achilles gym by chance or was I drawn to it by the semantics of Achilles signifier?) There are scholars who argue that Achilles does actually choose his fate in the *Iliad* (Rutherford 1982, 146; Whitman 1958, 188),² but chances are that the “choice scene” is a later *ad hoc* addition (*Augenblickserfindung*, Willcock 1977, 49; de Jong 2004, 280, n.59; Janko 1994, 322).³

The terminus scene, however, seems ambiguous only in the light of the embassy; otherwise it reads as Thetis’ observation of the conditions of Achilles’ death. With these two scenes, there is an emphasis on choice in the *Iliad* that can be interpreted as a peculiar Homeric device which, due to the consequential narrative inconsistencies, deepens Achilles’ character and emphasizes his fate. Instead of staying the same throughout the poem, now he demonstrates growth as he wrestles with his (im)mortality while “not yet entirely sure who he is” (Whitman 1958, 188). Consequently, human predestination is cast in a

2 Whitman (1958, 188) does not really argue for an *ad hoc* addition of the embassy scene, but explains that it serves to show how Achilles’ fate has already been decided, but he does not know it yet and needs to come to terms with it.

3 The choice is a traditional motif in Greek literature and other heroes and characters, in and out of the *Iliad*, have been presented with one. On Euchenor, see Fenik 1968, 24, 148–150; Kullmann 1960, 309; 1991, 441 n. 65; on Heracles, see Whitman 1958, 188; Willcock 1978, 17 and Edwards 1987, 224; on Gilgamesh see, Edwards 1987, 224; on Polydeukes or Phineus, see Gantz 1993, 350.

different light, adding gravity to the poem already overburdened by a heavy exposition on (im)mortality (Hainsworth 1993, 117; Slatkin 1995, 33; Janko 1994, 5; Schein 1985, 67; Griffin 1980, 142; Graziosi and Haubold 2005).

It is paramount to note that those two scenes – of which one is ambiguous and the other is, compared to the overall evidence of the poem to the contrary, a minor anachronism – are the ones that stayed with the audience the most and kept retelling the story of Achilles according to contemporary needs. From classical Athens to the twenty-first century, Achilles is *the one who chooses* and whose choice is framed by a *self-annihilating deed* (the killing of Hector). For Plato (*Symposium* 179e), who conflated the two scenes, Achilles *chooses* death *after* he learns his *terminus post quem*; for Simmons, his choice seems open until the very end. “[T]he prophecy goes”, says Thomas Hockenberry (2003, 280), the episodic narrator of *Ilium*, “if [Achilles] chooses long life, he will be known only as a man, not as the demigod he will become if he kills Hector in combat. But he has a choice. The future is not sealed!” Similarly, in *The Song of Achilles*, he chooses to go to Troy only because he can always change his mind as long as Hector lives.⁴ Hector’s death is over and again Achilles’ point of no return that perpetuates the embassy anachronism and the trope of Achilles’ choice. Though eventually every contemporary retelling comes to the point where Achilles’ choice is either taken away from him or revealed to be an illusion,⁵ giving his character that choice (at some point or another) is paramount to the extent that to deny or omit it seems unforgivable.

As a contemporary and consumer of this tradition, I have been marked by the trope of Achilles’ choice; I cannot pass it as the mark keeps being triggered by the Achilles signifier in which the choice had already been made prior to my “choosing”. Had it been different I might have chosen a different gym; had I not been marked by it I might have not fallen into the pit of its promise.

What is, than, the promise of Achilles’ choice?

Kleos, Hēbē, Gym and Social Networks

On the plains of Troy heroes fight for glory, for *kleos*; attaining it is the apogee of their accomplishments, the highlight of their *arête*. To perish without it marks the hero’s deed ordinary and the hero unworthy of mention and memory. “[N]ot without a struggle let me die”, cries Hector (22.303–305), “neither ingloriously (*akleios*), but in the working of some great deed for the hearing of men that are yet to be”. In Greek poetry, the word *kleos* has two different but interrelated meanings: *kleos* is “fame, reputation, rumor” (Garcia Jr. 2020,

4 “[W]hy should I kill him? He’s done nothing to me” (Miller 2011, 161).

5 In *Ilium/Olympos*, Achilles is a quantum singularity that simply cannot die (Simmons 2005, 518), while in *The Song of Achilles*, as in the *Iliad*, his later doubts are all parts of an already fixed outcome.

167), but also “the poem or song that conveys glory, fame, that which is heard of” (Nagy 2013: 26). The *Iliad*, therefore, as the “tale of Ilion”, is a meta-text, as it sings of the warriors and heroes fighting for the right to be sung about (*aoidimos*), to be part of the *Iliad* itself. The rule applies: the bigger the deed the bigger the glory and the bigger the glory the bigger the song, so Achilles is the *protagonist* of the *Iliad* because his glory is the greatest, “unwiling” (*kleos apthiton*).⁶

But it must be emphasized that *kleos* is a highly, or exclusively, public achievement and is earned only through the testimony and praise of others. No warrior can bestow *kleos* upon himself, but needs to earn it in the eyes of his peers. Therefore, the Homeric hero culture is one lived in terms of others (Vernant 1991, 57) and hero’s personality rests on the public image intended to live forever. To be a hero and be worthy of being sung about, one must transcend one’s corporality and move to an aesthetic plane conveyed by speech and words; namely, to be a hero, one must *textualize* oneself, turn oneself into the words of (and for) others. In such a world, in which the difference between the unmediated life and song/text is diminished (or erased) (Nagy 2013, 31) corporal death cannot be the end; the real death comes only as a public amnesia. To truly die in the *Iliad* means to be forgotten. If you do not fight heroically, says Achilles from *Troy* “no one will remember your name” (00:06:26).

The price of the glory Achilles is after (the imperishable one) is life. However, the hero’s identity is a textual, aesthetic category (one is considered hero to the extent he is sung about), conjured at the intersection of others’ gazes, so dying is simply not enough – giving up the body is not enough – it means little, nothing, or wrong things if it is not beautiful, if the warrior did not die a “beautiful death” (Vernant 1991). The hero’s body in death is as important as in life (Treherne 1995; Frieman *at al.* 2107), because if he lives through the eyes of others he also dies as a public display. In order to be worthy of song and textual immortality, his body must remain beautiful – and to do that it must *remain young*. This connection of death, youth and the necessity of preservation is clearly expressed in the divine treatment of the heroic bodies: two warriors in the *Iliad* are said to be invested with the heroic youth (*hēbē*) – Patroclus (16.857) and Hector (22.363) – and both have their bodies protected from decay by gods.⁷ If he had died during the course of the *Iliad*, Achilles would have been invested with *hēbē* as well. “For the hero”, says Nicole Loraux (1975, 23), “[...] death takes place under the sign of *hēbē*; even if youth had not been specifically attributed to the warrior, he possesses it at the exact moment he loses it”. By dying young, a hero stays young forever.

6 On the other hand, most of the warriors mentioned in the *Iliad* have attained a small *kleos*, a bit of it, but enough to earn them a spot in the song. See, for instance, Iphidamas who left his young wife and came to Troy in search of the Achaean *kleos* (11.218–228).

7 Thetis imbues Patroclus’ body with ambrosia (19.7–9) and Apollo shields Hector’s body with his aegis (24.19–20).

Which finally brings me to the issue of aging: while old *age* is in the *Iliad* revered (1.259–261), the old *body* is marked by anxiety, insecurity, weakness and regret (11.670–671, 23.629–631).⁸ Similarly, youth is often considered reckless and hasty (20.408–412, 20.463–466), but it is the *body's* greatest strength (24.347–348), *megiston kratos*. This is precisely why Vernant (1991, 61) distinguishes between its aspects: *hēbē* does not necessarily refer to an age group, but to the “time of life when one feels oneself in a state of superiority, when success and acclaim (kudos) seem to follow you naturally, seem linked to your undertakings”. To be young, or, rather, to possess a young, powerful body is crucial for a culture founded on the external gaze. Youth brings praise and adoration; it celebrates the vital, kinetic powers of the body. Achilles is fast, “swift-footed”, his youth at its prime, body beautiful.⁹ If he is to achieve great deeds, if he is to become a hero, the warrior must be and remain young. Consequently, body aging is filled with anxiety, fear and remorse. When related to the warrior's body, aging is not simply limiting, but unconditionally ugly; *hēbē* turned upside-down. “When a young man falls by the sword in battle”, says Priam to Hector imploringly,

he may lie where he is and there is nothing unseemly; let what will be seen, all is honorable [*panta kala*] in death, but when an old man is slain there is nothing in this world more pitiable than that dogs should defile his gray hair and beard and all that men hide for shame. (22.71–75)

For a young warrior – *panta kala*, everything is beautiful, virtuous, honorable (Vernant 1991a). If it is to be honored for eternity, the warrior's body has to remain eternally beautiful. To do that, it has to die in battle young.

This triad of concepts – youth, beauty and death – are all opposed, threatened by and constructed in opposition to the old body. The warrior's hunger for fame is as big as his shunning away of aging; the more he fears or rejects old age, the more he craves and deserves glory. “[I]f you do not come to Troy”, says Odysseus to Achilles in *The Song of Achilles*,

your godhead will wither in you, unused. Your strength will diminish. At best, you will be like Lycomedes here, moldering on a forgotten island with only daughters to succeed him. Scyros will be conquered soon by a nearby state; you know this as well as I. They will not kill him; why should they? He can live out his years in some corner eating the bread they soften for him, senile and alone. When he dies, people will say, *who?* (Miller 2011, 156)

This resentment and fear of old age is the driving force of the Homeric hero culture and it is what persuaded Achilles to come to Troy fully knowing he would die. In Miller's novel, as in the *Iliad*, the old age is not a simple obscurity, but utmost insignificance, erasure. The aged warrior in Odysseus' speech is not a person any more, he has no organic power, no friends, no body and

8 See, for instance, Couch 1943 or Yamagata 1993.

9 The statuesque Brad Pitt was not an accidental choice for the role in *Troy*.

no name; he is inconsequential and invisible. He is food for dogs, and not just any dogs but his, his own animals that will tear him apart because they cannot recognize him anymore – because there is nothing left to be recognized. For a young warrior's body *panta kala*; for the old's nothingness. The body that moves, sweats, bleeds, kills or is butchered on every other page of the *Iliad* is in life a complex and contradictory "system of organs and limbs animated by their individual impulses" (Vernant 1991, 62). At death, however, it acquires a formal unity and becomes the seat of the warrior's beauty, embodiment of his excellence. Its youth, all its streaming, juicing, kinetic powers are in death petrified and thus preserved, captured in the warrior's *soma* that, in Homer, is a lifeless body, a shell of a once living being (Peigney 1998, 212).

Achilles has to die young so he can stay young forever. He needs to make the transition to poetry; he wants to become text, the Achilles I am familiar with, Achilles-as-text. His exteriorized body is a libidinal knot that he will give up so as to textualize and immortalize it. To achieve *kleos apthiton*, which is inseparable from *hēbē*, Achilles dies, and in death empties himself completely, turning his body into *soma*, the perfect object of spectacle for others (Vernant 1991a, 86) – turning himself into a gym sign bound to promise that the effort put in the body image will be exceptionally rewarded and that the one putting it will rise above his peers: powerful, agile, young forever – immortal.

Youthful immortality: the promise of Achilles' choice.

As I throw the dumbbell against the hurting muscle I perform the song of Achilles. The wording of my *Iliad* comes in the form of pain and the more I hurt the more articulate it is. Achilles' overemphasized physique commands the room and what I see when I look at it, what I want from it is repealing of the body aging, the youthful immortality. The Achilles signifier stretches across the wall, moves further across my identity, my body image, my lack of self-acceptance and my fear of cellular degradation; it spreads even further across the room, others and the gym as an institution.

Spending time in the gym paid off and my body gradually transformed according to the prevailing standards of gay gym culture (Alvarez 2008). I suffered severe insomnia and back pain due to exhaustion, and the quality of my life degraded seemingly beyond repair; for some yet unknown reason I began losing voice. However, I developed a muscular physique, my shoulders broadened, chest expanded and thighs thickened. Than others began praising it, so I exposed it more. I became progressively more explicit on dating apps, posted body shots on social networks, ascending (or descending) to the meta-physical plane of my *kleos* generated by foreign gazes. Facebook, Instagram, Grindr became my personal epic, the *Iliad* earned by body abuse. Others commented on my body's vitality, flattered it saying I stopped aging, dating became easier since I was in possession of that which contemporary gay culture valued the most: a young, beautiful and muscular body. And the more they praised it the more I desired it, basking in an identity-consuming "high-performance narrative"

(Douglas and Carless 2009, 215–216), “glorified sense of self” (Alder and Alder 1989, 303–305) and self-esteem animated from *without*. This meta-physical song of comments and likes encased me, and made me feel as if “success and acclaim (kudos) follow[ed] [me] naturally, [seemingly] linked to [my] undertakings”; there I was in possession of strength and youth – *megiston kratos* – young forever (or as long as the song lasted).

But for that I paid Achilles’ price: I demolished my body, gave it away, externalized it and turned it into *soma*;¹⁰ how it *felt* became insignificant compared to how it *looked*. The poetic body needs the flesh to die so it can immortalize it, as much as social networks push consumers to pass from the physical to the meta-physical in order to be glorified. Just as Achilles let his body be destroyed for song, I destroyed mine for a beautiful (e)pic that kept me young forever.

I became *aidimos*, worthy of being sung.

Illusion and Pain, or, What Comes After

Three years into the excessive workout, my body broke down. I was diagnosed with chronic gastritis and hiatal hernia, partly earned by lifting heavy weights and partly by three years of overeating. Combined they led to GERD¹¹ which manifested by persistent cough and a lump in the throat that affected my vocal cords and endangered voice. Even the slightest motions (such as bending over or tying my shoes) aggravated my condition. I had not slept a full night for years and had forgotten how the rested body *felt* – the important thing was that it *looked* muscled and was worthy of praise.

The breakdown happened suddenly: one day I was running kilometers and was lifting weights, the next I was on my side with a gastroscopy tube down my throat. I stopped working out; I reduced the food intake and turned attention back to *living* my body instead of *looking at it*. The body I now felt seemed horrifying and empty, taken through the scenario of a “broken jock” (Sparkes, Partington and Brown 2007, 312); I felt as if I truly turned it into a hurting, dysfunctional shell I was unable to command anymore. The praise song sang for a while yet, but one can live on a past glory only thus far, so comments thinned out and likes grew few. I deflated, lost muscles and my body retransformed

10 This process of body externalization as part of the culture of spectacle is hardly a contemporary phenomenon (Debord 1983 and 1988; Teodorski 2016; 2016a and 2021, 13–40), but social networks culture is its current pinnacle. It becomes less and less important how the body *feels* than how it *looks*, how others respond to it, is it desirable and what do others desire from it.

11 Gastroesophageal reflux disease is a digestive disorder that affects the ring of muscle (lower esophageal sphincter) between esophagus and stomach. In GERD, the ring does not close properly and the stomach contents flow back to esophagus or even mouth.

into an ordinary one that now felt ancient. Ironically, I began working out so as to remain young (my inner scenario was saying: “as long as you work out you are worthy of praise and as long as you are worthy of praise you are young”), but three years later I felt like my body aged a lifetime and my face a decade. It took four months to regain capacity for continuous sleep, and six months to feel only slightly rested. Looking at myself in the mirror and, more importantly, feeling myself, I wished I had never begun working out in the first place. I thought about “those good times” before the anxiety when I felt healthy and rested and now they made me feel old, debilitated and, above all – disillusioned.

What I am aiming at here is what happens with the real, organic body once it has ascended to its illusory meta-physical epic of comments, likes and praises; what happens with the one inheriting that body. “Say not a word in death’s favor,” says Achilles (*Odyssey* 11.487–492) to Odysseus who has descended to Hades, “I would rather be a paid servant in a poor man’s house and be above ground than king of kings among the dead”. After Achilles ascended to the *Iliad* and got himself the *kleos* worthy of the protagonist role, he ended up in Hades desirous and thirsty, regretting the choice he made and lamenting his lost strength.¹² Achilles from the *Odyssey* is a devastatingly tragic figure, a hero who succumbed to an illusion of immortality and agelessness, and who now speaks from the other side (literally), from what comes after. And what comes after is “reckoning” (Van Norwick 2008, 3) the regret of self-destruction in which one’s mind flees towards “those good times” retroactively constructed against the dreariness of today. Aboard the Queen Mab, Simmons’ Odysseus dreams of Achilles who would rather stare “up an oxen’s ass ten hours a day than be the greatest hero in Hades” (Simmons 2005, 303).

Bodies in epic poetry, just as on social networks, belong to that symbolic, auditory/scopic, meta-physical register, to represented, textual and transhuman existence driven by signifiers and libido where literature extends (or substitutes for) the lived body: literature as a post-physical condition. However, the full scope of human flesh and cellular processes runs simultaneously with it, the body that feels and aches, sweats, bleeds, excels, ruptures, breaks down, enjoys and suffers, but also the body one wants to transform, “restructure”, “body-build”, the body one wants to alienate, to use it as the tool of pain so it can sing the song of Achilles. As long as humanity depends on the physical body¹³ to enable and support its complex and messy psychology, its unconscious that ne-

12 “Could I but stand by his side, in the light of day, with the same strength that I had when I killed the bravest of our foes upon the plain of Troy – could I but be as I then was [...]” (*Odyssey* 11.499–502)

13 It is interesting to note that *Ilium/Olympos* Achilles articulates this transhumanist vision of transcending physical decay. He is wrapped in the “quantum-probability matrix [...] to a quite improbable extent” (Simmons 2005, 107) which turns him into an invulnerable “quantum freak” (Simmons 2005: 518) that can suffer but cannot die. This quantum-probability matrix is the Celestial Fire in which Thetis burned him as a child, reimagining Achilles’ origin story from *Argonautica* by Apollonius of Rhodes (4.869–879).

ver sleeps, its libido that attaches itself to everything (especially to the self), its inability to truthfully perceive mental processes and its ability to delude itself with mirrors – be they epic songs, social networks commentaries or selfies – a *sung* Achilles will simply still be a *dead* Achilles.

And in the words of Odysseus: “Achilles doesn’t like being dead” (Simmons 2005, 303).

Bibliography

- Alder, P.A. and P. Alder. 1989. “The Gloried Self: The Aggrandizement and the Constriction of Self.” *Social Psychology Quarterly* 52 (4): 299–310. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2786993>
- Alvarez, Erick. 2008. *Muscle Boys: Gay Gym Culture*. New York: The Haworth Press.
- Apollonius of Rhodes. 1912. *Argonautica*, edited and translated by Robert Cooper Seaton. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- Bourdieu, Pierre and Loic J. D. Wacquant. 1992. *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Burgess, Jonathan S. 2008. *The Death and Afterlife of Achilles*. Baltimore: The John Hopkins University Press.
- Couch, H. N. 1943. “Homer on Youth.” *The Classical Weekly* 36 (18): 211–213. <https://doi.org/10.2307/4341679>
- de Jong, I. J. F. 1987. *Narrators and Focalizers*. Amsterdam.
- Debord, Guy. 1983. *Society of the Spectacle*. Detroit: Black & Re.
- Debord, Guy. 1988. *Comments on the Society of the Spectacle*. London and New York: Verso.
- Douglas, K. and D. Carless. 2009. “Abandoning the Performance Narrative: Two Women’s Stories of Transition from Professional Sport.” *Journal of Applied Sport Psychology* 21 (2): 213–230. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10413200902795109>
- Edwards, M.W. 1987. *Homer: Poet of the Iliad*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Edwards, Mark W. 1991. *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume 5, Books 17–20*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Fenik, J. C. 1968. *Typical Battle Scenes in the Iliad: Studies in the Narrative Techniques of Homeric Battle Descriptions*. Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH: Wiesbaden.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1981 [1900]. “The Interpretation of Dreams I.” In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IV (1900)*, translated by James Strachey, 1–603. London: The Hogarth Press and Institute for Psychoanalysis.
- Freud, Sigmund. 1981 [1939]. “Moses and Monotheism.” In *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume XXIII (1937–1939)*, translated by James Strachey, 1–140. London: The Hogarth Press and Institute for Psychoanalysis.
- Frieman, Catherine, J. 2017. “Aging Well: Treherne’s ‘Warrior’s Beauty’ Two Decades Later.” *European Journal of Archaeology* 20 (1): 36–73. <https://doi.org/10.1017/ea.2016.6>

- Gantz, T. 1993. *Early Greek Myth*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Garcia Jr., Lorenzo F. "Kleos." In *The Cambridge Guide to Homer*, edited by Corinne Ondine Pache, 167–168. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Graziosi, B., and J. Haubold. 2005. *Homer: The Resonance of Epic*. London: Duckworth.
- Griffin, Jasper. 1980. *Homer on Life and Death*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Hainsworth, Bryan. 1993. *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume 3, Books 9–12*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Homer. 1898. *The Iliad of Homer. Rendered into English prose for the use of those who cannot read the original*, translated by Samuel Butler. London, New York and Bombay: Ballantyne Press.
- Homer. 1900. *The Odyssey. Rendered into English prose for the use of those who cannot read the original*, translated by Samuel Butler. London: A. C. Fifield.
- Janko, Richard. 1994. *The Iliad: A Commentary. Volume 4, Books 13–16*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Kullmann, W. 1960. *Die Quellen der Ilias*. Franz Steiner Verlag GMBH: Wiesbaden.
- Kullmann, W. 1991. "Ergebnisse der motivgeschichtlichen Forschung zu Homer (Neanalyse)." In *Zweihundert Jahre Homer-Forschung*, 425–455. Stuttgart: Teubner.
- Leaf, Walter, trans. 1900. *The Iliad*. London: Macmillan.
- Loroux, Nicole. 1975. *HBH et ANΔPEIA: Deux versions de la mort du combattant athénien*. Paris: Ka.
- Miller, Madeline. 2011. *The Song of Achilles*. London, Berlin, New York and Sydney: Bloomsbury Press.
- Nagy, Gregory. 2013. *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*. Cambridge (Mass.) and London: Harvard University Press.
- Niven, Larry and Steven Barns. 1991. *Achilles' Choice*. New York: Tor Books.
- Peigney, Jocelyne. 1998. "On the Greek Vision of the Human Body." In *Greeks and Romans in the Modern World*, edited by Roger-Paul Droit, 211–215. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Troy. 2004. Directed by Wolfgang Petersen. Los Angeles: Warner Bros. Pictures. 2006. DVD.
- Plato. 1909. *The Symposium of Plato*, translated by R. G. Bury. Cambridge: W. Heffer and Sons.
- Rutherford, R. B. 1982. "Tragic Form and Feeling in the Iliad." *Journal of Hellenic Studies* 102: 145–160. <https://doi.org/10.2307/631133>
- Schein, Seth L. 1985. *The Mortal Hero: An Introduction to Homer's Iliad*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Simmons, Dan. 2003. *Ilium*. New York: Harper Voyager.
- Simmons, Dan. 2005. *Olympos*. London: Gollancz.
- Slatkin, Laura M. 1995. *The Power of Thetis: Allusion and Interpretation in the Iliad*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Sparkes, A.C., E. Partington and D.H.K. Brown. 2007. "Bodies as Bearers of Value: The Transmission of Jock Culture via the 'Twelve Commandments.'" *Sport, Education and Society* 12 (3): 295–316. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13573320701464150>

- Teodorski, Marko. 2016. "Reflection as Commodity: A Short Ethno(historio)graphy of Victorian Mirrors." *Bulletin of the Institute of Ethnography SASA* 64 (1): 121–132. <https://doi.org/10.2298/GEI1601121T>
- Teodorski, Marko. 2017. "Kultura stakla: transcendentalni subjekat na raskršću teksta i materijalne kulture." *Književna istorija* 160: 221–245. <http://arhiva.knjizevnaistorija.rs/editions/160/teodorski.pdf>
- Teodorski, Marko. 2021. *Textuality and Transcendence*. Institute for Literature and Art.
- Treherne, Paul. 1995. "The Warrior's Beauty: The Masculine Body and Self-Identity in Bronze-Age Europe." *Journal of European Archaeology* 3 (1): 105–144. <https://doi.org/10.1179/096576695800688269>
- Van Nortwick, Thomas. 1995. "Achilles in Oberlin: The Hero Story as Metaphor." *Classical Bulletin* 71 (2): 125. <https://www.proquest.com/docview/1296277954>
- Van Nortwick, Thomas. 1996. *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled: The Hero's Journey*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press.
- Van Nortwick, Thomas. 2008. *Imagining Men: Ideals of Masculinity in Ancient Greek Culture*. London: Praeger.
- Vernant, Jean-Pierre. 1991. "A 'Beautiful Death' and the Disfigured Corpse in Homeric Epic." In *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*, edited by Froma I. Zeitlin, 50–74. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Vernant, Jean-Pierre. 1991a. "Panta Kala: From Homer to Simonides." In *Mortals and Immortals: Collected Essays*. Edited by Froma I. Zeitlin, 84–91. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Whitman, Cedric Hubbell. 1958. *Homer and the Heroic Tradition*. Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press.
- Willcock, M. M. 1977. "Ad hoc Invention in the Iliad." *Harvard Studies in Classical Philology* 18: 41–53. <https://doi.org/10.2307/311110>
- Willcock, M. M. 1978. "Homer, the Individual Poet." *LCM* 3: 11–18.
- Wills, David. 1995. *Prosthesis*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Yamagata, Naoko. 1993. "Young and Old in Homer and in 'Heike Monogatari.'" *Greece & Rome* 40 (1): 1–10. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S001738350002252X>

Primljeno: 12.03. 2022.

Odobreno: 15.05.2022.