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Editor's Essay
The Wrath of Achilles

Abstract: 'Wrath' is the first word of the *Iliad* and of Western literature, specifically 'the wrath of Achilles'. In Homer's conception, the human being integrates body and mind as inseparable elements, and decisions are determined by bodily impulses. This conception of the human being contrasts with later philosophical views that separate the soul from the body, considering the former a more noble entity and the latter merely a container or prison. The concept of 'bodily islands', coined by the philosopher Hermann Schmitz, emphasizes the Homeric representation of emotions through bodily experiences. Schmitz's insights align with contemporary research on corporeality, which describes emotions as 'bodily resonance' (Thomas Fuchs), involving sensations linked to the autonomic nervous system and muscle activations. Emotions, therefore, are bodily movements, in line with the Latin root of the term 'emotion' (*emovere*). Even the famous 'wrath of Achilles' can be reinterpreted in light of embodied cognition. Initially portrayed as dynamic and destructive, Achilles' wrath later manifests as apathy and inactivity, akin to depression. This shift highlights how the quality of emotions changes with their bodily resonance, influencing the perception and emotional engagement of the audience listening to the epic chant.

Keywords: Iliad; Achilles; Embodied Cognition; Embodied Anthropology; Wrath.

For at least twenty years, the study of ancient Greek literature has experienced an 'emotional turn,' despite the lack of a clear answer to the question: *What is an emotion?* The prevalent perspective in classical studies has been the history of emotions, where scholars aim to understand and reconstruct the meaning of emotions within their cultural and anthropological contexts[1]. Most historians find the experimental results of neuroscience on emotions inapplicable to historical documents. The Homeric poems, however, are an exception as they cannot be attributed to a specific historical and geographical context.

Traditionally, Homeric studies focused on the lexical correspondence between contemporary expressions of emotions and the terms found in Homeric poems, examining the semantic field of words that denote emotions like anger,

[1] Chaniotis 2012; Chaniotis-Ducrey 2014; Chaniotis-Kaltsas-Milonoupoulos 2017; Cairns-Fulkerson 2015; Cairns-Nelis 2017; Chaniotis 2021.

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shame, fear, joy. Recently, some studies have explored cognitive metaphors used to express psychological and mental phenomena, such as 'turning green' to signify fear or 'feeling the knees give way'[2] to describe a strong shock or great emotion. These metaphors, rooted in corporeal perception, bridge the gap between bodily experience and metaphorical meaning[3].

The most recent philosophical and neuroscientific findings on embodied experience can open a largely unexplored field of study, even on the representation of emotions in Homer. This field of study falls within a broader inquiry into the conception of the human being, both body and mental mechanisms, in Homeric poetry, a conception often distorted by idealistic evolutionism, according to which Homer represents an archaic, and therefore imperfect, stage of the idea of the human being.

But why should we study the representation of emotions in Homer? There are multiple answers. The most obvious is that the *Iliad* is the first transmitted text of Western literature, serving as a model or anti-model for subsequent tradition. Moreover, it is significant that the *Iliad* begins with the description of the effects of an emotion, the famous wrath of Achilles, on which we will focus in this article. Finally, it must be considered that the Homeric poems are oral and aural poetry, intended for recitation: therefore, just as it happens for any performance, they are suitable for asking to what extent the emotions performed by the poetry were and still are reflected in the audience of listeners and readers.

The Homeric poems are also a document of a conception of the human being in which body and mind are understood and perceived as inseparable: the body does not constitute the container of a part that, from Plato onwards, is considered more noble, namely the soul. In Homer, man feels and understands himself through his own body and decides based on bodily impulses. Thus, the Homeric poems become, on the one hand, an important testimony of the anthropology of corporeality, and on the other, they can be understood precisely considering the most recent studies on the relationship between body, mind, subjectivity and intersubjectivity[4].

As the philosopher Hermann Schmitz (1928-2021), founder of neo-phenomenology, showed a long time ago in a book completely forgotten by classical scholars[5], in Homer the representation of emotions, like any other psychic activity, passes through the detailed recording of bodily experiences. More

[2] See Kuhn-Treichel in this issue, with additional bibliography.
[3] Horn 2018; Zanker 2019; Kuhn-Treichel in this issue, with additional bibliography.
[4] Gallese-Morelli 2024.
[5] Schmitz 1965.

precisely, it passes through the representation of what is felt in what in the German language is called *Leib*, the lived body, which is distinct from *Körper*, the body seen from the outside or understood in its anatomical nature. Homeric terms denoting psychic activity are vague in the sense that one cannot find their correspondence in specific anatomical organs of the human body. In other words, Homer describes an embodied experience of mental and psychological processes, including emotions, not through the functions performed by specific organs, such as the heart, diaphragm, or bile, but through perceptions that concern broader bodily areas, which Schmitz calls 'bodily islands'.

Consider, for example, one of Homer's formulaic expressions, κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν: despite long debates on the specific meaning of the words φρήν and θυμός no precise identification with a specific organ has been reached and can be reached. The Homeric expression κατὰ φρένα καὶ κατὰ θυμόν remains untranslatable, and only to give an idea can we render it as 'through his heart and mind'. The expression indicates a mental activity that is located 'along' (κατὰ) a bodily island, which crosses the body at chest height, and is thus perceived as an internal movement of the body, like a wave passing through it.

Schmitz's reflections on bodily islands in Homer have found and continue to find an echo in the research of neuroscientists and anthropologists of corporeality. According to this research, emotion consists of a 'bodily resonance'[6]. This includes all forms of local or general bodily sensation: sensations of heat or cold, tickling or chills, tension or relaxation, constriction or expansion, oscillation, bending or rising, etc. These sensations correspond, on the one hand, to the activation of the autonomic nervous system (e.g., increased heart rate, accelerated breathing, sweating, trembling, visceral reactions), and on the other hand, also to muscle activations, bodily postures, movements, and related kinaesthetic sensations (e.g., clenching the fist, tightening the jaws, forward and backward movements, etc.). Particularly rich in fields of bodily resonance are the face, chest, abdomen. For example, pain can be perceived as tension around the eyes, a tendency to cry, a lump in the throat, chest tightness, an abdominal cramp, and so on.

As William James already wrote in 1884: «not only the heart, but the entire circulatory system, forms a sort of sounding-board, which every change of our consciousness, however slight, may make reverberate»[7]. The bodily resonance of feelings is not limited to the activity of the autonomic nervous system or facial expression but includes the whole moving body. Fear, for example, does

[6] Fuchs 2017.
[7] James 1884, p. 19.

not only mean an increased heart rate and wide-open eyes but also the urge to flee or hide. In general, the term emotion derives from the Latin *emovere* (to move out), i.e., every emotion has a movement potential, an orientation towards a specific goal. Hence, there have been various attempts to classify emotions based on the different action schemes they provoke: approach (e.g., desire), avoidance (e.g., fear), staying together (e.g., joy, trust), rejection (e.g., disgust), dominance (e.g., arrogance), submission (e.g., humility, resignation), etc.[8]

In summary, the sensitive and mobile body is the means through which we are emotionally related to the world. Emotions are bodily movements determined by the affective valences of a situation, thus they are themselves bodily orientations. Accepting this definition of emotion, I believe we can try to reread Homer. Here, for example, I will consider the first verses of the *Iliad*.

Μῆνιν ἄειδε, θεά, Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος,
οὐλομένην, ἣ μυρί' Ἀχαιοῖς ἄλγε' ἔθηκεν,
πολλὰς δ' ἰφθίμους ψυχὰς Ἄϊδι προΐαψεν
ἡρώων, αὐτοὺς δὲ ἑλώρια τεῦχε κύνεσσιν
οἰωνοῖσί τε πᾶσι [...]

Wrath – sing, goddess, of the *ruinous* wrath of Peleus' son Achilles,
that *inflicted* woes without number upon the Achaeans,
hurled forth to Hades many strong souls of warriors
and *rendered* their bodies prey for the dogs,
for all birds [...] (translation by Caroline Alexander)

'Wrath', Μῆνιν (in the accusative), is the first word of the poem and, as already noted, the first word of Western literature, and it is obvious that since antiquity it has been at the centre of discussions. Moreover, since the verbs that indicate its action are in the active voice, it has also been considered personified, as if it were a deity or an extra-human agent. Like other emotions, however, wrath does not exist if it is not embodied, and thus the poet immediately says that it is the 'wrath of Achilles', where the genitive indicates that the emotion, without the body in which it is embodied, has no life of its own, is not autonomous. The actions of the character and his bodily expressions are the emotion itself. Achilles possesses the wrath and it is not the wrath that possesses Achilles as if the hero were prey to a sort of divine takeover. However, the perception of this wrath is not described, in the first verses of the *Iliad*,

[8] Fuchs 2017.

from Achilles' point of view, but from the external perspective of those who relate to the effects of this wrath (hence it is defined as 'ruinous, cursed'). The verbs express the actions that a body performs to manifest its wrath, actions that are not chronologically ordered, that is, they do not follow one another, but indicate movements in the space of the body experiencing wrath: inflicting countless woes, hurling the lives of heroes into the afterlife precisely when they are in the prime of their physical strength, rendering their dead bodies prey for dogs and birds. These are all concrete actions performed by a human being experiencing fury.

Within the narrative frame of the *Iliad*, these are only potential actions. Nowhere in the *Iliad* are the corpses given as prey to dogs and birds, nor does Achilles directly impose grief and sorrow on the Achaeans, i.e., the Greeks on whose side he fights. This means that in the first verses, the emotion is not an individual characteristic of the character Achilles. The emphasis on wrath and its concrete consequences has an aesthetic meaning for the poet; it is the means to involve the audience in the emotional atmosphere of the poetry, an atmosphere of slaughter and war, in order to incite the audience's emotional engagement.

Why does the *Iliad* start this way?

It is not a mechanism of anticipation, as happens, for example, in thrillers when the narrative begins with the account of a crime and then goes back to tell how it got to that point. The poet's purpose is rather to set the audience in motion, mentally and physically, to bind them, in a sense, to the emotions of the poetry through their bodily reactions.

What emotions? Fear for the 'many woes', disgust for the corpses given as prey to beasts, horror for the young dead. With the *Iliad*, the apparent paradox begins whereby we derive pleasure from hearing, seeing, witnessing terrible events, and thus experiencing negative emotions with the distance guaranteed by fiction. The proem of the *Iliad*, in other words, aims to establish an emotional relationship with the audience. Living or reliving the experience of Achilles' wrath has an aesthetic meaning, comparable to emotionally experiencing a war film.

Achilles' wrath in the proem of the *Iliad* thus has a poetic justification and an emotional purpose; it does not anticipate the narrative, and it is therefore futile to ask to what extent the poet's invocation to the deity corresponds to the actual subject of the poem. Both the space and time in which this wrath acts are chaotic and disorderly. However, it is still necessary to ask to what extent the wrath of Achilles in the first verses of the *Iliad* is truly the wrath of Achilles described later in the poem.

This is extensively described and defined in verses 488-492 as follows:

αὐτὰρ ὃ μήνιε νηυσὶ παρήμενος ὠκυπόροισιν
διογενὴς Πηλῆος υἱός, πόδας ὠκὺς Ἀχιλλεύς·
οὔτέ ποτ' εἰς ἀγορὴν πωλέσκετο κυδιάνειραν
οὔτέ ποτ' ἐς πόλεμον, ἀλλὰ φθινύθεσκε φίλον κῆρ
αὖθι μένων· ποθέεσκε δ' ἀϋτήν τε πτόλεμόν τε.

But, he, sitting idle by his fast-running ships, remained full of wrath –
the Zeus-descended son of Peleus, Achilles of the swift feet;
never did he go to the assembly where men win glory,
never to war, but consumed his own heart,
biding his time there; yet he yearned for the war shout and battle.

In these verses, Achilles' wrath acts very differently from the proem. Achilles intentionally refuses to be himself, to follow his nature, to go to war, a war that he nevertheless yearns for with a genuine erotic passion. While the wrath in the proem involves a series of violent and disorderly actions, here being wrathful means refraining from any movement, which also contrasts with Achilles' exclusive epithet 'swift-feet,' which defines his nature. Wrath is configured as silence and internal consumption (expressed through the metaphor of 'consuming his heart').

Thus, Achilles' wrath in these verses has an emotional quality and bodily resonance antithetical to the wrath that bursts into the first verse of the *Iliad* and drags the poet, who is only a mouthpiece the deity of poetry, and his listeners into a world of mourning and horror. Achilles' wrath, which in the first verses has a dynamic destructive character that frightens with its monstrous effects, reveals itself instead, when observed closely, as a state of apathy and inaction, which appears to us more like depression. The emotion, that is, acquires a different quality depending on its bodily resonance. In the first case, the described resonance is not internal to the character, but arises from the relationship the poet wants to establish with the audience; the emotion thus becomes an aesthetic tool for involving the audience. In the second case, the wrath corresponds to an internal physical state of the character, which elicits an opposite emotional reaction in the listener: in the proem, one perceives fear, disgust, and the tension arising from not knowing precisely what is about to be narrated, as well as the estrangement of suddenly finding oneself in a hostile and terrifying mental space. In the second case, one feels or can feel pity and commiseration for a strong and vigorous character who is wasting away and gnawing at his heart.

By accepting an embodied conception of emotions, we can try to reread the *Iliad*, understand its idea of the human being, and attempt to reconstruct its reception of poetry.

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