Beneath the splendid and glittering surfaces of the poetry of the Iliad, the beauty of the heroes and gods, one easily senses chaos. This shadow of chaos lies in the background for the most part. When a warrior dies, for instance, we are usually told that a mist of darkness clouds his eyes, a formula either evoking the obscure realm into which men pass when they die, or the finality of a death beyond which there is nothing. The poem is marked by a dim but persistent consciousness that just beneath the surface of life lies a dark abyss that threatens to engulf what little there is of human happiness and pleasure. But the shadow also moves in the foreground of the poem. History itself appears to bear no meaningful pattern, but to consist of “constant aimless alternations of glory and misery,” as C.S. Lewis said.1 Zeus intends to visit tears and sufferings on both Danaans and Trojans alike and he even remarks on how dismal the life of men is.2 Cities rise and fall under the hand of Zeus’ as he likes; when he is eager to destroy a city, as he makes clear, nothing will stand in his way.3 And the cause seems to lie simply in his will, or perhaps more accurately, in his whim, for he makes no effort to justify his actions with a rational scheme. The lives of individual men fare no better than those of cities. Even the

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1 C. S. Lewis, Preface to Paradise Lost (London: Oxford University Press, 1961), 30. Lewis explains as follows: “[In Homeric epic] no one event is really very much more important than another. No achievement can be permanent: today we kill and feast, tomorrow we are killed, and our women led away as slaves. Nothing ‘stays put’, nothing has a significance beyond the moment. Heroism and tragedy there are in plenty . . . but no ‘large design that brings the world out of good to ill’. The total effect is not a pattern, but a kaleidoscope. If Troy falls, woe to the Trojans, no doubt, but what of it?” This seems a pithy presentation of the case.
2 Homer Iliad 2.38-40, 17.446-7.
3 Iliad 4.40-42.
most fortunate men, like Priam, suffer ruin and defeat in the inevitable up and down of things. Happiness and sorrow depend in no way on deserts, but visit men regardless of their merit. The Homeric world appears to be one of disorder, irresponsibility, and irrationality. 4

The number of details, images, similes, and formulae in the Iliad that give this impression is perhaps beyond calculation, but Achilles’ myth of the two urns is especially eloquent of the view that human life is a series of erratic revolutions of fortune and woe. Priam has come to Achilles asking for the body of his son Hektor. After he arrives they begin to weep together, Priam at the feet of Achilles weeping over Hektor, and Achilles weeping over Patroklus, his sorrow undiminished even after avenging his beloved friend’s death. It is one of the most moving scenes in all of literature, full of tenderness, weakness, and pain, but somehow free of mere pathos. Its effect depends on our having experienced the whole of the preceding story: having felt Priam’s greatness, the tragedy of Hektor’s loss, Achilles’ wrath and cruelty, and all the rest of the carnage of the war. The drama settles down at this moment and the tension of the story begins to loosen. This is not a moment for action, but for discussion of the meaning of human existence. 5 But, oddly, it is not Priam, the old man wise in counsels, who instructs Achilles, but Achilles, the ruthless warrior, who teaches Priam. Priam sits at Achilles’ feet, as if Achilles has won through to a wisdom that needs expression in this situation. Hektor had been told by

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4 T.S. Eliot, in his essay Virgil and the Christian World, says that as a young man he did not enjoy Homer because “the gods were as irresponsible, as much a prey to their passions, as devoid of public spirit and the sense of fair play, as the heroes. This was shocking. Furthermore, their sense of humour extended only to the crudest form of horseplay. Achilles was a ruffian; the only hero who could be commended for either conduct or judgment was Hector . . .” (124).

5 Someone has pointed out the interesting fact that there are very few conversations in the Aeneid, while the Homeric epics are full of conversation. The reason seems to be that in the Aeneid there is always the mission compelling the hero onward imperatively, and therefore no time to stop and take the measure of things in conversation with other men. I would contend that the first instance of the idea of mission is to be found in the Aeneid. This is yet another way in which it is the founding secular document of Christendom.
Poulydamas that the gods will often grant a man prowess in war but not wisdom, which is a gift often bestowed on men who are lesser warriors. But here, at the end of the book, after the huge and terrible drama of the preceding twenty-three books, we find the greatest warrior delivering what may be the deepest wisdom of the poem. The myth he tells is quite simple. Zeus has two urns, one full of blessings and one full of evils. Each man’s life contains something from each of these urns, both evils and blessings—an alternation of misery and happiness, with more misery than happiness. Every blessing is bought with, or balanced, by some evil. Peleus, for example, was rich and powerful and the husband of a goddess, but he bore only one son, and that son was all but destined to bring him sorrow. And Priam himself, who had enjoyed so much prosperity, now sees his city beleaguered by the Greeks and has lost all his sons in battle. Both before and after telling this myth to Priam, Achilles urges the futility of lamentation upon him. Suffering is pointless, meaningless, and constant in life, and men can do nothing to prevent it or to gain from it. They must simply accept it as inevitable. It is not surprising that some have called Achilles the first nihilist.

What is the status of this myth? It is given a very prominent place in the poem, uttered at a moment of utmost dramatic significance. Is it the sum of the wisdom Achilles has gained over the course of the poem? Is the absolute truth about life that life is an “aimless alternation” of blessing and evil? If this is the case, what sort of wisdom is this, which seems an abnegation of wisdom, since it is a refusal to discern order in things? To say that life is a mixture of good and evil, incomprehensibly bestowed by Zeus, is surely not to affirm order but disorder? Such wisdom would be disappointing as the crowning affirmation in such a sublime and magnificent work. So, are we to take this myth as a

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*Iliad* 13.726-734.
concentrated and accurate expression of the vision of life expressed in the rest of the poem through drama and imagery? To interpret it this way is reasonable enough, since the outlook expressed in Achilles’ myth corresponds so exactly with the meaningless flux that the rest of the poem indicates is the character of existence, or at least is an aspect of existence.

Such an interpretation seems all the more appealing to us today, for we have, I feel sure, a tendency to see the Homeric world as primitive, coarse, and even immoral, believing as we do (despite ourselves, sometimes) that wisdom and morality progress only as material civilization progresses. From this point of view, Achilles’ myth of the two urns expresses perhaps the highest wisdom attainable in an uncouth and uncivilized age. The mind of mankind had not evolved very far; thought had not yet become differentiated; governance of the world was still ascribed to gods and goddesses who preyed on human beings for sport; all speculation about the gods, the nature of existence, human action, and the human community was unrefined and vague; and it was in a context such as this, with all of its limitations, that Homer composed his poems. Thus goes our instinctive reasoning today. But it is possible that we are wrong about Homer and that we therefore underestimate, and misunderstand, his poems. If we do, we do so at great loss to ourselves, for Homer’s poetry is poetry of the highest genius—today we might immediately distinguish, the highest primitive genius—and as such it embodies universal truths about our common humanity. Homer has too much to teach us about our own existence to read him with shallow prejudices of this sort.

Having said these things, I would like to argue, against our modern mental habits and the impression the poem leaves on many readers, that the *Iliad* presents an ultimately
meaningful and ordered vision of existence; in fact, that Homer is just as aware of a pattern in human events and history as Virgil. What, then, are some of the indications in the *Iliad* that Homer sees some order, pattern, even meaning in human action and life? I think the best way to answer this question is to analyze the significance of two things: the function and significance of the shield of Achilles and the sources whereto Homer assigns the causes of disorder in the human community and human soul. What I hope to indicate briefly by developing the significance of these aspects of the poem is that there is movement from disorder to order in the overall pattern of the *Iliad*.

The shield of Achilles, as Cedric Whitman points out, universalizes the action of the hero just at the moment when his will becomes unified and he makes, or is driven to, his choice of death over life and plunges “into the final fatalities of the action.” The shield, he explains, connects the action of Achilles with the ultimate destiny and order of human existence and reality; it presents “the passion, the order, and the changeless inevitability of the world as it is.” We might say it presents the metaphysical level of meaning of the action of Achilles, and of the action of the poem as a whole. What is significant is that the shield is made for Achilles. Achilles’ heroic action in the final books of the poem is the means by which the order presented on the shield is accomplished. What is equally significant is the universality of the picture of the world on the shield, which relates the shield to the plans of Zeus referred to throughout the

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7 I am especially indebted in my thinking about the sources of disorder in the human community to Eric Voegelin’s masterly analysis of the *Iliad* in *The World of the Polis*.
9 I use the term metaphysical here to refer to nothing more than Zeus’s plan for the totality of existence and not just the human community. The metaphysical level of meaning in the poem, thus, pertains to the character of *existence* as it is presented in the poem: whether it is good or evil, ordered or disordered. It seems to me that Zeus generally in the poem has responsibility for the whole of existence, not as creator, redeemer, and consummator like the Christian God, but as ruler or provider (whose regime is perhaps temporary). We see him visit other peoples than the Trojans and Greeks and he is certainly the Father of the gods. He clearly has concern for the whole.
poem as universal, transcending special interests, encompassing the ultimate destiny of
the cosmos and man’s life within it. Just as Zeus’s plans are universal, so the picture of
the cosmos on the shield is universal. And Achilles bears this shield and accomplishes its
order through his heroic excellence. He is an instrument of Zeus’s universal,
metaphysical plan.  

There are two cities depicted “in all their beauty” on the shield. In the first of
these cities, there are marriages and feasts taking place and young people dancing to
music. These are images of order and flourishing, of life in the human community. The
marriages suggest harmony between man and woman; the feasts, concord among men
and perhaps between men and gods; and the dancing youth, order and harmony, for
dancing is orderly physical movement, and thus serves as a fitting image of human order
which is deliberate and not haphazard. This city is also governed by laws, and the
violations within it are thus dealt with through legal methods. Thus conflicts between
man and man do not beget a cycle of violence, issuing in feuds, but are resolved
peaceably under the rule of law. There is, importantly, a likeness between this city and
the community of the Achaians: just as the Achaians suffer from internal disorder caused
by the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon, a disorder perpetuated by Achilles’
refusal to accept Agamemnon’s offer of reparation, so the first city on the shield is
disturbed by a quarrel between two men in which one of the parties refuses to accept an
offer of reparation. Although this society contains signs of order, it is threatened by seeds

10 Am I saying that Achilles is the unwitting agent by which Zeus accomplishes his plan of restoring order
and that heroic action is the means by which Homer sees the plans of Zeus being achieved, almost as if
Achilles were a sort of redeemer bringing peace and justice to a fallen world? Yes, I think I am. I am not
saying that Homer was a millenarian or anything of the sort. Achilles and the will of Zeus are poetic
images, symbolic representations of universal truths of human experience. As images, they bear an
analogical relation to reality, not a univocal one, and thus stand for something beyond themselves, which
they in some way embody.
of disorder from within. The other city is at war, surrounded by forces of armed men. The resemblance between this city and Troy is unmistakable. Both of them are beset by evils from without; both contain rich possessions which they are in danger of losing; both venture forth from the city to fight outside the walls; both are situated near a river, alongside which they fight battles with their enemy. The city on the shield is a poetic image, and thus not an exact reproduction but an oblique likeness, of Troy itself, the city at war. Thus, we might say that the first city represents the Greeks, who are threatened by disorder erupting from within, and the second city represents the Trojans, who are beset by destructive forces from without.

Following the pictures of the two cities, there are a number of scenes of farming, animal life, viticulture, shepherds, and dancing youth—of many dimensions of life. The dominant impression of these scenes is one of order and harmony; appropriately, many of the images are of human art, of various deliberate alterations of the natural world by human ingenuity. As far as these scenes are concerned, I think three things are especially significant. First, the scenes depict young men and women dancing, playing, and making music, a depiction which relates this final scene to the first city. Yet now, here in this last scene, there is no internal strife mentioned, so that although the orderly picture presented in the final scene is related to the orderly aspects of the first city in the first scene, the internal disorder is absent and the final scene presents only peace. A conversion or transformation seems to have occurred in the development of the city on the shield; the causes of disorder have been removed. Second, the sheer proportion of the description given to these scenes: they occupy half of the long passage narrating the making of the shield. And finally, these scenes of peace are placed in the final position in the passage,
and thus given additional special emphasis. It is worth noting that classical rhetoricians might have thought these points of organization served to interpret, at least in part, the material on the shield. That is to say, the large proportion of space, as well as the final positioning, given to the description of the peaceful city, would be arguments in themselves that Homer wants to emphasize the ultimate predominance of order over disorder in history, perhaps even in existence as a whole. We might pursue this line of thought and speculate that the harmonious city on the shield represents a possible order, even a future order. The city in this possible order will be at peace because it will possess all of the excellences of the older city, but the causes of disorder will have been removed. Thus this peaceful city will completely supersede those cities threatened by destructive forces within (the first city on the shield) and without (the second city on the shield).

Perhaps we could say that both the Achaean and the Trojan societies, along with their disorders, must decline and fall, to be replaced by a new order. This program of destruction and renewal is not to be taken literally, of course. Troy and the Achaeans, in the poem itself, are poetic images, not literal or historical instances, of the human community in general and of the ultimate failure of all human effort to establish order. Moreover, the peaceful city itself is an image, in turn, of the ultimate pattern of things, which Homer envisions as moving toward a peaceful end. It is not to be supposed that Homer thought a literal human city at peace, a perfect secular order, would appear in human history; but perhaps he imagined that at the end of human history, order would be restored and the human community would thus reflect the order in the cosmos; the political order would embody, or show forth, the metaphysical order which we see reflected in the great cosmic images described in the first place on the shield. On this
accounting, the cities and the scenes of human community represented on the shield of Achilles present an eschatological, not an historical, level of the significance of the action of the poem; in this respect, the *Iliad*, quite strangely, conforms to the biblical paradigm in which all of history is moving toward its consummation in a great city.

The shield of Achilles, then, is at the center of the poem and cannot be regarded as irrelevant embroidery. Its symbolism orders the meaning of the poem and reveals its deepest level. It is a poetic image within a poetic image which interprets the meaning of the work in which it is embedded. As we have seen, there are many features on the shield that connect its symbolism with the action of the rest of the poem, but one in particular is significant at this point in our analysis, namely, that the disorder in the first city depicted is caused by someone’s refusal to accept an offer of compensation for an offence. This event calls up the whole complex of forces, balances, actions and reactions, and tensions underlying human relations in the *Iliad*; it associates the shield with the moral order that obtains in the poem as a whole. At the center of this moral order is a kind of unwritten compact governing the relations among men which, in the terms of Eric Voegelin, requires that an offence against another’s man’s possessions or honor should be responded to with *cholos*, a reaction which in turn tends “to inflict damage on the transgressor, with the ultimate purpose of compelling formal compensation and recognition of the rightful relation between them.”¹¹ Disorder among men, and therefore suffering and death, can arise either from an initial offence or from an improper response to that offence, a *cholos* that exceeds its cause, or from a refusal to accept compensation offered by the offender. A failure to observe this customary order is characterized by

Homer as *ate*, a term which can be translated “blind delusion.” The misdeeds of the heroes in the *Iliad* are all caused by this blindness. Achilles and Agamemnon, as well as Achilles’ teacher Phoinix, blame their own actions, and those of others, on *ate*. Phoinix in particular is at pains to convince Achilles of the folly of his refusal of gifts from Agamemnon; but the other heroes, as well, when they assign a cause to their own misdeed or those of others, invariably speak of *ate*, whether the actual wrong is an act of lust, or thievery, or foolhardiness, or self-will, or some other kind.\(^\text{12}\) Indeed, the whole Trojan war, from this perspective, can be said to have its origin in *ate*, for it began when Paris stole another man’s wife, Helen, a heinous act properly responded to with an angry vengefulness by the Greeks that might have compelled the restoration of Helen, and therefore of order, but for some reason (perhaps due to the gods) did not. Right order among men depends on the observance of this moral order, and violations of it bring damage and destruction upon the human community. Hence both Troy and the Achaians, guilty of various forms of *ate*, suffer disaster: Troy is attacked by the Greeks, and countless Greeks die in battle, on account of someone’s blindness. Moreover, the fact that the *Iliad* begins with the same crime as that which started the war associates the disorder that has befallen the Trojans with that which has befallen the Greeks. As Eric Voegelin rightly points out, Homer begins his poem with “a deliberate parallel construction of the wrath of Achilles with the war against Troy. . . . The great war is caused by the abduction

\(^{12}\) *Ate* might be properly considered a generic or categorical term which includes a host of diverse human errors or misdeeds: lust, hard-heartedness, pride, covetousness, excessive wrath, self-assertion of the will against destiny, concern for personal honor over common good. The *Iliad* traces all these actions or attitudes to a single origin. *Ate* is a kind of capital vice in *Homer*, from which many evils proceed.
of Helen by Paris . . . . The wrath of Achilles is caused by Agamemnon’s taking of Briseis.”

The disorder in these human communities, thus, stems from the same cause.

The complex of forces here briefly described witnesses to the presence of a moral order in the *Iliad*. Whether this order is the handiwork of the gods is not a question for us here, but there is no doubt that men are subject to this order and that they suffer deleterious consequences if they violate it. The shield of Achilles indicates, as said above, that history moves from disorder toward order; it was said above also that it presents the eschatological significance of the poem; the shield looks to the future. Yet within the action of the poem itself, from our analysis of *ate*, can we discern also a movement from disorder to order at the moral level? Is there an image of the restoration of order within the pattern of the poem, in addition to that which the poem anticipates in the future? I think the encounter between Priam and Achilles provides an affirmative answer to that question. The important point in this scene, among many others, is that Achilles does not refuse but grants Priam’s request for the body of Hektor, and by doing so, instead of perpetuating disorder as he did earlier by refusing Agamemnon, he restores a kind of balance and rightness in the relations among men. The encounter presents the right way for men to relate to each other, in contrast to the wrong way presented in the opening book of the poem. The final scene, then, corrects the imbalance introduced by the opening scene, and resolves the tensions that have tightened and strained over the course of the poem.

From the standpoint, then, of the symbolism of the shield and the pattern of the moral action of the poem, Homer’s world does not appear to be one of aimlessly repetitive patterns of misery and glory, but one which makes a steady, albeit often

13 Voegelin, 83.
disrupted, advance toward an ultimate goal and ultimate restoration. Human life is not dependent on erratic and irrational forces beyond control. For Homer it has a shape and pattern created by deliberate human choices, and many, though not all, of the evils of human life originate from the root of blind delusion. Achilles’ myth of the two urns thus, we can now see, presents an ironic wisdom which Achilles himself believes but which we know from the pattern of experience and the symbolism presented in the poem does not account for all the facts. It makes no mention of *ate*, for one thing, and that is a significant omission in the light of the proportion of attention given to that moral phenomenon in the poem. Achilles’ sight is limited, for he cannot see the principle of understanding which operates in the Homeric vision. The sense of chaos and pessimism which overshadows the fresh and dew-like loveliness of so much of the poetry does not then bespeak a dark and terrible truth underpinning the outlook of the poem. It does reflect, however, the tragic experience embodied in the poem, but this painful tragedy is set in the context of a world in which design and order are visible.\(^\text{14}\)

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\(^\text{14}\) I find myself happily confirmed in this view by Charles Norris Cochrane, whose analysis of Homer in *Christianity and Classical Culture* is excellent (419-422). He finds in Homer a search for a principle of understanding which will account for all the facts of existence and which will satisfy a desire to understand the whole, though only aesthetically through the constructs of poetry and not intellectually through the critical concepts of philosophy.
Bibliography


