

Reading Guide

The Disordered Soul: Thémis and PTSD

Readings for 27 January 2011

READINGS (REQUIRED)

[A] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character*. Introduction, Chapters 1, 2, 11 & Conclusion, pp. xiii-xxiii, 3-38, 183-209.

[B] Homer, *The Iliad*. Selections. (V*2)

[C] Stanley Milgram, "Behavioral study of obedience." *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 67 (1963), pp. 371-378, reprinted in Elliot Aronson, ed. *The Social Animal*, pp. 26-40. (V*2)

READINGS (SUPPLEMENTARY)

[A*] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*. Chapters 3, 5 and 7. (Or any of the other chapters whose contents capture your interest.)

[A] Jonathan Shay, *Achilles in Vietnam*, Introduction, Chapters 1, 2 & 11, pp. xiii-38, 183-194.

Background

Jonathan Shay is psychiatrist at the Department of Veteran Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston who works with Vietnam veterans suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). In 2007, he was awarded a MacArthur "Genius" Fellowship.

As he was working with Vietnam veterans, Shay noticed striking parallels between their experience, and those described by Homer in *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* some 2500 years ago. This led to two extraordinary works: *Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character* (1994) and *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming* (2002). The first examines the experience of war itself; the second looks at the experience of returning from war.

The books have gained wide praise across the political spectrum: from pacifists and military leaders, and from the Left and the Right. (For example, the foreword to *Odysseus in America* was co-authored by Senators John McCain (R) and Max Cleland (D), both Vietnam veterans.)

Reading *Achilles in Vietnam* is a powerful experience. Shay insists that "the reader must respond *emotionally* to the reality of combat danger in order to make *rational* sense of the injury inflicted" (p. 11.) I encourage you to allow yourself to respond in these ways, and – in addition to the required chapters – to read as much of the book as your schedule allows.

Terms, Concepts and Examples

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following terms and concepts and examples:

Terms and Concepts: post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD); berserk/berserking; *thémis*; fairness assumption, fiduciary assumption; *mênis*; moral luck

Examples: opening composite story describing PTSD (in Introduction); numerous wartime examples in each of the chapters; story of Briséis; story of Pátroklos

Reading Questions

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) What does Shay mean by “betrayal of [the] moral order” (p. 3)? What does he see as the psychological consequences of such betrayal?
- (2) In what ways can combat trauma “destroy the capacity for social trust” (p. 33)? What are some examples that Shay gives of this phenomenon?
- (3) What role does Shay think narrative can play in the healing process?
- (4) How does Shay’s writing provide an implicit answer to Glaucon’s challenge

[B] Homer, *The Iliad*, selections

Background

Homer’s *Iliad* (8th or 9th century BCE) is one of the foundational texts of the Western literary tradition. Written in Homeric Greek, it is an epic poem of some 15,000 lines which describes the final weeks of the Trojan War, focusing on the experiences both of the Greeks (including Agamemnon, Achilles and Odysseus) and the Trojans (including Hektor, Paris and Priam).

For those of you who have not read the text before, it may be difficult to engage with without context. I encourage you to read as much of Book I as you are able, using whichever of the two translations* you prefer at the wonderful Perseus Project:

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/searchresults?q=iliad>. Alternatively, you may make use of whatever translation you (or your roommate, or your neighbor, or the library) has handy.

Reed College’s Humanities program has produced a very nice guide to the *Iliad* which can be found at <http://academic.reed.edu/humanities/110Tech/Iliad.html>. The guide includes a useful outline, which can be found at: <http://academic.reed.edu/humanities/110Tech/Iliad.Outline.html>

* Both the 1898 translation by Samuel Butler

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0217> and the 1924 translation by A.T. Murray

<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:1999.01.0134> are highly readable.

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

Please read through Book I, just to get a sense of what the work is like.

Alternatively/additionally, you may use the extraordinary “Table of Contents” function on the Perseus Project website to look at the context for any or all of the quotations that Shay provides. (For example, you can look up the context for the quotation at the bottom of Shay’s page 5 (1:189) by going to “Scroll 1” “lines 160-199” (Butler translation) or “Book 1” “lines 172-205” (Murray translation.))

Reading Questions

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

(1) In what ways do the passages that you are reading illustrate Shay’s claims?

[C] **Stanley Milgram, “Behavioral study of obedience.”** *Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology*, Vol. 67 (1963), pp. 371-378, reprinted in Elliot Aronson, ed. *The Social Animal*, pp. 26-40. (V*2)

Background

Stanley Milgram (1933-1984) was a social psychologist who taught at Yale, Harvard and CUNY. The article we are reading describes a series of experiments he conducted in the early 1960s in an attempt to understand the psychology behind Nazi collaboration during the Holocaust.

The experiments described in this article were conducted in the basement of what is now Linsly-Chittenden Hall.

It is difficult to overstate the influence that this article – and the subsequent research that Milgram conducted using this paradigm – has had. If you are interested in reading more about these findings, you may want to look at Milgram’s book-length treatment of the topic: *Obedience to Authority: An Experimental View* (1974).

Passages to focus on/passages to skim

Please read this paper in its entirety. Make sure that you understand the Method and Results, and give special attention to the Discussion section.

Terms, Concepts and Examples

Be sure that you understand and are able to distinguish among the following terms and concepts and examples:

Terms and Concepts: obedience/defiance

Examples: Milgram experimental setup

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Reading Questions

As you read through the selection, keep in mind the following questions:

- (1) What was the structure of Milgram's experiment? What behaviors did respondents predict would occur? What behaviors actually occurred?
- (2) What sorts of reactions did subjects have as they participated in the experiment? What do you think this shows? How does it connect to some of the observations made by Jonathan Shay?

[Posted 1/22/11]