

# Colby



Colby Quarterly

---

Volume 38  
Issue 1 *March*

Article 4

---

March 2002

## Dying is Hard to Do

Jenny Strauss Clay

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.colby.edu/cq>

---

### Recommended Citation

Colby Quarterly, Volume 38, no.1, March 2002, p. 7-16

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Digital Commons @ Colby. It has been accepted for inclusion in Colby Quarterly by an authorized editor of Digital Commons @ Colby.

## *Dying is Hard To Do*

By JENNY STRAUSS CLAY

In memoriam September 11, 2001

BOOK 22 OF THE *Iliad* has only one action: the death of Hector, its preparation, and its immediate aftermath. This episode constitutes the last duel and battlefield death in the poem and thus forms the culmination of all the deaths that have preceded it. As such, it rehearses almost every motif and theme from the major confrontations encountered elsewhere in the *Iliad*; and at the same time it expands, varies, and deepens all those previous duels. Nevertheless, it is unique among all the books of the *Iliad* in its focus on the inner life of one man. Indeed, Hector is summarily and conventionally dispatched by Achilles;<sup>1</sup> the actual killing of the Trojan prince forms an anticlimax to the far greater drama that precedes it, one that more than any other defines the *Iliad's* sense of heroism. For according to the *Iliad*, being a hero is not constituted by what is usually thought of as bravery, that is fearlessness. Rather, heroism means finally being stripped of all illusion, of all hope, and looking death in the face and being prepared to die. In Book 22, Homer reveals how hard it is to make that choice. Step by step, Hector is stripped bare until his naked humanity makes the final gesture by accepting and embracing his own death.

The bulk of Hector's decision making is embedded in a lengthy monologue whose typology has been studied by Fenik.<sup>2</sup> All four such Iliadic type speeches, opening with the phrase ὦ μοι ἐγών, occur when a single warrior faces unequal odds; in the ensuing monologue he considers the possible alternatives of retreat or confrontation. The line ἀλλὰ τίη μοι ταῦτα φίλος διελέξετο θυμός ("but why does my heart debate these matters?") introduces the final decision whether to flee or to make a stand. A simile involving an animal against a man usually precedes the successful escape of the warrior. Fenik's comparison of these "basic ingredients" reveals "the interplay of typology and variation" as well as "the richness and subtlety of the *Iliad's* character drawing."<sup>3</sup> In each case, the outcome varies: Odysseus does indeed escape, but only after dispatching a good number of Trojans and being

1. Richardson (1993) 105: "The fight is remarkably brief. . . . Its brevity contrasts with the slowness of the build-up."

2. Fenik (1978) 68-90. Cf. Schadewaldt (1965) 300-01. Fenik argues, rightly, I think, that these speeches demonstrate genuine decision making on the part of Homeric characters.

3. Fenik (1978) 71.

wounded (11.404-88); Menelaos, on the other hand, first retreats, but calls for reinforcements to help him to rescue the body of Patroclus (17.91-122). Agenor's soliloquy at the very end of Book 21 (21.553-70) offers what Fenik calls "an anticipatory doublet"<sup>4</sup> of Hector's speech, which follows less than two hundred lines later. Like Hector, Agenor contemplates the choice between attempting to flee to the safety of the walls or running off across the plain toward Ida. His speech also contains elements of fantasy as he imagines his escape ("And in the evening, I would wash off the sweat in the river and refreshed, I would make my way home toward Ilion...."), but he soon comes to the realization that such fantasies will not be fulfilled: either way, swift-footed Achilles will catch him. As Agenor prepares to fight, however, at the last minute Apollo rescues him from certain death by leading Achilles on a wild goose chase. The divine intervention that allows Agenor to escape stands in bitter contrast to the divine deception and abandonment practiced on Hector. Finally, in contrast to all the monologue sequences that precede it, the outcome in Hector's case is different: he does not escape.<sup>5</sup>

For two hundred lines the poet explores the mental processes of the doomed hero (22.90-305). That Homer should lavish his attention on this particular character rather than another is not fortuitous: Achilles has long since accepted his death; Sarpedon received a special dispensation post-mortem because he was Zeus' son; and poor Patroklos never knew what hit him. To be sure, every warrior must in some sense confront the possibility of dying each time he enters the fray, but only with Hector does the poet focus on the hero's conscious choice. In interpreting this scene, commentators have sometimes talked about Hector's tragic flaw, his *hybris*, his fatal sense of shame, and his cruel deception by the gods.<sup>6</sup> However valid these terms may be, they seem to me to miss something essential: the dynamic movement of the episode, which through a series of speeches and actions, on both the divine and the human plane, portrays and dramatizes Hector's relentless psychological progress toward his own death. Let us trace that movement.

While the Trojans flee into the city before Achilles' onslaught "like fawns," "a fateful doom bound Hector to remain there before Ilion by the Skaian gates." For almost two books, Apollo has kept Hector from Achilles. Shortly before, the god had diverted Achilles with a trick, so that the rest of the Trojans could make good their escape within the walls. Hector alone is left outside. First Priam, then Hecuba, beg him to come into the safety of the walls. Neither their arguments on behalf of the city and the family nor their moving appeals for pity succeed in persuading Hector, "but he waited as

4. Fenik (1978) 79.

5. Fenik (1978) 83 points out another anomaly in the Hector passage: elsewhere the ennobling simile comes right after the hero makes his decision, whereas Hector's occurs *before* his monologue and it involves an animal not otherwise known for its courage: a snake. See below, p. 9.

6. For example, Redfield (1975) 109, for whom Hector is "the true tragic hero of the poem." "Hector's story ... is the story of a man somewhat better than ourselves who falls through his own error;" de Romilly (1997) esp. 99-105 and 121. On the scene as a whole, see also Schadewaldt (1965) 295-323 and Edwards (1987) 287-300.

gigantic Achilles came nearer” (92). Achilles’ approach is seen through Hector’s eyes.<sup>7</sup> In fact, much of the emotional power of this episode derives from our visualizing it through Hector’s perspective.

A strange simile describes the waiting Hector: he resembles a snake, who has fed on “evil drugs” that arouse him to dreadful fury, lying in wait coiled near his lair.<sup>8</sup> On the face of it, a serpent is not generally considered a very courageous beast nor does confronting it demand great courage.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, the repeated mention of the nearby lair emphasizes the proximity of escape and safety within the walls for Hector,<sup>10</sup> while the poison the snake has eaten and the rage it inspires bring out not only the menacing character of the serpent, but also its imminent death.<sup>11</sup> Hector may still be deadly, but he is also dying.

Alone before Troy and ignoring the pleas of his parents, Hector first reflects on his own recklessness in rejecting the advice of Polydamas who had warned him to bring the Trojans into the city under cover of darkness as soon as Achilles returned to battle:

ὦ μοι ἐγών, εἰ μὲν κε πύλας καὶ τείχεα δύω,  
Πουλυδάμας μοι πρῶτος ἐλεγχεῖν ἀναθήσει,  
ὅς μ' ἐκέλευε Τρωσὶ ποτὶ πτόλιν ἠγήσασθαι  
νύχθ' ὑπο τήνδ' ὀλοήν ὅτε τ' ὤρετο δῖος Ἀχιλλεύς.  
ἀλλ' ἐγὼ οὐ πιθόμην· ἦ τ' ἂν πολὺ κέρδιον ἦεν.  
νῦν δ' ἐπεὶ ὤλεσα λαὸν ἀτασθαλίῃσιν ἐμῆσιν,  
αἰδέομαι Τρῶας καὶ Τρωάδας ἔλκεσιπέπλους,  
μὴ ποτὲ τις εἴπησι κακώτερος ἄλλος ἐμεῖο·  
Ἔκτωρ ἦφι βίηφι πιθήσας ὤλεσε λαόν.  
ὥς ἐρέουσιν· ἐμοὶ δὲ τότε ἂν πολὺ κέρδιον εἶη  
ἄντην ἢ Ἀχιλῆα κατακτείναντα νέεσθαι,  
ἢ ἐκεν αὐτῷ ὀλέσθαι εὐκλειῶς πρὸ πόλης.

Alas, if I should enter the gates and walls,  
Polydamas will be the first to heap abuse upon me,  
he who urged me to lead the Trojans toward the city  
during this cursed night when shining Achilles rose up.  
Now since I have recklessly brought destruction upon my army,  
I am ashamed to face the Trojan men and the women in their trailing robes,  
in case someday someone who is my inferior should say:  
“Hector, putting his faith in his own strength and might, destroyed his army.”  
So they will say. Better by far then for me  
either after killing Achilles face to face to return home,  
or to be killed by him before the city with my good fame.  
(22.99-110)

7. Both the emotion fraught *πελώριον* and the spatial deixis of *ἄσσοι ἰόντα* reveal the angle of vision. Cf. De Jong (1987) 273, n. 84, who also notes that “during the time of Hector’s monologue he [Achilles] has come close enough (131: *σχεδόν*) for him [Hector] to discern details: Achilles’ helmet and especially his fearful Pelian spear.”

8. Oddly, Fränkel (1977) 69 supplies the snake with a brood—that it is protecting? Schadewaldt (1965) 300 notes the simile’s ambiguous character, which mirrors the irresolution of Hector that surfaces more clearly in his soliloquy.

9. Cf. 3. 33-37, where Paris starts in fright at the approach of Menelaos.

10. Leaf (1900-1902) 2, 437 notes: “a snake under the circumstances would certainly prefer to retire into the hole.” So would Hector.

11. Commentators generally refer to the belief—probably derived from this very passage—that snakes acquired their poison from eating poisonous herbs. They do not comment on the possible effects of the poison on the serpent itself.

How should we interpret Hector's reflections here? In Book 6, Hector had formulated his sense of shame before the Trojans with a similar line (22.105 = 6.442), but the situation was quite different. There, his wife had urged him to stay within the Trojan walls and make a stand; Hector rejected her plea because he would appear to be a cowardly shirker if he remained. He must go out into the battlefield to fight in the forefront. Here the situation is inverted: Hector, the only Trojan still remaining outside the city, refuses to return for fear of abuse from his inferiors and out of shame for his overconfidence and miscalculation. Many critics have seen Hector as overly concerned with his reputation; others, that all of Homer's characters are equally obsessed. But there is a deeper contradiction: Priam has already made the obvious case that the salvation of Troy and its people as well as of his family depends on Hector's survival. The old king's gruesome description of his own death and mutilation vividly demonstrated Hector's obligations to all those who depend upon him and renders the hero's present feelings of shame and remorse shallow in comparison. The possible abuse by his inferiors for an understandable error of judgment would not seem to override the legitimate claims of his community.<sup>12</sup> Yet Adkins claims that the two "situations are treated in precisely the same manner"<sup>13</sup> because for Homer results rather than intentions count. But in fact, the outcome of Hector's reflections on *aidôs* in Book 6 and in Book 22 leads to different conclusions, to different results, one might say. While in the earlier passage Hector returns to battle, in Book 22, despite the apparent bravado of his words ("for me it would be far better either to return home having killed Achilles face to face, or to die gloriously before the city," 108-10), he does not confront his adversary. Apparently, the argument from *aidôs* is insufficient—as Hector's subsequent flight attests. Homer here presents the first of several instances of flawed reasoning on the part of his hero that serve to throw his final choice into relief. Significantly, when Hector is finally prepared for death, thoughts of disgrace and failure play no role.

Abruptly, Hector's monologue now takes an unexpected turn as he imagines another option, which will turn out not only more problematic than the last, but also contradicts it. Hector begins by fantasizing about the possibility of his disarming himself and offering to make a deal with Achilles: let Helen and her belongings be returned to the Atreidai, while the rest of the Greeks divide up all the wealth of Troy with nothing held back.<sup>14</sup> Hector's musings recall another episode from a previous book: Lykaon's supplication (21.64-120), which itself forms the climax of a series of such rejected entreaties. But more important for evaluating Hector's state of mind is the echo of Book 3 where Paris and Menelaos fight a duel intended to decide the fate of Helen and thereby bring the war to an end.

12. The bT scholiast on line 99 notes that the passage "reveals what an evil *philotimia* can be; for Hector perishes because he doesn't want to hear himself called base by an inferior. Although the reasoning arises from a noble intention, it is senseless. For he wanted to cure one error by another."

13. Adkins (1960) 48.

14. Cf. 18.511-12, of the city under siege on Achilles' shield. Schadewaldt (1965) 302 observes that this lengthy sentence with its piling up of details "ist eine Art Flucht der Seele noch vor der Flucht um die Mauern Trojas."

It has long been recognized that this duel between the husband and the seducer logically belongs to an early phase of the conflict, but that Homer—with some awkwardness—inserted it there so that his poem, ostensibly limited to Achilles' wrath, might in fact comprehend the whole of the Trojan War. Hector's reflections are thus not only untimely, they also ignore the whole course of the war during which the issue of Helen has been transcended. Finally, his reference to the *gerousios horkos* harks back to the oath that preceded the duel in Book 3 and its subsequent breaking. Of course, Hector quickly recognizes the folly of such a deal. When he has disarmed, Achilles will kill him on the spot like a woman. The feminine image is further developed in Hector's realizing the absurdity of his hope; between him and Achilles, there can be no idle prattle such as that between a youth and a maid. In evoking such an everyday peaceful activity *in extremis* and in his repetition of the phrase "youth and maid," Hector lingers over this harmless but charming activity far removed from his present situation.<sup>15</sup> It belongs to another world, a world that Hector will never see again. Hector's monologue concludes with the decision to face his opponent, "so that we may see to which of us the Olympian may hand the boast." But Hector is not yet "absolute for death."

As previously, the hero's brave words are just that. Achilles approaches, in Hector's eyes, the very image of the war god, brandishing the Pelian ash spear and the armor fashioned by Hephaestus, gleaming like blazing fire and the rising sun—all elements emphasizing Achilles' superhuman status and the disparity between the combatants. Hector runs.<sup>16</sup> Critics have been astonished by Hector's loss of nerve and have even offered excuses for his conduct.<sup>17</sup> But Hector's flight is merely the physical manifestation of what has already emerged from his words: he is not yet ready to die. Confronted by a godlike opponent who resembles nothing so much as the elemental forces of nature, Hector runs and thereby demonstrates his humanity.

Homer expands the pursuit itself with several devices that function not only to increase suspense but also to extend the narrative time required by the chase. The fig tree the runners pass is not merely an arbitrary feature of the landscape but recalls Andromache's vain attempt to persuade her husband to defend Troy from within by mustering his forces at the most vulnerable point of the city walls by the fig tree (6. 433).<sup>18</sup> Not only does it remind us of that poignant moment, the last time husband and wife see each other alive, but it also serves to remind us of a lost opportunity and an alternate strategy, now no longer possible.

15. Repetition seems to be a characteristic of Hector's speech. Cf. ὤλεσα λαόν (22.104) and ὤλεσε λαόν (22.107) and 20.371-72.

16. Note the word play τρόμος, τρέσε, of Hector and the simile in which he is compared to a τρήρωνα πέλειαν (22.136-43).

17. Schadewaldt (1965) 304-06, while believing that Hector's flight is Homer's invention, speaks of Hector's weakness and points out that many of the heroes—even Achilles—have their weak moments. But he overlooks the essential point: none decides to stand firm and then runs away.

18. The fig tree is also mentioned in 11.167 as a landmark in Agamemnon's attack on Troy.

Like the earlier wistful reference to lovers' converse, the digression describing the springs in which the Trojan women used to do their laundry alludes to former domesticity "before, when there was peace, before the sons of the Achaeans came."<sup>19</sup> The scenery of Troy is seen, or as narratologists might say, focalized, through Hector's eyes. For him, the well-known landscape bespeaks familial attachments and domestic chores.

Similes too punctuate the action, some quite conventional like the pursuit of hawk and dove (139-42) and the hound's relentless tracking of a fawn (189-93); in both cases Achilles is the pursuer and Hector his hapless prey. But there is also the contrasting image that underlines the difference between an athletic contest for a prize and this grim race for Hector's life, with the divine audience playing the role of sports fans (159-65).<sup>20</sup> The series culminates in the unique nightmare simile (199-201), which again is seen from Hector's perspective: it is Hector's nightmare.<sup>21</sup> For while the image could apply to both the pursuer and the pursued, our focus throughout the scene has been on Hector's inner state whereas Achilles is presented externally as he appears to Hector.

Two divine scenes interrupt the pursuit, both of which seem simultaneously superfluous and perfunctory. First, as the gods are observing the mortal race, Zeus pities Hector and asks whether they should save the man who has shown such extraordinary piety toward them. The scene recalls the earlier episode of Sarpedon, and Athena here responds with the same words Hera used there in answer to Zeus' proposal (22.179-81 = 16.441-43). But Hector is no Sarpedon, nor does he share the latter's kinship with Zeus nor, for that matter, Achilles' connection to his goddess mother. The parallelism of the two scenes highlights their different circumstances and serves to underline Hector's mortality. While Achilles has already long ago chosen death, and Patroklos—literally—never knew what hit him, Hector must come to the point where he chooses, or at least resigns himself to, his own death. Through Hector, Homer makes us share in the grim struggle over that decision, a struggle grounded on a profound love of life and a deep understanding of human mortality.

On the divine level, Zeus responds to Athena's indignation: "Cheer up, dear child, I'm not speaking in dead earnest." This is very strange. Zeus seems to declare that he does not take his own proposal seriously.<sup>22</sup> Then why does he make it? Just a very tasteless joke? No, in his characteristic way, Homer *shows* us rather than merely describing for us the hopelessness of

19. Is the repetition of πρὶν at line 156 characteristic of Hector's style of speech? But cf. 9.403.

20. On the gods as audiences to human suffering, see Griffin (1980) 179-204.

21. Hector is the subject of both the line that precedes the simile and the one that comes after. The obsessive repetition of δύναται φεύγοντα διώκειν...δύναται ὑποφεύγειν...διώκειν...δύνατο is also characteristic of Hector's thought pattern. Leaf (1902) 2, 617, thinks the lines are a later addition. Cf. Edwards (1987) 294: "the fourth simile takes us into Hector's mind."

22. Richardson (1993) 126 calls Zeus' words "very casual." But compare *Il.* 8.39-40 where Zeus addresses the same words to Athena; there, however, he is smiling.

Hector's situation.<sup>23</sup> But, even so, on the human level, Hector has not yet embraced his fate; as his actions show, he is still not ready to die.

ὄσάκι δ' ὀρμήσειε πυλάων Δαρδανιάων  
 ἀντίον ἀΐσασθαι ἐυδήτους ὑπὸ πύργους,  
 εἴ πῶς οἱ καθύπερθεν ἀλάλοικεν βελέεσσι,  
 τοσσάκι μιν προπάροιθεν ἀποστρέψασκε παραφθᾶς  
 πρὸς πεδίον· αὐτὸς δὲ ποτὶ πτόλιος πέτετ' αἰεῖ.

As often as he made a rush for the Dardanian gates,  
 darting closer under the well-built towers—  
 if somehow underneath them they might protect him from the missiles—  
 so often did [Achilles] cut him off and make him turn  
 toward the plain; but [Hector] for his part always flew toward the city.  
 (22.194-98)

As Hector rounds the springs a fourth and last time, Zeus extends his golden scales, an act that merely seals and makes manifest Hector's fate that has already been determined. Then, with chilling rapidity, Apollo departs and Athena takes the stage. First instructing Achilles to catch his breath,<sup>24</sup> the goddess declares that she will persuade Hector to stand and fight his opponent face to face. What she proceeds to do, however, cannot by any stretch of the imagination be considered an instance of persuasion.<sup>25</sup> The poet himself calls it κερδοσύνη, a sneaky ploy. In addition to seeming gratuitously cruel—which perhaps should not shock us—Athena's actions appear unnecessarily complicated. The sudden epiphany of his brother restores Hector's connection with the living. With bitter irony, the false Deiphobus encourages his brother to be “unsparing of his spear”<sup>26</sup>—which will leave Hector naked to his enemy. Yet the goddess's lethal game of hide and seek has a function: it renders visible through dramatic action the state of Hector's soul.<sup>27</sup>

Even now, so late in the game, Hector has not yet confronted his impending death. Even now, he still nurtures a vestigial and perhaps instinctual hope of success: ἔλοιμί κεν, ἢ κεν ἀλοίην (22.253). The point of the Deiphobus episode will be first to arouse that hope and then to dramatize its shattering, thus ending Hector's inner struggle and bringing him to a clear acceptance of his death. Nowhere else does Homer *show* us how hard it is to look death in the face. In the guise of Deiphobus, Athena gives Hector the courage to stand and fight. Yet even now he attempts to make a deal with his arch enemy: if he should manage to kill Achilles, he will return the body for burial. Then he

23. Richardson (1993) 126: “this debate . . . serve[s] the dramatic function of reenacting for us the process of divine decision which seals Hector's doom, just as the weighing of the fates (208-13) gives this a final, visual expression.” Cf. Reucher (1983) 402.

24. Reminiscent of the beginning of the book where the Trojans do the same after retreating within the walls 22.1-3. But here the goddess's almost maternal solicitude for Achilles strikes us as grotesquely unfair; she will deliver Hector into Achilles' hands on a silver platter.

25. We can compare Athena in Book 1, where she benevolently persuades Achilles to restrain himself from killing Agamemnon. The bT scholia at 22.231 cite Apollo's deception of Patroclus (16. 798-804) as a parallel.

26. φειδωλή at 22.244 is a *hapax*.

27. Homer's way of making visible and dramatizing an internal psychological process is quite different from the view of the Homeric gods, espoused by Snell, Dodds, et al., as projections of psychic activity.



adds rather lamely (258), almost as an afterthought: "And you do likewise." Not only does Hector's offer foreshadow the mutilation of his own corpse as well as its final burial, it also reveals that he still has some vestige of hope, be it only for the treatment of his dead body. Just as the earlier part of Hector's speech recalled the duel of Book 3, so his offer here reminds us of the contest he proposed in Book 7 (lines 77-85). That duel was a kind of game, a demonstration match on which nothing depended, and no one got hurt. There, in reverse order, Hector laid out the ground rules: if he should be defeated, the victor must return his body to the Trojans for burial (77-80); but a confident Hector then proceeded to elaborate boastfully on the consequences of his own victory. Here, however, his laconic phrase betrays a wish that he must know will not be fulfilled.

Brutally rejecting Hector's plea, Achilles asserts the impossibility of oaths or agreements between them; just like men and wolves or wolves and sheep, they are natural enemies; they belong to different species who share no common ground and certainly no common humanity. There is, he declares, no escape for Hector. The duel, long delayed, finally begins. Achilles hurls his spear first; Hector ducks. Unnoticed by Hector, Athena returns the spear to Achilles. This outrageous unfairness on the part of the goddess has scandalized many readers.<sup>28</sup> But a comparison with a similar passage highlights what is truly unusual here. In Book 20 (318-25) Poseidon rescued Aeneas under a covering of mist from Achilles' spear thrust and returned the latter's spear. When the mist dissipated, Achilles was astonished at Aeneas' vanishing act and the reappearance of his spear before his feet (20.344-52). Recognizing the action of a god and the pointlessness of continuing, Achilles abandons his pursuit of Aeneas. In Book 22, however, the poet explicitly tells us that Hector did *not* notice what had happened to Achilles' spear. Had Hector done so, he too would have recognized the intervention of a god and, presumably, the hopelessness of his situation. But Homer continues to retard and manipulate that moment of truth so that Hector's final realization arises not from his perceiving the gods' support for his enemy, but from the crushing recognition of the gods' abandonment. Moreover, it allows Hector his last shred of hope.

Buoyed by Achilles' apparent loss of his spear, Hector mocks his opponent for declaring victory prematurely; now it is Achilles' turn to avoid the spear thrust. Should he succeed in burying it in Achilles' flesh, "then the war would become more bearable for the Trojans, if you perished." The mention of Troy, even if only in the form of a wish, still expresses his slender link to his community. Now Hector's own weapon bounces off Achilles' shield uselessly out of reach. But Hector's moment of truth comes only after calling to his brother to give him a replacement spear and realizing that he "was not near to him at all":

28. See Schadewaldt (1965) 314-18.

Ἔκτωρ δ' ἔγνω ἦσιν ἐνὶ φρεσὶ φώνησέν τε·  
ὦ πρόποι ἦ μάλα δὴ με θεοὶ θάνατον δὲ κάλεσσαν·

Then Hector knew in his heart and spoke:

“Alas, for sure now the gods are summoning me to my death.”  
(22.296-97)

The line recalls one from Book 16, but again the difference is instructive. There, addressing Patroklos at the height of his deadly rampage right before a bare enumeration—without commentary or epithets—of nine fallen Trojans, the poet asks:

ἐνθα τίνα πρῶτον τίνα δ' ὕστατον ἐξενάριξας,  
Πατρόκλεις, ὅτε δὴ σε θεοὶ θάνατον δὲ κάλεσσαν;

Then who was the first and who the last whom you slaughtered,  
Patroklos, when the gods summoned you to your death?

(16.692-93)

The effect here is deeply ironic; at the moment of what is apparently Patroklos' triumphant attack on Ilium, Homer insists on his impending death. Patroklos' total *lack* of awareness of the fate barreling down on him gives the line its high pathos. In our passage, however, the reverse is true, for here, totally isolated, Hector fully comprehends, and for the first time fully confronts, the certain end that awaits him. After all the innumerable delays, stripped of false hopes and self-delusions, with neither fear of dishonor or the disgrace of failure nor vain hopes of success, Hector accepts his death without illusions:

μὴ μὰν ἀσπουδί γε καὶ ἀκλειῶς ἀπολοίμην,  
ἀλλὰ μέγα ῥέξας τι καὶ ἐσσομένοισι πυθέσθαι.

Let me not die, by God, bereft of striving and glory,  
but in accomplishing some great deed, even one for future generations  
to hear of.

(22.304-05)

The full awareness of mortality is also the moment of the awareness of *kleos*, the sole means of transcending death. Now the poet, who had previously likened Hector to a snake, a dove, or a young deer, elevates him to an eagle pouncing on his prey as he emerges from dark clouds—the dark clouds of indecision and vacillation, from confusion to clarity—and to heroic status.<sup>29</sup>

And then something remarkable happens. Throughout this entire episode, as Edwards remarks, “Achilles is seen only through Hector’s eyes, inscrutable and inhuman.”<sup>30</sup> Now as Achilles, armed with the shield and helmet wrought by Hephaestus, closes in for the kill, his approach is again focalized from the perspective of the doomed hero. In the last of a sequence of similes that link

29. This simile inverts the earlier one (139-42) in which the hawk pursues the dove.

30. Edwards (1987) 294.

Achilles to baleful light or fire,<sup>31</sup> the gleam from Achilles' spear point is likened—paradoxically—to Hesperus, the most beautiful of all the stars at night (318). For Hector, I submit, the instrument of his death in the hands of his deadly, pitiless adversary has become transformed into something serenely beautiful.<sup>32</sup> Likewise, at this brutal, long delayed, fatal moment, the frailty, vulnerability, and courage of Homer's most humane character are transformed into the beauty and eternal glory that only epic can confer.\*

31. Achilles, through the eyes of Priam, is likened to Sirius "who brings fevers to wretched mortals"(22.25-32); to Hector, Achilles appears like fire or the rising sun (22.135).

32. For the sentiment, cf. Pindar, *Pythian* 8.95-97.

\* Translations are by the author.