The Warrior Ethos

Military Culture and the War on Terror

Christopher Coker

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In *The Warrior Ethos*, Christopher Coker discusses the concept of warriors and war, covering warrior culture from ancient Greece to the Iraq War, taking in philosophy, psychology, political thought, culture and news media.

In modern Western society, warriors face three different challenges. The first is that the warrior myth, as embodied by Achilles, no longer holds as great a resonance as it once did. Western societies are increasingly sceptical of the warrior's existential pursuit of glory or reputation, and, more worryingly, the willingness to sacrifice oneself, to go beyond the call of duty. Warriors are also struggling with the increasingly technological basis of war. Not only is the warrior becoming distinctly out of sorts with society's post-modern sensibilities, but the future battlefield environment is becoming an unforgiving one.

In concluding, the author argues that, even though it has declined, the warrior ethos which has emerged in the Western world over the centuries is as important as ever before, that warriors do still exist and that the warrior code remains essential for psychological, humanitarian and political reasons. He also makes a clear statement of why those who target civilians instead of other soldiers do not qualify as 'warriors'. Finally, Professor Coker analyses the problems within our culture that prevent us from valuing warriors, and argues that this culture is flawed, and that warriors are a special group who provide morality in war.

This thought-provoking book will be of great interest to all students of military history, strategy, military sociology and war studies.

Christopher Coker is Professor of International Relations at the London School of Economics. His most recent books include *The Future of War* (2005), *Waging War Without Warriors* (2005) and *Humane Warfare* (2001).

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‘Despite the impossibility of physically detecting the soul, its existence is proven by its tangible reflection in acts and thoughts. So with war, beyond its physical aspect of armed hosts there hovers an impalpable something which dominates the material . . . to search for this something we should seek it in a manner analogous to our search for the soul.’

(George Patton, cited in James Hillman, *A Terrible Love of War*, London: Penguin, 2004, p. 80)

‘Belief consists in accepting the affirmations of the soul; unbelief in denying them.’

(Emerson)

Contents

Preface

There is no end to our fascination with military history in the Anglo-American world. The military history sections of the major bookstores grow exponentially every year. Perhaps, because we live in post-heroic societies we show an unhealthy interest in war. Unhealthy or not we display an equal interest in warriors – the men who were once admired as role models in society. We admire them much less than we did, which is a mark, perhaps, of our ambivalence towards war itself. Few of us, even in the military, dare confess to loving war, or to finding it noble, let alone glorious. Yet there's no doubt that the warriors we still produce join the profession precisely because of the glory, and many of them engage in noble acts.

Some years ago I wrote a book, *War Without Warriors*, which argued that the increasing instrumentalisation of war (which the United States had led, if not pioneered) was making warriors as a class increasingly redundant. Since it was published, warriors have come to hold centre stage in the war on terror. Special forces are increasing in numbers all the time. Warriors are back in the news. I still wonder, though, whether they can survive long into the twenty-first century, especially in the light of the three challenges I identify in this book.

I think it important, nevertheless, that they should. That we will continue to fight war I have no doubt. What keeps war an ethical activity is the warrior ethos. Some of my readers may think this book is an unqualified encomium to a dying class. Others may think I have not done justice to them. I have written this book in the hope that those serving in the military or teaching in military colleges will find that many of my arguments ring true. If so I will have succeeded; if not I won't.

I am grateful to some of my Ph.D. students whose work I have benefited greatly from reading, chief among them Rune Henriksen. I am also grateful to my anonymous reviewers for making this hopefully a better book than it would otherwise have been. Anonymous reviewers are like Unknown Soldiers – we all need them, but they pass by in the night largely unacknowledged. With a few exceptions I have followed their advice as to the best ways to improve this work. The faults that remain are mine alone.

Christopher Coker
LSE, August 2006

1 The unhappy warrior

A few years ago I found myself involved in a panel discussion at the London Barbican Centre. We were discussing 'War and the Arts'. At one point a young woman from the audience, perhaps provoked by my undisguised admiration for Homer's *Iliad*, was moved to ask: 'Wasn't Homer a militarist?' I asked her why she thought so. 'Doesn't Achilles like war too much?'

I knew what she meant. To a generation whose sensibilities have been formed, not by Homer and his many imitators but by the Great War poets such as Wilfred Owen and Siegfried Sassoon, the *Iliad* is apt to be read as an unthinking acceptance of the warrior tradition. My questioner's concern was symptomatic of a general change in the intellectual climate of the Western world. The veneration both of the warrior as a staple hero for young men and of war as a test of, and testament to, a nation's resilience has been replaced by a deep scepticism towards all organised violence, whatever form it takes.

The fragment of conversation nevertheless got me thinking, not so much about what the woman had said as why she said it. Militarism, after all, is a nineteenth-century invention. The Social Darwinist belief that war is a natural human condition and that the struggle for existence is a basic principle of political life can be found nowhere in the Greek world, even in Sparta, the most warlike of the city states. War may well have been central to the economies of the ancient world and to the political structures of Greek society, but we find no belief that war was morally necessary for human development and therefore a positive good, as was the case in the fascist societies of twentieth-century Europe. If Achilles loved war too much, there were plenty of Greeks who were more ambiguous in their outlook. 'Ares is equitable: he kills only those who kill', runs a famous Greek epitaph. The fact is that the ancient Greeks were just as reflective about their own culture as we are about our own. Their thoughts about war were certainly different from our own but there is no reason to suppose that they were any less complicated.

But the Greeks differed from us in one critical respect: they accepted that war was an inevitable, even essential, part of life. We are one of the first generations that can imagine a world without it. If we go back to the *Iliad* we will find that for Homer victory is all that matters. It is true that we find plenty of references to peace in his poem but the rhetorical purpose of these similes is not to describe the world of peace so much as to make more vivid the world of war. Indeed, the life of peace

is merely another kind of war: one between human beings and nature in which the yield of the annual harvest represents the spoils of battle.[1]

It was another poet, the Roman writer Ovid, who made this connection vivid. Long ago, he wrote, shortly after the birth of Christ:

> Earth had better things to offer – crops without cultivation
> Fruit on the bough, honey in the hollow oak.
> No-one tore the ground with ploughshares
> Or parcelled out the land
> Or swept the sea with dipping oars–
> The shore was the world's end.
> Clever human nature, victim of your inventions,
> Disastrously creative,
> Why cordon cities with towered walls?
> Why arm for war?[2]

Ovid's vision is a compelling one, but it is also a prelapsarian vision of the noble savage, the proto-man who knows no inventiveness and is therefore happy. The idea that we should not go to war against nature, that instead we should treat the environment with respect, given that it is the only one we have, is even more recent. Only in the last thirty years have we begun to imagine living at peace with nature, as well as each other.

No generation can pass judgement on another era without reference to its own concerns, and the concern we have had since 1945 is to justify war itself. Until recently what criticism arose was muted. It was focused on particular ways of fighting, or regret over the loss of life or the shattered minds and bodies of those who survived. Today all this has changed. We find war deeply disturbing. As for warriors, we tend to think that even those we admire are not entirely innocent; we tend to believe that in some way their heroism is bred into them in Lamarckian fashion through the inheritance of the acquired characteristic of cruelty. 'We inherit the warlike type and for most of the capacities of heroism that the human race is full of we have to thank this cruel history', wrote William James in his influential essay 'The moral equivalent of war'.[3]

One of the reasons we no longer take our heroes on trust is that even apparently selfless acts are seen as motivated by a sublimated wish for self-esteem. Thus when we do celebrate heroic deeds the stories we tell are usually much less celebrations of heroism than protests against the violence of battle and sometimes the futility of war itself. Even when we respect heroic actions we respond more positively, not to tales of soldiers locked in a fight with the enemy but of soldiers recovering from serious wounds or coping with personal trauma. In our post-heroic times survival is considered the act of real moral or emotional worth. Thus we even see Achilles as a victim. We claim to recognise the pain in his fortitude. In the twentieth century his early death had particular emotive appeal; it was at one with the wasted lives and broken hopes of so many other young men who went to their deaths on the Western Front or other battlefields.

Even when the heroic stereotype is reprised in films such as Kenneth Branagh's *Henry V* the message is still ambiguous. When contemplating any war we are encouraged always to think of its cost. As one film critic wrote of Shakespeare's hero-king, 'though you still feel he's a hero, it's not so much because he's won it's because he has known the cost of victory'.[4] Although undoubtedly heroic, Henry can also be seen as a 'victim' of his beliefs and passions, a victim, above all, of a centuries-old 'deception' about the glory of war. Our age seems determined to strip away the myths behind the warrior ethos, to expose its 'hollow' core. When we think of Henry and his 'band of brothers' we tend to deprive them of the fullness of their lives in order to support and sustain the smallness of our own. When we contemplate war we seem to be increasingly sceptical of the heroic temper, perhaps because we rarely see ourselves in a heroic light.

In sum, the problem we have with warriors derives from the problem we have with war itself. Belief in one is only as strong as belief in the other. If you devalue war, you devalue the standing of the man-at-arms. It is for this reason that warriors remain such deeply ambiguous figures, as do also the qualities that their careers are deemed to represent: heroism, courage, even unqualified love of country – or what Susan Sontag memorably described as 'the worst form of unrequited love'. Most remote of all is the heroic version of history. No longer taught in schools are such classic set-piece texts about patriotism as the Epitaph of the Spartan Dead, or Henry V's speech before Agincourt. We have stripped war of its 'glory'. The problem we have is that since 1914 any return to the merely heroic, any speech or poem that tells merely of brave men fighting to save their own or their country's honour, is seen as an anachronism. You cannot be young twice, which is one reason why so many of today's warriors would seem to be unhappy.

If warriors have shaped the history of our cultures – and other cultures – for millennia we have to ask why they are beginning to find war itself increasingly *soulless*. I use the word quite deliberately because it is invoked so often. Accompanying the first unit of Marines in the assault on the city of Fallujah in November 2004 the American journalist Robert Kaplan wrote that what they had going for them was their 'warrior spirit'.[5] But what does the phrase mean, and is it the same or different from what General Patton called 'the warrior soul'? William Broyles writes that war is 'the only way in which most men touch the mythic domain of their soul',[6] but not all soldiers touch that domain, or even wish to. We use such phrases loosely at our peril. What constitutes the warrior soul? Indeed, what is a warrior?

What is a warrior?

Where to begin but with Clausewitz, who was not only history's greatest analyst of war but also a warrior in his own right. Clausewitz first experienced battle as a young ensign of thirteen and once unwisely confessed to his wife his first taste of battle meant more to him than his marriage night. He remains the only significant writer to tell us about war – modern war in the modern era which today's warrior still inhabits – just (and which is the sole focus of this study). He was something

of an intellectual, a phenomenologist of war whose writing was very much in the spirit of German philosophy, which beginning with Kant would dominate European thought until the mid-twentieth century.

Of the warrior Clausewitz wrote: 'War is the realm of physical exertion and suffering. These will destroy us unless we can make ourselves indifferent to them and from this birth or training must provide us with a certain strength of body and soul.'[7] In a sentence Clausewitz captures what makes a warrior: strength of body and soul, and of the two the soul is the more important. Anyone can become physically fit through exercise. Indeed, modern militaries, unlike those which came before them, tend to put a premium on physical fitness. But stamina is different. It is mental toughness which allows the warrior to go the extra distance, to 'push the envelope' to use today's vernacular.

Since the soul is a trope, since it is both intangible and metaphoric, it is difficult to measure. When each of us, even atheists, claims to find something 'soulless' – an experience, a work of art, an encounter with any external reality (fictional or real) – we mean something very real. My attempt to capture it in the study is coloured inevitably by my own idea of the warrior. In many ways this is a highly personal account, as it must be. It's also intensely impressionistic, grounded in literature more than history. This book is, in many ways, an extended essay and should be read as such.

In attempting to comprehend the warrior's soul we can't be comprehensive. We can only grasp it from our own perspectives, in my case from the margins since I've never seen military service, and this means that we tend, most of us, to perspectivism. It is inherent in life. Nietzsche famously observed that we can only grasp reality from the sea, not the shoreline, but at what point at sea and at what distance from the shore? And when – at dawn or sunset?

Clausewitz's work has an additional merit. In another section of his book he refers to war's 'frightful apparitions'. Those apparitions, including fatigue, fear and hunger (everything we are programmed in life to avoid), include the greatest challenge: death itself. Soldiers face these apparitions in many guises. Some survive them; some overcome them; some survive at the time only to be traumatised in the leftover lifetime that many soldiers experience. Warriors, on the other hand, welcome these apparitions. Many volunteer to return to battle. 'The main fight in SEAL Team was to *return* to Vietnam', wrote a US Navy SEAL, Harry Constance, who served in Indo-China in the late 1960s.[8] To be put in a position of danger is one thing; to return to it voluntarily is another. What makes a soldier want to face these apparitions again and again? Having spent twenty years or more reading about them, including what they have to say about themselves in their own memoirs, I would volunteer this explanation. For a warrior, war is transformative.

Of course, war can transform those who engage in it in many ways. It can be a rite of passage, a painful initiation into adulthood; it can make or break an ordinary man who finds himself for the first time in extraordinary circumstances. It can break a man's spirit and ruin him for life, or redeem him from a meaningless existence in peacetime. When we say war is *transformative*, however, we mean something quite different. It allows a warrior to tap into the vein of his own heroism. It allows

him to lead an *authentic* life. In that sense, his life is never quite the same again. Battle can be akin to an epiphany or a religious experience. When we talk of the warrior soul, we do so because many of us must find a place for the sacred in our lives, and it is more than symbolic that the two words 'sacred' and 'sacrifice' etymologically share the same root. Sacrifice is the key to the warrior ethos. Through it, the bond that the warrior forges with his community, his unit and country, becomes a sacred one.[9] If war does not transform him, if the warrior is dead to the world he serves, then war will have been transformed too – the battlefield will no longer be a place for warriors.

Put differently, we must distinguish between the soldier and warrior in terms of the 'will', that decisive factor that philosophers have discussed since Schopenhauer. Will-power we often call it. Without it we are lost, especially in moments of great danger. 'Summon up the will, stiffen the sinews', the king enjoins his men before Harfleur in *Henry V*. Huddled in the trenches of the First World War, fighting in the harsh and unforgiving Ukrainian steppes, the conscripts of the twentieth century, arguably among the bravest soldiers of any century, displayed that will again and again. Before the First World War, the General Staffs of Europe had assumed that, unless war was short, economies would collapse and societies would descend into revolutionary chaos. Soldiers would simply refuse to fight on. In the event, they didn't. They found the will to continue even when, as with the soldiers of the Third Reich, fighting in a dubious moral cause.[10] But, as Bruce Newsome observes, there's a significant difference between a willingness to fight and a willingness to fight with enthusiasm. There is also a vital distinction to be drawn between 'intrinsic' and 'extrinsic' combat motivation.

Intrinsic motivations are those that civilians bring to military life. They are genetic or culturally constructed in childhood. Extrinsic motivations are derived from the military through socialisation including training. Newsome himself finds extrinsic motivation far more compelling than vague references to a 'warrior spirit' or 'warrior soul'. But he also acknowledges that extrinsic factors do not explain everything. They cannot explain, for example, why some soldiers fight on even when defeated, when the only 'rational' recourse is surrender. They don't explain why soldiers are willing to sacrifice their lives so unsparingly. They don't explain, in other words, what makes war so inherently life-affirming for some, while life-denying for most of us.[11]

The warrior, I contend, like an ordinary soldier, is a product of both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, or what I would prefer to call the existential and instrumental realms. And Achilles, that archetypal hero (the sine qua non of the Western warrior), is the template of the first in Homer's version and of the second in Plato's rewriting of the Homeric myth.

To the Achilles of the *Iliad* he looks to his existential self. The warrior likes war (though not necessarily killing); to Plato's objection to Achilles he looks (unconsciously) for what redeems the killing that he is asked to undertake. It is sanctioned by the state, which provides the moral framework within which he works. When he gets to like killing too much he's lost, as was Lieutenant Calley and his men on that infamous day at My Lai in 1970; or when he breaks faith with

discipline (the code), as members of a US Marine unit did at al-Haditha in Iraq thirty years later, he forfeits the respect which we owe him, those of us in whose service he labours.

Let me cite Gwyn Dyer's description of the warrior, the soldier whose true character is revealed (not forged) in war:

> There *is* such a thing as a 'natural soldier', the kind who derives his greater satisfaction from male companionship, from excitement and from the conquering of physical obstacles. He doesn't want to kill people as such, but he will have no objections if it occurs within a moral framework that gives him justification – like war – and if it is the price of gaining admission to the kind of environment he craves. Whether such men are born or made I do not know, but most of them end up in armies (and many more move on again to become mercenaries because regular army life in peacetime is too routine and boring).[12]

But even the best armies can claim few such men. They are so rare that they form only a modest fraction of small professional armies, mostly but certainly not exclusively congregating in the commando-style special forces.

For the true warrior has a vocation. He hears the call; he responds to an inner voice even if he is a product of extrinsic forces, such as civic duty or patriotism. When he goes into battle for the first time he finds himself. He becomes, to use the language of existentialism, an authentic human being. To me this is best captured in the reply of a US Marine Corps sergeant to an embedded reporter on the eve of America's war in Iraq:

> As a professional warrior, politics and ideology don't really enter into his thoughts but why he's here in the desert, waiting to invade a country.
>
> 'I'm not so idealistic that I subscribe to good versus evil. We haven't had a war like this since World War II. Why are we here now? I guess it is to remove this guy from power. I'm not opposed to it, and I wasn't going to miss it.'
>
> For him it's a grand personal challenge.
>
> 'We're going into the great unknown', he says. 'Scary, isn't it?' he adds smiling brightly. 'I can't wait.'[13]

Even if for other warriors the cause is everything, whether through personal belief or social conditioning, the experience is what he will remember for the rest of his life. In revealing himself to himself he uncovers the greatest mystery which constitutes his own humanity, what makes him what he is, what makes him tick.

Yet there is also something else. Ultimately warriors are defined through their relationship with death, their own and that of the enemy. They are prepared in the first instance to give up their lives, though it is also important to them that their sacrifice has meaning for others. This is what makes the Congressional Medal of

Honor the ultimate award in an age when awards have become devalued currency by the fact so many are awarded. The Congressional Medal of Honor is different. As the citation says, it is given for acts that go 'beyond the call of duty'. Duty is instrumental: it is in the service of others, but, as I shall explain, to go beyond the call is to see military service not as a contract but as an open-ended covenant. Those who go beyond it are rightly considered heroic by those they serve. This is as true of the instrumental dimension (sacrifice for one's country) as it is the existential sacrifice on behalf of one's friends. It is a point eloquently captured by the journalist Mark Bowden when describing the mind-set of Delta Force soldiers who found themselves trapped in the centre of Mogadishu in 1993:

> Howe was surprised to still be alive. The thought of heading straight back into the fight scared him, but the fear was nothing next to the loyalty he felt to the men stranded in the city. Some of their own were still out there – Gary Gordon, Randy Schughart, Michael Durant and the crew of the [doomed Black Hawk helicopter] *Super 64*.[14]

One of Howe's friends, Gary Gordon, was awarded posthumously the Congressional Medal of Honor in May 1994 for trying to rescue Durant and his friends. Gordon may have given his life in vain but he knew how to be a hero. The product of five years of rigorous training, he did his duty and won a medal for going beyond the call. In that sense the Western warrior is not a master of his own fate; his own destiny is determined by others who sanction his acts.

In other words, the Western warriors of today operate in two dimensions: the instrumental and existential. Most soldiers inhabit only one. They serve the state either because they choose to (for them war is a profession, as before the modern era it was a trade) or because they have no choice – they are conscripted – and many serve it very well. Some conscripts even discover that they are warriors in the heat of battle. And even though we may prefer to understand such men as 'a bundle of discrete drives or a composite of reflex patterns' (to cite the language of psychology) we should be wary of invoking psychological terms for it is easy to end up making brilliant generalisations while losing sight of the *man* to whom these things happen.

But today's warriors don't only serve themselves; they are domesticated. They serve the state, which provides the moral framework within which to act legitimately. Of necessity they serve others, not only their own unbounded will. Put rather crudely they are public servants and derive much of their self-esteem from the extent to which they are esteemed by others, even civilians. We admire them not only for their professionalism but for their sense of duty or service.

In the end warriors are three-dimensional figures, not two-, because they also subscribe to a historic myth, which is where Achilles becomes important. As the archetypal warrior in the Western tradition he dominates the imagination still. We may no longer read the classics but we do watch films. Achilles is invoked time and again in the memoirs of those warriors who reflect on their own profession. He continues to define the parameters of the heroic.

Yet the Western warrior is now in trouble. In this book I shall be looking at three challenges that he now confronts. The first will be to the warrior myth itself, embodied in the person of the greatest Western warrior of all, Achilles. As my critic at the Barbican reminded me that evening we are ambivalent about Achilles because he does indeed like to kill. We tend to see him as a 'one-man killing machine', a 'natural born killer'. Homer called killing 'the work of war' and it was butchery unending – hacking, spearing, lancing enemies on the 'killing ground' that constituted the Homeric battlefield. A third of the *Iliad* is about killing, and Homer's descriptions of it are as graphic as they come, for the heroes do it consummately well. At the US Naval War Academy in Annapolis the students who study the *Iliad*, the first book of a course called 'The Code of the Warrior', confess that they would rather be 'a Hector *who wins*'.[15] They too tend to see Achilles in a far less favourable light than their predecessors.

Of course, Achilles is a complicated figure. He may be a killer but he also invites an early death. He goes to the Trojan War knowing he will not survive. His death, in that sense, is freely chosen. He chooses an early and much remarked death over a long and unremarkable life. But while Achilles is undoubtedly heroic, he is also cruel. He sees war in no other light than the scope it provides for his own heroism. His greatness lies almost wholly in his courage and force of will. He has little humanity and even less imagination. Today, our heroes have to be fired by more than personal ambition.

Even so if Achilles does not necessarily inspire all warriors the principles he embodies still do. Not all warriors, perhaps the minority, are reflective, but those who survive battle and want to understand themselves even today invoke him for a reason. The Greeks themselves would say 'Let us begin with Homer', for he produced the archetypes of the heroes – Achilles opens out for the warrior not only a heroic but an ethical world of conflicting obligations and responsibilities to one's enemies, as well as one's side. For a Westerner these are archetypes that form the warrior myth.

Through myths people imagine their social existences conveyed in legends and stories; myths establish the expectations we have of each other and the way in which we should act. They provide the standards which make possible common practices based on ideal cases. Many of our imagined ideals go back to the Greeks. They remain our cultural ancestors, and our view of them is intimately connected with our view of ourselves. This is the particular point of still studying them. We should try to understand how our ideas are related to the Greeks because if we do so they can help us to see ways in which our ideas may be wrong. One of the reasons we find Achilles less compelling and his myth more difficult than ever to buy into is the development of modern war. Achilles may still be taught in military colleges and soldiers may still read him but the myth often rings hollow. If we read the *Iliad* we do so more as literature than for instruction.

And if we don't find Achilles entirely admirable, warriors face another problem – we find it difficult to mediate the myth. We are an intensely visual culture, and Hollywood cannot convey the myth as epic poetry did before 1914. For many

soldiers the archetypal hero is Rambo, and Rambo, entertaining though he may be, in today's vernacular, simply doesn't 'cut it'.

In the chapters that follow I will discuss a second challenge to the warrior's existential being: the judgement of civil society. Take the pursuit of glory. It is because we are sceptical about any mention of glory that we are especially suspicious about the joy of combat. Not so the true warrior. 'Combat is the supreme adrenalin rush', declared one Marine on the road to Baghdad in 2003. 'You take rounds, shoot back, shit starts blowing up. It's sensory overload. It's the one thing that is not overrated in the military.'[16] Anthony Swofford, who later turned against the Marine Corps after taking part in the First Gulf War, confessed that when he graduated from sniper school he was hooked. Combat is precisely what being a warrior is all about, adds Andrew Exum, writing about his own exploits with the 10th Mountain Division in Afghanistan. Only war could validate his experience as a man. When he left the army at the age of twenty-five he feared that his best years were behind him. He feared that he would never again find an opportunity to do so much again or to be part of something as significant as the war against terrorism.

For most of us life can be lived on other terms. For a few it is most intense when tested in battle. Exum is one of the latter. Indeed, he laments the dullness of his life after he left the service; he asserts the importance of living at the edge. What matters is not life but the living of it. Yet the warrior also lives for others, not only himself, and it is this which makes his service important for the rest of us. Combat, Exum asserts, is what redeems war as a profession, for it gives an individual the chance to express his commitment to country and unit through the medium of sacrifice.[17]

Today, alas, even sacrifice is not much in fashion. Exum saw action in Operation Anaconda (2002), a mission in the Shah-e-kot Valley in Afghanistan in the course of which 450 al-Qaeda operatives were killed. On being invalided out of the army he became incensed by the media coverage both of the operation itself and of the role of his division. Some months later he watched a movie on NBC whose plot involved a group of reporters covering a conflict in a fictional country in Central Asia. The lesson he learned was that in a post-modern era soldiers are not the real heroes of war. They can't be. They are too violent and lack moral purity. In the movie version of events journalists are the true heroes. Not only are they the ones who risk the most for the most noble cause – the truth – but, more importantly, they don't kill to obtain it.[18]

Soldiers these days are expected to be like oncologists, whose professional *speciality* is studying cancer and whose professional *vocation* is fighting it. A soldier's profession may be fighting, but his vocation, society believes, should be to combat war, not glory in it. Cruelty is now the problem. Killing – not only the act but the skill – is no longer celebrated as it once was. Thus when Lieutenant General James Mattis, a three-star Marine general who had served in Afghanistan and Iraq, claimed that it was 'fun to shoot some people' he was roundly rebuked.[19] Mattis was an excellent soldier who had been in combat three times in three years in Iraq. A small man in his mid-50s who spoke quietly, he was a bold thinker who

had little time for the rigid orthodoxies of military doctrine. In Iraq his favourite expression was 'Doctrine is the last refuge of the unimaginative'. On the battlefield his call sign was 'Chaos'. But his careless remarks back home were not well received even by some in the military. Killing is not something that our societies find attractive.

If pressed, even those who still venerate warriors would probably find especially embarrassing the admission of one of America's most decorated soldiers, Franklin Miller, that having a gun in his hand was like a 'religious experience'. A Green Beret, he received the Congressional Medal of Honor as well as a Silver Star, two Bronze Stars and six Purple Hearts for his exploits in Indo-China. Miller admits that he was one of the elite few for whom killing was not acquired but inherent – he calls it a 'unique ability'.[20] He was surprised to find that even many Green Berets couldn't bring themselves to fire at anyone. Most were 'good, squared-away individuals who just weren't killers'. Even when soldiers fired into the bush few were able to put a man in their sights and pull the trigger. Most, in fact, had difficulty executing 'calculated kills'.[21]

It is a measure of our growing ambivalence towards war that even the US military refers to killing only obliquely. A regular soldier can attend years in the military and never hear the word 'kill', except in bayonet practice, a practically useless form of training since the last US bayonet charge was in Korea almost sixty years ago. Instead, army manuals talk of 'suppressing enemy fire', or 'engaging targets', or 'attriting the enemy'. Most telling of all are the DD-2796 forms which soldiers are required to complete on returning from Iraq, for the army monitors the performance of soldiers in the field in the expectation of improving it, of making them more efficient. Those returning from active duty have to fill in a four-page form which asks them a number of questions. One asks: 'During the deployment did you ever feel that you were in great danger of being killed?' Another asks: 'Did you ever see anyone wounded, killed or dead during this deployment? Mark all that apply.' A third asks: 'Were you engaged in direct combat, where you discharged your weapon?' No soldier on returning home is ever asked whether to his own knowledge he killed anybody.[22]

In this regard, the West finds itself increasingly remote both emotionally and culturally from its enemies. 'Killing is not the most important thing in war', wrote Lim Quan, a philosopher in the Tang Dynasty. Like that of many sayings derived from the seven Chinese military classics (of which Sun Tzu's *Art of War* is, of course, by far the most familiar) the sentiment is enigmatic. When stated out of context it makes little sense. On further scrutiny the message is really quite clear. There is no especial virtue to killing if it can be avoided or kept to a minimum. Wanton destruction for its own sake has no instrumental value; it is usually a form of blood lust, the mark of a society that cannot discipline the soldiers who fight in its name. Al-Qaeda operatives and the insurgents in Iraq, of course, are still prepared to kill with a good conscience. In the Greater Middle East, without the shedding of blood war would make no sense whatsoever.

But it is precisely the contrast between our warriors and the enemies they are sent out to kill which makes it difficult for the Western military to celebrate their

own profession. To admit to a liking for killing, for example, or to boast that one does it exceptionally well is now associated with 'the erratic primitives' with whom the United States now finds itself engaged – the berzerkers, the fanatics, the suicide bombers who are immune to taking risks.

Yet take away the glory and the combat and the killing and what is left? Here we come to the quintessence of war for the individual asked to fight it. A common theme that runs through the writings of warriors like Franklin Miller is the satisfaction of having served the state – the satisfaction of a job well done or honestly undertaken means a good deal less to him than his own personal development. War enforces the paradox that all the successes on the battlefield are not necessarily of greater importance than what he has learned about himself as a man. What is most striking about works such as *One Bullet Away*, Nathaniel Fick's account of his own experience of Operation Iraqi Freedom, is that they convey the idea of war as a supreme test of character in which those who come through achieve a lasting sense of self-knowledge of a kind usually not available in civilian life. Theirs is a very private world. Yet it is precisely that existential, private realm which our societies now patrol more vigorously than ever.

This is why warriors in the Western world see themselves as under greater threat than ever before. 'Become what you are', Nietzsche enjoins us. All of us in the Western world come from a culture which doubts its own first principles, which has no foundation except, as pointed out by Plato, the dialogue that thought conducts with itself. We do not know what we are or what we will become. The urge to become what we are never ceases, but neither does the fear of what we may yet become.

What has made the Western warrior quintessentially different from most others he has squared off against in battle is that the existential realm has always been subordinated to the instrumental (the state). Today that dialectical relationship is being undermined by the extent to which civil society patrols not only the warrior's actions but also his thoughts and the extent to which he's allowed to exercise what the American writer Ralph Emerson considered the distinguishing feature of the warrior ethos: self-trust. It is that which permits him to play the role history has chosen for him. As Emerson's contemporary Charles Dickens wrote: 'the more real the man, the more genuine the actor'.

In Chapter 5 I shall identify a third challenge, one that lies in the future: the extent to which the new technologies threaten to dispossess warriors of their sense of agency. Humanity is distinguished from all other species on the planet by its ability to choose its own fate since only human beings have consciousness. Only in death do we quit the realm of freedom for the realm of necessity, but the face of future war threatens to rob the warrior even of that.

Much of this will be familiar to the devotees of science fiction. Indeed, novels like Scott Card's *Ender's Game* are taught at military colleges to prepare today's warriors for what's in store.[23] Not that he or any other writer of science fiction is always right in his predictions. The future when it arrives usually mocks those who claim to have foreseen it. In trying to sift science fiction's accurate predictions from its erroneous ones it is always worth applying at least three tests. First, is their

imagined world really an allegory of some aspect of the present day and not a comment on the future at all? Imagined futures are often only thinly disguised commentaries on current affairs. Secondly, do science fiction writers make the mistake of assuming that technology alone shapes the future? Although the future path of technology can to some extent be extrapolated from existing trends, social forces that help or hamper its adoption are far less predictable. But there is a third question we should ask – one much more troubling in its implications especially for the military. Science fiction does not exist in a vacuum. It is clearly popular among people of a technological bent and therefore we must always ask: are some sci-fi predictions so compelling that they become self-fulfilling, by inspiring inventors to implement them?

Today's warriors are struggling with what some in the military would like them to *become*: information processors in a cybernetic battle space. Not only is the warrior becoming distinctly out of sorts with society's post-modern sensibilities; the future battlefield environment may be an unforgiving one in which to practise his profession. Embedded in a cybernetic world, the words now invoked by the military are 'efficiency', 'super-empowerment' and 'optimisation' – words which seem to be taking him out of the range of a once familiar past and within hailing distance of an unfamiliar, and distinctly unappealing, future.

The best way to think of the soldier of the future is as an integrated mobile weapons system like a Bradley fighting vehicle or an Abrams tank, part human, part machine cyborg, 'an F-16 on legs' according to one member of the US Army Future Force Warrior Program.[24] Soldiers are becoming their technology. Soldiers are changing as fast as the society they defend. War too is being stripped of that 'religious' element which made the confrontation with the enemy and oneself in battle an epiphany for some, almost a religious experience. Even in our technology-fixated times, of course, our lives are not simply defined by machines: we have emotional lives, aspirations and beliefs. But we live in technology's shadow: every age leaves its imprint, and ours will too. No wonder so many warriors are unhappy.

The unhappy warrior

'Who is the happy warrior? Who is he – that every man in arms should wish to be?' wrote Wordsworth in his poem 'The Character of the Happy Warrior'. Wordsworth himself had no doubt who the happy warrior was. He was a 'generous spirit' whose endeavours illuminated his path in life. He was a man who overcame pain and fear and transcended them in the process. He was a man who renounced wealth and material success, 'the mild concerns of ordinary life'. Above all, he was a free spirit who 'in himself possesse[d] his own desire'. The warrior was happy, Wordsworth imagined, because he was his own man. His fame also derived from serving others, not merely himself. Thus his immortality was assured. In the course of his life he became a 'conspicuous object in the nation's eye'.[25]

Wordsworth himself never took up arms and never went near a battlefield so we may conclude he is a suspect source. How many civilians, one suspects far too

many in the past, have had an over-romantic view of warriors? Many of my own readers may think that I have too. But Wordsworth was a great spinner of myths. Warriors were, for Wordsworth, as they have been for so many poets, transcendent figures, perhaps because they touched on the nature of the human condition and because, in particular, they represented a human type.

In his own poem Wordsworth was writing not of any particular warriors or of any particular age; he was spinning a myth, one which performs a collective purpose or function in many guises – aetiological, exemplary and symbolic. The warrior myth had, for Wordsworth and still has for many people today, a collective significance and an enduring social interest. It still anchors today's soldiers in the past, or is meant to. Here too, however, war's purchase on our imagination is not what it was. The myth is being gradually hollowed out.

It has been for some time. Take 'The Unhappy Warrior', a poem by Herbert Read, who was an infantry company commander at the battle of Ypres. Recalling Wordsworth's poem and finding its optimism ironic, Read published a modern version which spoke of the reality of war, the war he experienced at first hand – 'primitive filth, lice, boredom and death'. The message he sought to convey is that the soldier fights usually for no nobler purpose than his own survival. As Read claimed in another poem penned at the beginning of the Second World War, to know this and fight on is the only happiness. 'To fight without hope is to fight with grace'. To hold to honour in that knowledge is the true nobility of a warrior's calling.[26]

It is a bleak and unforgiving message, and one must never forget that Read like many fellow soldiers spent the post-war years striving to get the war out of his system. But Read also had his own reasons for fighting. He was not conventionally patriotic but he was a warrior, and when he was not showing war in all its brutality he was extolling it for making him a man. 'I don't want to die for my King and country', he wrote in 1917. 'If I do die it is for the salvation of my own *soul*, cleansing it of all its little egotisms by one last supreme egotistical act.'[27]

It is the warrior's growing disenchantment with what war has become, or is becoming, that explains much of his unhappiness. War becomes soulless when it is more life-denying than life-affirming – a paradox which has haunted every warrior since Achilles. The paradox inheres not in war itself but in our own humanity. The fact is that we are all creatures of paradox: we are self-assertive and self-preserving at the same time. We all want to survive; survival is an instinct genetically programmed into us. But we are self-assertive as well. We take risks because we want more out of life than security; we seek to make ourselves felt during our lifetime; we seek to make our mark, to impress others with our abilities or achievements. The stronger we are, the more willing we are to risk all for reputation.

To put it more simply, if reductively, human being externalises itself in activity, which is why *homo sapiens* is also *homo faber*. Our identity as human beings is derived from the work we do. To work is to have value in the eyes of others. We value others for the work they do. And once we derive our humanity (our identity) from the work we do (i.e. the role we play in society) we come to value ourselves

much more. Now warriors are most likely to be happy when there is a dialectical relationship between the objective and subjective worlds, when what is real outside corresponds to what is real within. When we are valued by others we value ourselves. It is this fusion of the inner and outer worlds which gives the warrior ethos its appeal. It is this identity that makes the warrior 'happy'. Soldiers require not only implicit confirmation of their identity through everyday contact with others but an explicit and emotionally charged confirmation that others bestow on them. In other words, all of us inhabit a social world in which our identity is largely determined for us.

The Greeks (as usual) had a word for it: they called it *thymos*. It is a word for which there is no single translation. It can mean 'soul' (as I shall use it here), but it can also mean 'desire', 'will', 'spirit', 'courage' and other less desirable passions such as 'anger' (the rage of Achilles). These are all words we associate, of course, with warriors through the centuries. It's the stuff of consciousness, passion and thought. It's perhaps best viewed in vitalist terms as a life force which opens the receptive *soul* to the words of the gods. In English we still use the language of corporeal possession. We talk about being 'filled with enthusiasm' or 'stunned to anger'; we still talk of 'feeling inspired'.

Time and again in war *thymos* has determined the outcome of battles. An instance of this appears in the *Iliad* when Nestor urges the Greeks to take no prisoners, and 'so saying he aroused the strength and spirit of every man'.[28] The word for strength (*thymos*) was applied to emotions such as rage and pride. These moods dominate the action of the poem. Men are the creatures of impulse and passion. War requires us to prize life so much that death is life-affirming. It's because life matters that its victories and prizes matter. And the competitive type of courage (heroism) needed to win them is important. The warrior is a man whose *thymos* leads him to seek out the prize, even at the cost of his own life.

Here we come to the crucial difference between a soldier and a warrior. We find it in a passage in the *Iliad*, when Priam comes to Achilles' tent to ask for the return of his son's body. Achilles remarks somewhat strangely to our ears: 'You have a heart of iron.'[29] The word Homer uses for 'heart' is *thymos*, and 'iron' because Priam has steeled himself to plead with Achilles even though he has been robbed of sons other than Hector. What's striking is that the same phrase is used by Hector himself when Achilles refuses to spare his life. Hector replies he did not expect anything else. 'You have an iron *thymos* in your breast.' The iron in both cases is indifference to normal feelings, the feelings you or I may have. Achilles is indifferent to the norms of society. He has the capacity, writes Raymond Williams, to go against normal feelings in order to do what's necessary to satisfy what is for him a deep human need. He does what he must, or what is in his nature.[30]

Our highly utilitarian societies find it difficult to grasp the *thymotic* origins of war even though it has been for centuries at the very heart of the Western political tradition. Thus Machiavelli speaks of the desire for glory, Hobbes of vainglory, Rousseau of *amour propre*; Hegel of our need for recognition (the master–slave dialectic) and Nietzsche of man as 'the beast with red cheeks' (the only animal that can blush, that can feel embarrassed).[31] Each of these terms refers to the fact

that man is the only animal who needs to place value on things – himself in the first instance but also on people and actions around him, such as the unit, or regiment, or 'band of brothers': hence the intense bonds of friendship that are so often forged in battle between comrades-in-arms.

The problem of philosophy since Plato has been the need to harness the desire for recognition in a way that would serve the political community as a whole. The state does this by making the warrior an instrument of its own purposes. Yet in their personal lives warriors are often conflicted; they know the bitterness of loss as well as the seductive attraction of war. We often pay a terrible price for glory. Yet if their unhappiness is possibly greater than that of the past there is a reason for that too. Warriors are unhappy today because they are increasingly alienated from a society which won't allow them to be themselves, which patrols their thoughts as well as actions. They are alienated from a military that asks them to conform to what instrumental reason demands. And they are alienated from a world which no longer grants them the glory they once took for granted. We have cut war down to size; and in downsizing its heroic dimensions we have diminished those who fight. No wonder so many warriors are unhappy. Unhappiness inheres in the condition. If we become what we sing, today we sing in a minor key. The muse is beginning to fail us.

Inevitably, my Barbican interlocutor would raise an objection. Should we sing about war at all, still less celebrate it? I can think of no better response than that of John Updike, one of America's foremost contemporary novelists. To say that war is madness is like saying sex is madness: true enough from the standpoint of a stateless eunuch but merely a provocative epigram to those who must make their arrangements in the world as a given. To be a citizen, he argues, is to participate in the passions and emotions of a community that will inevitably make war. But the most noble protester will continue to say war is madness if only to urge reflection on the warrior – to keep him from loving war too much.[32]

2 Achilles and the warrior soul

> It would be quite easy to claim that Achilles had no unusual qualities, after all, that he was essentially no different from you or me. It would be properly democratic to take this line. It isn't an age of heroes.
>
> (John Fuller, *The Memoirs of Achilles*, 1993)

In the early 1920s one of the greatest of American warriors, George Patton, wrote an article entitled 'The warrior soul'. In criticising the German performance in the Great War he acknowledged that no other people had sought so diligently for pre-war perfection. They had built and tested and adjusted their mighty war machine and become so engrossed in its visible perfection, 'in the accuracy of its bearings and the compression of its cylinders that they had neglected the battery', or what Patton called that 'implausible something', the soul. Despite the physical impossibility of locating the soul, he believed that it could readily be discerned in the acts and thoughts of soldiers. 'So with war . . . there hovers an impalpable something which dominates the material . . . to search for this something we should seek it in a manner analogous to our search for the soul.'[1]

When Patton talked of the soul he was using the term in a non-religious sense: he was talking of the irrational world of unconscious emotions. He was writing of what another contemporary American, the novelist William Faulkner, called 'the problems of the human heart in conflict with itself . . . which alone can make good writing'. The soul may be intangible but, nonetheless, it exercises a powerful influence on our lives. In the case of the warrior it is what makes war an intensely existential experience.

Patton himself was a much more sensitive man than is often acknowledged. He was a poet and a romantic, a mystic who believed in reincarnation (a strategy, some claim, which helped him cope with an innate and morbid fear of death). When he landed in North Africa with the American Third Army he thought he had seen the battlefields as a Carthaginian warrior in a previous incarnation. He was convinced of the truth of the imagination; he believed that what the imagination seizes as sublime must be true. In war Patton saw what the poet Wordsworth called 'the life of things'. All that is required in order to see the truth of an experience is not 'the meddling intellect' but 'a heart that watches and receives'. Or, as another romantic

poet claimed, a truth does not become true unless it is felt upon the pulse and carried alive into the heart by passion.[2]

Patton was not an intellectual. Indeed, the joke at West Point is that his statue faces away from the library. But if not a gifted writer he was a notable warrior; he came from a warrior line. He was reminded from early in his youth of his family's military heritage. His grandfather had commanded a Confederate brigade. The great battles of the American Civil War were recounted as a family affair involving Southern codes of honour and great personal courage. As Carlo d'Este puts it, it is hardly surprising that by the age of 7 he was hopelessly seduced into the conviction that his life and destiny lay in perpetuating the Patton family name and, even more, living up to its valorous achievements.[3]

Yet Patton's reputation today is mixed. Most know him from the 1970 film in which he was played to such telling effect by George C. Scott. Its most famous line (one of the most famous lines of any war movie of the past 50 years) is confessing to loving war: 'I love it. God help me, I do love it so. I love it more than my life.' Indeed, the suspicion that he loved war too much has blighted his reputation, and did so even at the time. But the public loved him. He was charismatic, heroic and fiercely ambitious both for himself and for his men. Franklin Schaffner's film showed a man whose life was quite literally defined by war. It shows a man who had he survived into peacetime would have been lost without an enemy to confront. Even at the time he struck a discordant note; he seemed a little unreal, a throwback to an earlier era.

In time he became the exemplar of the mechanised general, especially in the closing stages of the Second World War when he was seen as the army's primary practitioner of armoured warfare. Nevertheless, he was a late convert to tanks. Right up to the outbreak of war he could be found preaching the virtues of the horse and the benefits of arming cavalrymen with a sabre of his own design. With his trademark ivory-handled pistols and scowling face he seemed to have stepped out of a movie, perhaps a cowboy film, and like the American cowboy he did not long outlive his era. Had he lived he would have become an anachronism. Can the same be said of warriors today?

For Patton would be disappointed that war is becoming increasingly soulless, as the 'system' demands ever greater conformity. Soldiers are becoming information processors; others find they are being enmeshed in a cybernetic web which reduces their sense of independent agency. Paradoxical though it may seem, most are not encouraged to cultivate a sense of wonder on the battlefield at the ineffable mystery of life. Looking back to 1918 we can see that Patton was living on the cusp of a technocratic era, one in which there was a decreasing place for the warrior soul. Now it is the American military that sees itself as an engine that can be fine-tuned. What is extraordinary is the extent to which the metaphor of the machine penetrates our consciousness. This is true even of the US Marines. 'The fucked thing', Evan Wright was told by one of them serving in Iraq, 'is the men we have been fighting probably came here for the same reason we did, to test themselves, to feel what war is like. In my view it doesn't matter if you oppose or support war. The *machine* goes on.'[4] What 'the machine' metaphor challenges is the warrior's

thymos, his soul, his thinking heart. For some time warriors have begun to find that war itself has diminishing existential appeal.

Tales of three Marines

Even before the Second World War, the opportunities for displaying the traditional warrior virtues seemed to be diminishing. For some time men had not stared into their opponent's eyes and confronted the man whose life they would take. Death was often meted out remotely to a faceless enemy; the trench warfare of the First World War provides a vivid example of this. So too does the Pacific war against a particularly tenacious and unyielding enemy. Yet both conflicts provided scope for individual as well as collective acts of bravery.

One of the best accounts of the Pacific war is by a United States Marine, Eugene B. Sledge, whose memoir *With the Old Breed* has become, in the words of Paul Fussell, 'a classic of modesty, honesty and simplicity, more telling than any amount of literary sophistication'. As Fussell writes in an introduction to the book, Sledge tells his story with no pretension; 'his style is like a window glass: you don't pause to notice it – you look through it to the actuality it discloses'.[5]

Sledge served on a mortar team in Company K, 3d Battalion, 5th Marines. He began his career with the Peleliu campaign, later continuing on to Okinawa. His account of the atrocities of a war defined by mutual hatred and utter 'waste' catalogues one young man's loss of innocence over the course of a couple of months in the field.[6] He is honest about his fear under shelling, his horror at the atrocious sight of rotting corpses, and even his early compassion for a dead Japanese soldier – fleeting as it was.

Early on in the book Sledge seeks to differentiate the warrior from other soldiers. Number one on his list was Captain 'Ack Ack' Haldane, the commanding officer of Sledge's company. Haldane was a decorated war hero, a veteran of several other Pacific engagements. In one hour during a five-day battle, he and the other members of his unit repulsed five Japanese bayonet charges. But Sledge's admiration for Haldane did not stem exclusively from his excellence in battle; it originated much more from the compassion and understanding he showed the enlisted men, a quality Sledge found unique among the commanding officers he encountered. 'His sincere interest in each of us as a human being helped to dispel the feeling that we were just animals trained to fight.' Unlike many officers his compassion was genuine and he proved it in battle, demanding bombardments of enemy strongholds and reinforcements when necessary to maintain the morale of his troops by minimising the risks they were asked to run. He actually cared about the physical and emotional security of the men in his battalion. He dispelled any thought that their commanding officers considered them 'expendable'. Sledge describes Haldane's death as the 'worst grief I endured in the entire war'.[7]

But Sledge respected many other members of his unit whose heroism was not in doubt. One was Gunnery Sergeant Elmo Haney, an over-50-year-old veteran of the First World War who voluntarily returned to the battlefield at the outbreak of war in 1941. He later won a Silver Star for killing a group of enemy soldiers by

himself with a couple of hand grenades. Haney represented the more typical combat hero who killed with a precision and skill that put others to shame. He was known in the battalion for practising his bayoneting skills for countless hours every day. He was as good a warrior as any in the Pacific. He provided a link to the 'Old Corps', as well as to its traditions, the memories of battles fought in a very different environment and in a very different era.[8]

Others may not have been heroes in the classic sense of the term but they performed heroically when asked. On one occasion when Sledge and his men were pinned down in a very precarious position by an enemy machine gunner, one of their comrades, putting himself in grave danger, threw several smoke grenades, providing a distraction long enough for his friends to cross the danger zone.

> I expected to get hit. So did the others. I wasn't being brave, but Redifer was, and I would rather take my chances than be yellow in the face of his risks to screen us. If he got hit while I was cringing in safety, I knew it would haunt me the rest of my life – that is if I lived much longer, which seemed more unlikely every day.[9]

While the distinction between the warrior and the ordinary soldier is quite clear throughout his book, Sledge makes it even starker by discussing the character of Mac, his mortar section leader on Okinawa. Mac represented everything that a soldier is told is contrary to the warrior ethos. He brags of charging the Japanese single-handedly, but digs into unnecessarily deep and roofed foxholes to protect himself at night. He is egotistical, cowardly, and careless of the lives of his comrades. He endangers his team and is disrespectful of both his men and the enemy. Sledge describes Mac urinating in a Japanese corpse's mouth as the 'most repulsive thing I ever saw an American do in the war'. It made him ashamed to be a Marine officer. But then he also witnessed many other mindless atrocities including fellow soldiers with their Ka-Bar knives levering out gold teeth, often from the mouths of enemy soldiers who were still alive.[10]

The warrior ethos could not be taken for granted in the twentieth century and not only in the Pacific war – a struggle of increasing brutality on both sides. Fussell also posits the theory that the attenuation of religious belief in the modern world contributed to making modern war and especially death much harder to bear than in the past:

> The warrior could once solace himself with the contention that his death was merely a passage into a glorious afterlife . . . No such comfort for modern troops, destined to struggle until relieved by wounds or a death which promises only a black oblivion.[11]

Sledge, a religious man who admitted to praying as he first went into battle on Peleliu, is a perfect example. He gradually lost his faith as the war dragged on.

But declining religiosity was not the only factor making death harder to accept. While technology was increasing the distance at which war was fought, it was also increasing its horror. Take one episode that Sledge witnessed in the Pacific as artillery shells uncovered scores of half-buried American and Japanese soldiers, transforming one ridge that Sledge and his men were asked to take into 'a stinking compost pile':

> If a marine slipped and slid down the back slope of the muddy ridge, he was apt to reach the bottom vomiting. I saw more than one man lose his footing and slip and slide all the way to the bottom only to stand up horror-stricken as he watched in disbelief as white fat maggots tumbled out of his muddy dungaree pockets, cartridge belt, legging lacings and the like…
> …
> We didn't talk about such things. They were too horrible and obscene even for hardened veterans . . . It is too preposterous to think that men could actually live and fight for days and nights on end under such horrible conditions and not be driven insane . . . To me the war was insanity.[12]

All wars, at one time or another, come to contradict what they were originally fought for, even 'just' wars, and most Americans never doubted that the war against Japan was just. Many soldiers' self-belief never survives their encounter with reality; many are never able to take war itself ever again on trust. Some rise above it; some even embrace it. The latter can be said to subscribe to a very Nietzschean belief that our task in life is to make sense not of the wonder of the world but the horror of it, that the principal job of the warrior (or in Nietzsche's case of the philosopher) is to make sense of its cruelty. As Nietzsche would have argued, surrendering to the horror (not engaging in it but accepting it) is the only response a warrior can make. For many this alone is what makes war life-affirming.

It is the horror, however, which makes it difficult to accept that war can be glorious. Advance twenty years and we find the young Philip Caputo in action in Vietnam, another Asian theatre of conflict in which the scope for being a warrior was if anything even more constrained. Robert Sherwood claims that the Second World War was the first in American history in which the general disillusionment preceded the firing of the first shot.[13] This may well be true, but the disillusionment would see its most extreme manifestation in Indo-China.

Caputo joined the Marines with many of the same heroic dreams and boyish ideals that had inspired the young Sledge. In Caputo's account of his baptism of fire, *A Rumour of War*, the reader watches his desperate attempts to cope with war and the growing realisation that he enjoyed it, perhaps too much. Confronted during one mission by a lone sniper hiding in the bush, he walked up and down a clearing trying to draw the sniper's fire, showing the kind of frenzied hatred that Homer attributed to the intervention of divine madness:

> 'C'mon Charlie, hit me you son of a bitch', I yelled at the top of my lungs. 'Ho Chi Minh sucks. Fuck Communism. HIT ME Charlie' . . . I was crazy.

> I was soaring high, very high in a delirium of violence . . . I was John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*. I was Aldo Ray in *Battle Cry*.[14]

Even before he saw battle he imagined himself charging up a beach head, 'like John Wayne in *Sands of Iwo Jima*'.[15] It looked as though the war would provide Caputo, as a Marine, with an opportunity to prove himself a hero. He watched as Lance Corporal Sampson saved one of his men after being shot by a sniper: 'Crawling on his belly and probing for mines with his bayonet, [Sampson] cleared a path through the field, slung the wounded man over his shoulder, and carried him to safety.' For this he received a Bronze Star. But his brave act is the last mention of heroism in Caputo's book. As the horrors of the war set in, either heroic deeds ceased to occur or he neglected to mention them. Indeed, he soon discovered that war was much less heroic than he had anticipated. He spent much of his time in Vietnam trying to find the heroic in himself, only to give up, realising 'none of us was a hero . . . We'd survived and that was our only victory.'[16]

Men like Caputo who went to Vietnam inspired by idealised clichés of heroism emerged from the war, in their own eyes at least, much lesser men than before they had gone in. While they tried to emulate the warriors of classical films and literature, they found little scope for that ambition. Indeed, adds Caputo, 'actual acts of heroism were often regarded askance by many combatants who feared that such antics risked the survival of the group or were just plain silly'. While many men went out to Vietnam with heroic ideals, few returned heroes in their own eyes; fewer still were able to cast themselves in a heroic light in the eyes of civilians back at home. No wonder they were so disillusioned, the warriors perhaps most of all.

The problem in Indo-China was that as a concept heroism was beginning to have a declining purchase on the American imagination. As Fussell explains, 'American troops tended to refrain from immolating themselves, preferring comfort, safety, moneymaking, drugs, alcohol, and sexual pleasure to the more heroic values formerly associated with the profession of arms.'[17] Caputo's company fought day to day, trudging through their patrol missions fortified only by the promise of liberty to the whorehouses of Da Nang and extra rations of beer at night. In many circumstances punishment for disobedience was directed at what would have most impact on the men – denying them access to alcohol being top of the list.

Even in the army's attitude to its own soldiers we find something more sceptical that makes the Vietnam War the first 'post-modern' conflict in history. One characteristic of the post-modern sensibility, writes Fussell, is a self-consciousness bordering on contempt for the medium or genre the artist is working in which can amount to a disdain for the public respect which usually greets, say, an art exhibition. Post-modern artists are always disparaging their art, and even their admirers, for taking both art and themselves too seriously. Our age, indeed, seems to be marked by a pervasive inability to take its own presuppositions seriously, and thus to be at some ironic distance from itself. Nothing is more characteristic of the

times than the ironic, detached self-consciousness that we have of contemporary life, which is why we can never again take anything on trust. One correspondent in Vietnam remembers that, when he went out into the field to photograph the war at first hand, 'we used to go in teams so that if one of us got blown away the other could cover it. A bit sick.'[18] But then equally sick was the military's love of phrases such as 'accidental delivery' and 'friendly fire', which soon became useful euphemisms to describe being killed accidentally by one's own men. All they succeed in communicating is an ironic detachment from death itself.

Especially indicative of this were the notorious 'body counts' which were employed to define success or failure, measured in terms of the number of Vietcong (VC) 'hits' American combat units reported each week. The body count system led to fierce competition between different units. Soldiers were 'shamed' in their own eyes if other units scored more highly: 'there was a race on for most kills', admitted a lance corporal based at Long Tan.[19] Body counts became the main index of success, for which there were important rewards from cans of cold beer to extended furloughs in Saigon.

Not that body counts were entirely an invention of the Vietnam War. They had been employed though not institutionalised in both world wars. But operationally, especially in Vietnam, the practice was deeply flawed for it was in the interest of units to exaggerate the death count, sometimes it was later discovered by as high as 100 per cent.[20] And whatever optimal efficiency it was thought to bring in the abstract, the concept of 'Constant Pressure' (another euphemism) demoralised and degraded soldiers by undermining their self-esteem. Thus enlisted men were routinely given mixed messages about who to kill, what the goal of the war was, and what defined success. While Caputo describes strict rules of engagement which were designed to ensure that no civilians were killed, statements from his skipper such as 'If he's dead and Vietnamese, he's VC' blurred any agreed understanding of what it meant to be a warrior.[21] As Caputo would later add, looking back on his own court martial for allowing his men to execute some young boys wrongly suspected of being members of the Vietcong, 'they had taught us to kill and had told us to kill, and now they were going to court-martial us for killing'.[22]

Skip another twenty years and we find another would-be warrior, Anthony Swofford, another US Marine, berating his lot in a much acclaimed account of his experience in the First Gulf War. Swofford joined the Marine Corps (or 'Jarheads' – so called for their haircut) at 18 years of age. The word 'jarhead' works on many levels, metaphorically. His book is a jar, a capsule which he has filled with his Marine Corps life; the title lets readers know that they will be entering a world hermetically sealed off from civilian life. Like Caputo, Swofford had dreamed of joining the Marine Corps during his adolescence. He asked his mother to attach to one of his white collared shirts an iron-on U.S.M.C. patch, foreshadowing his enlistment less than four years later. In the course of the book he tells us that his desire to enlist in the Corps 'was based on my intense need for acceptance into the family clan of manhood'.[23] It was from the need to test his manhood in battle that Swofford also derived his intense need to be heroic.

But heroism was even less in fashion in Swofford's America than it was in Caputo's. Even in a time of peace, he admits to having to hide from his peers his desire to enlist in the Corps. 'It was not cool to want to be in the military, so I kept this desire to myself.' Once in the Corps he found that the social stigma attached to a heroic death still pursued him. This was vividly elucidated in a letter from his father, an army veteran himself, which he received in Kuwait during the build-up to Desert Storm: 'my father's recent letter urging me not to be a hero. He had written that all of the heroes he knew from Vietnam were dead, and that in the first place they were stupid for dying.' His response is equally telling: 'I tell my father that I will only be a hero if the battlefield renders me so, that I will not seek the heroic deed.'[24] Much to his disgust he was soon to find that the post-modern battlefield no longer offered much opportunity for heroism.

Swofford mentions only one occasion on which he came under heavy fire and then it was from his own side. He almost ended up a victim of what the military calls 'accidental delivery'. His team leader Johnny radioed in to halt the firing. His prompt response earned him a medal. Swofford was later to question whether he too did not deserve a medal for yelling, 'Tell those motherfuckers, Johnny, tell those motherfuckers they just hit our water buffalo and murdered someone.' On second thoughts he came to the conclusion that no one should have been awarded a medal. 'I too deserved an award, but I would have plenty on my chest anyway and none of it worth even a few dead shadows floating through the mirage.'[25]

Reading *Jarhead* one is particularly struck by Swofford's name for the Marine Corps: 'the suck', a name which he claims was commonplace among the men with whom he served. Despite widespread acclaim his book is not popular with many Marines, who are inclined to think that he has an exaggerated sense of how important his testimony is; others think that he writes in a voice that sounds dangerously close to self-pity. But his account does capture a sense of growing alienation or disenchantment with the face of modern warfare. What disenchants them most is how little the life of the contemporary soldier now conforms to the Homeric ideal.

The *Iliad* and the modern face of battle

> My STA mates have fanned out to find friends and talk trash but I sit in the back of our Humvee and read the *Iliad* . . . All around me jarheads fight and wrestle and sweat and trade war stories and I read my book.
>
> Two jarheads who have lost their first wrestling matches are consoling . . . one another when one of them notices me. He approaches my vehicle and says, 'What are you reading?'
>
> 'The *Iliad*.'
>
> He reaches towards me and I hand him the book and he examines the back cover. He says, 'That's some heavy dope, sniper. Cool' and he returns to grappling with his partner.
>
> For the sniper, dope is anything that helps him acquire a target.[26]

This passage comes from Swofford's book. To anyone familiar with Homer, the picture of young Marines wrestling in the desert might bring to mind the Greek chieftains wrestling, racing and throwing the javelin around the funeral pyre of Patroclus, not so much in memory of their dead comrade as in celebration of their own aliveness and strength. Even in the midst of carnage life forges ahead. War and mortality may cry havoc in the Homeric world but the centre holds nonetheless. Homer's tale is still popular with many soldiers because it tells them that the works and days of men are worth recording, and that no catastrophe – not even the burning of Troy – is final. Life goes on.

But Swofford writes in disappointment, as much as anger, at the brutalities of life in boot camp and the field, which have not changed much even in an age of network-centric war. He was especially vexed by the bone-headed boredom which most soldiers confront when not involved in actual combat. His account is indeed chastening for any testosterone-charged young man dreaming of a military career. Like most of his colleagues he was perpetually hyped up for a battle that never came. The air bombardment took weeks, the ground campaign when it came only 100 hours, scarcely enough time to root the reality of war in the minds of those who were asked to fight it. For the infantry the Gulf War was a bad movie, an empty spectacle where special effects presided over derivative ideas and unoriginal plots. Swofford writes of a war in which he found himself plunged into an existential crisis. The pointlessness of his existence could only be assuaged by killing, and there was precious little of that since the enemy remained largely unseen, or over the horizon.

Yet the crisis for Swofford ran deeper still. The worst moment of all, he tells us, was in retrospect 'the moment of madness' in which he joined the Marines in the false expectation of becoming a true warrior like Achilles. Like so many of his friends, he writes, he was 'ruined early by the Marine Corps' and it is to the Corps that we can attribute what he reports as the 'loneliness and poverty of spirit' he encountered at first hand.[27] As in Caputo's account of the Vietnam War there are no real villains in his book, only villainous circumstances, but if there's an enemy it is the Corps, which misled him into thinking that there is still a place for the warrior in modern warfare.

What makes his disappointment all the more telling, he tells us, is that he came from a long line of warriors. 'Before me my father had gone to war and also my grandfather, and because of my unalterable genetic stain I was linked to the warrior line.'[28] This explains why he was drawn to the *Iliad*, precisely perhaps because it is not history but myth, and myth has an appeal which spans the generations. Homer's poem appeals to each new generation. It is one of those protean works whose meaning seems to shift with each new reading. It offers us a psychological insight into what makes us human and, more to the point, why the warrior, as opposed to the ordinary soldier, is a specific human type, a man who derives his humanity from war.

The themes and beliefs the great poets like Homer explore in their poetry are those associated with the *mythic* dimension of war. And Homer explored the myth within a context in which war was taken as a given – an unavoidable (and

sometimes regrettable) part of life. So like Swofford we must begin at the beginning; we must start with Homer because he is not only the greatest but the most interesting poet to have discussed the nature of war, even if its character has changed, as we might well expect in the course of the last 2,600 years.

Homer's great epic has been known as the *Iliad* ever since the Greek historian Herodotus so referred to it in the fifth century BC. The word means 'a poem about Ilium', but the real theme of the poem is best summed up in its opening line, translated by the first English verse translator, Chapman, as 'Achilles' baleful wrath'. For this is a poem not so much about war as about warriors. It is provoked by the 'abduction' of Helen, the wife of Menelaus, Achilles' kinsman. We are told of no other cause, and only an age so preoccupied with instrumental reason, with the 'real' meaning of events, will find, as did the Hollywood screenplay writers of Wolfgang Petersen's film *Troy* (2003), a political subtext: trade rivalry between the Greeks and their rivals, the Trojans. As for the incident that sparks Achilles' rage in the final year of the war, it is the main theme of the poem, the mainspring of the plot. It arises from the shame visited upon the greatest of all Greek warriors by his commander, Agamemnon. In other words, it arises from a personal affront which becomes a public crisis.

The crisis is occasioned when Achilles loses a slave girl to Agamemnon, who demands her in recompense for his own loss, a priestess whom he is forced to return to appease the god Apollo. Angered by the dishonour he has suffered in the eyes of his own men – and glory and honour are the two key attributes of every warrior down the ages – Achilles withdraws from the field. Only the death of his friend Patroclus at the hands of Hector, the greatest of the Trojan heroes, leads to a belated reconciliation with his own side. His rage is not diminished but it is now directed against Hector, whom he kills. The *Iliad* ends not only with Hector's funeral but with an intimation of his own, which he has been told will follow closely on from Hector's. The poem ends, in other words, with the death of the two greatest warriors in Western literature.

Such are the bare bones of an epic poem which in the original Greek consists of over 15,000 lines of hexameter verse. But what exactly is the Homeric reality? And what insights into modern war did Swofford expect to gain from reading the *Iliad*? Every generation has to make sense of Homer in the light of its own experience. We read him in order to analyse our own age with greater clarity. We look for correspondences with the world in which we live. We are irredeemably self-referential. As Guy Debord says somewhere: 'Men resemble their times more than their fathers.' When we read Homer we ask not how we resemble the heroes but how much they resemble us. In a word, every age gets the Homer it deserves, or perhaps secretly desires.

As the West has evolved, so at different times its various societies under pressure from their own histories – both past and contemporary, both real and imagined, both personal and collective – have developed very varied and often sharply opposed preconceptions of the ancient Greeks' character and achievements. It makes a great deal of difference whether you are Christian or post-Christian, a man or a woman, a German or an Englishman. The Greeks are who we imagine

them to have been; we appropriate them in our imagination and turn them into 'us'; we read them through a contemporary lens; we read into them what we want. We re-experience them all the time.

Back in the early eighteenth century the Neapolitan philosopher Giambattista Vico was the first writer to show Achilles and his fellow warriors in a much less flattering light than they had been seen in by Chapman's generation. Homer's heroes, he reminded his readers, lived an absurdly simple life. Achilles cooked his own meals. And he was often unheroic, railing like a fish wife at Agamemnon, or weeping like a child at the death of his friend. Like Achilles, many of the heroes on both sides 'exhibit the capriciousness of children, the vigorous imagination of women and the seething passion of violent youths'.[29]

Vico explained away these contradictions – or what his own age found puzzling because distinctly unheroic – by the fact that the heroes were primitives who had only recently climbed out of the mire. Their actions revealed a dark world which cast into relief the striking differences of feeling and expression between Homer's age and his own. The heroes might be incomparable poetic archetypes, but they would have been completely out of place in the salons – or even on the battlefields – of Enlightenment Europe. And eighteenth-century warriors were expected to be at ease in both. What makes Vico's voice so contemporaneous is that he was the first modern writer to see Achilles as we are encouraged to see him today: a man who was pitiless, or lacking in humanity. No mind rendered humane by philosophy, Vico added, could have created the inhumanity or even infantile nature of Homer's world. Yet this was precisely the point. The source of the poem's astonishing power owed everything to 'the gruesome atrocity of the Homeric battlefield', a gruesomeness that Vico seized upon as evidence to drum home his central insight: that over time men tend to live by radically different moral codes and even speak in radically different vocabularies of value.[30]

Another writer, the historian George Grote, went even further in stripping down the *Iliad* to the basic story, Books 1, 8 and 11–22, which for him contained the original: a harsher, more savage poem with none of the humane touches that his own age, like ours, finds so moving: the parting of Hector and his wife Andromache, or the journey that his father Priam makes to Achilles' camp to secure the return of his son's body. These, argued Grote, were the product of a later, more humane hand.[31]

Whether or not this is the case, it is not necessary to excuse the *inhumanity* of the *Iliad* to appreciate its appeal. As Vico tells us, what appealed to the Greeks most was the relentless butchery that it describes. For Homer makes no attempt to spare his readers the reality of the killing ground which constituted the battlefields of the Trojan War, any more than he is willing to spare them the degradation of the violent death with which many of the heroes meet in the course of the struggle, including Hector, the noblest of all. Take, for example, the terror of the Trojan charioteer Thestor at the approach of Achilles' friend Patroclus:

> Cowering, crouched in his fine polished chariot,
> Crazed with fear, the reins flew from his grip –

Patroclus rising beside him stabbed his right jaw bone,
Ramming the spearhead square between his teeth so hard
He hooked him by that spearhead over the chariot-rail,
Hoisted, dragged the Trojan out as an angler perched
On a jutting rock ledge drags some fish from the sea
Some noble catch, with line and glittering bronze hook.
So with the spear Patroclus gaffed him off his car
His mouth gaping round the glittering point
And flipped down face first,
Dead as he fell, his life breath blown away.
(*Iliad*, 16. 478–89)

Nothing can be more degrading than the manner in which Thestor meets his death – speared on a hook, netted as a prize and then gutted like a fish on a slab.

This should, of course, prompt us to ask: what disappointed Swofford most? The fact that the modern face of battle is different from that of the Homeric age? Or the fact that he was denied the 'joy of combat' which led him initially to join the Marine Corps? Spared the combat, he was spared the killing as well. One of the most common words for combat in the Iliad, *charme*, comes from the same root as *chairo* – 'rejoice'. Thus Homer describes two warriors holding the line in a desperate struggle as *charmei gethosunoi*, 'rejoicing in the joy of battle'.[32]

What they rejoice in, of course, is not so much the killing as the combat experience. The *Iliad*, writes Harold Bloom, teaches us 'the surpassing glory of armed victory', which is why Achilles has been held up as the supreme warrior ever since.[33] The Greeks themselves saw in him the paragon of male courage – 'the splendour running in the blood' (to quote that arresting phrase of the poet Pindar). It is that splendour that the early poets wanted us to share. Through the power of words, they wanted to draw us into the unfolding action, to identify with the heroes on both sides of the war. Who does Homer himself favour? Where do his sympathies lie: with the Trojans or the Greeks? It is likely that Homer had no sympathies. There is no need to 'take sides' when the characters are doing it for you. What inspires the modern reader most, after all, is not the cause for which the heroes fight, or even the character of the actors, but the intensity of their experience, the enthusiasm with which they fight.

What is that joy, the 'splendour running in the blood'? I find it is best treated by two philosophers. The first is Immanuel Kant, who in a short passage in *The Critique of Pure Reason* discusses two categories of logic, or what he calls 'the understanding'. One is objective, or what we might call instrumental or deterministic judgements. It is what we call instrumental rationality. We set out to achieve something and find the means by which to achieve it. The other is purely subjective: it is the realm of aesthetic judgements of taste, or what Kant calls 'reflective judgements'. The latter are subjective because they are unique to those who experience them at first hand. According to Kant they are grounded in two kinds of feeling: those that are pleasurable such as excitement; and those that are

unpleasant such as shock, fear and loathing. And both have less to do with rational arguments than they do with the imagination and most immediately sensation.[34]

The philosopher Schopenhauer came up with something similar when he described the aesthetic imagination as 'the contemplation of the world independently of the principle of reason'.[35] That is the existential realm in which rational contemplation often gives way to those epiphanies or transcendent bursts of insight that seem to be the peculiar prerogative of the warrior. One of the most famous (as we shall see) is Pierre's epiphany during the battle of Borodino in the greatest fictional account of war after Homer, Tolstoy's novel *War and Peace*.

Sensation is the key concept and the Greeks grasped this from the first. For we shouldn't be surprised if combat can be pleasurable in Kant's sense of the word. After all, all emotion is pleasurable, however dreadful the stimulus. That is the fundamental reality which, in the case of war, we are increasingly reluctant to acknowledge. Thus even in the dispiriting phase of the war in Iraq, during the insurgency which followed the rapid conventional phase of the conflict, after the taking of Baghdad, operations could still be 'sensational' for many who took part in them. We find this not in poetry or novels or even stories of individual campaigns written after the event but in many accounts written in the field courtesy of a new technology. Blogging now allows soldiers to upload their daily reflections and opinions in an odd-ball Greek chorus. Thus some of the best descriptions of the fighting in Fallujah in November 2004 came from a first lieutenant using the backlit screen of his Dell laptop:

> Terrorists in headwraps stood anywhere from 30 to 400 meters in front of my tank. They stopped, squared their shoulders at us just like in an old-fashioned duel, and fired RPGs at our tanks. So far there hadn't been a single civilian in Task Force 2-2 sector. We had been free to light up the insurgents as we saw them. And because of that freedom, we were able to use the main gun with less restriction.[36]

Awarded the Silver Star for saving his tank task force during an assault elsewhere in the Sunni Triangle, this was a warrior who thoroughly enjoyed combat at close quarters, which is why he had joined the Marines. He went by the name of 'Red 6' and was the author of a web site called Armor Geddon. For him the poetry of war was to be found in the sound of exploding bombs and the chaos of the battlefield. One of his favourite sounds was that of an F-16 fighter on a strafing run: 'It's like a cat in a blender ripping the sky open – if the sky was made out of a phone book.' Red 6 was not only a warrior but also something of a poet. Behind the light swagger of his journalism was a man with a keen eye for the aesthetics of war, which is why many may find his journalism disturbing. Unlike Caputo, he might not have been able to tame the metaphors of violence or transform primary colours into depth and shade, but he was able to refine the raw material of experience.

Sensation, however, must not be mistaken for sensationalism, although the two are often confused. We experience a sensation before any deep reflection on what

it might imply. It involves *perception*, not *cognition*, and the fact that a soldier may not think through his combat experience at the time in no way detracts from the awe it may inspire. Such experiences can frequently reduce the subject to a state of silence or confusion. Recently the concept of 'awe' has begun to attract the attention of psychologists who have noted that a range of stimuli can inspire it, including combat. What awe produces in the subject is a feeling of vastness which covers anything that can be experienced as larger than the self or the self's ordinary level of experience or frame of reference.[37]

There is no awe in *Jarhead*, only a sense of desolation. And there is no joy, just an emptiness that mirrors an empty battlefield: not 'a field of honour' so much as an empty landscape devoid of any of the contours that would have been familiar to Homer. Many of Swofford's fellow Marines even when playing football in the desert were forced to wear their gas masks and protective chemical suits. Some even invested in non-standard-issue Depend diapers because their instructors had told them that as many as 25 per cent of them could be expected to lose control of their bowels under fire; they were also a regrettable necessity when wearing protective suits for hours at a time. Unfortunately, there is very little that is Homeric about the modern soldier issued with atropine and oxine injectors and PB pill packs, both intended to reduce the likelihood of dying from the ever growing number of nerve agents with which he might be attacked in battle.

So what else did Swofford fail to find on the battlefields of the Gulf War? Not the hard work – e*rgon* as the Greeks called it, by which they meant the killing. 'Work' is one of Homer's most frequently used words for what men do in battle. Swofford never got to kill anyone even though as a member of a scout sniper platoon he was more likely than most to actually see the enemy he targeted. Instead, his alienated attitude from his own profession is caught in his description of what it now means to be a sniper. 'Systems management: we might just as well call marksmanship by that name – anyone can be taught a system.' And systems management is precisely what war has become or is in the process of becoming. As the US military has progressively instrumentalised war, so the existential dimension has been increasingly hollowed out. Killing is now mostly done at a distance, by means of a technology so remote from everyday experience as to deny the exercise of even that limited range of emotions which once made war such an intensely human activity, a fitting theme for poets.

The mission of the military, Swofford tells us, is to 'extinguish the lives and livelihood of other humans'. 'To be a Marine, a true Marine, you must kill. 'With all of your training, all of your expertise, if you don't kill, you're not a combatant.'[38] But if this was his mission, then he failed. In fact, he recalls only one opportunity he ever had to kill another man, when he lined up a general in his sniper sight. But his mission was called off, and he left the war zone never having fired a shot. Later he confesses to being thankful that he was spared from the war, even if that diminished his combat service.[39] The only dead Iraqis he ever saw – 'hunched over, hands covering their ears as though they had been waiting in dread' – were the victims of concussion from a blast of a Daisy Cutter bomb, a smaller version of the Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb which was to be used

twelve years later in Operation Iraqi Freedom. Today the Daisy Cutter, which falls silently from an aircraft and kills with the certainty of a concussive overpressure of 1,000 lb per square inch, has replaced the sustained artillery barrages of the First World War.

Swofford's battlefield, in short, was one from which human agency had apparently departed the field, and with it human interest. Swofford's problem was that his ground war lasted no longer than an average long-range reconnaissance patrol in Vietnam; the 'flyboys' did most of the job and the Abrams tanks did the rest. There is no heroism without a challenge, or hardship; what might have been heroic was put into question by the incompetence of the enemy. The Iraqis didn't even maintain their weapons in working order which meant they could not have fired back in a potential firefight (of which there were precious few).

It was human interest, of course, that sold his book – or rather lack of interest: the boredom, the missed opportunities, the self-reflection on all of the above. Swofford was more of a Hamlet than an Achilles and he hated it. But should his account be seen as a lament for a dying class, written by a man who wanted to be a warrior but who could no longer find on the modern battlefield any scope for that ambition?

For there is another, more profound way in which the *Iliad* no longer resonates with today's warriors. What Homer's poem offers its readers is human interest at its most profound: the intellectual and emotional growth of the hero, or his 'becoming' what he is ('finding himself' in today's jargon). In the course of a war a warrior discovers his true self. When Priam visits his tent Achilles not only shields the old man (if Agamemnon had known of the visit we can imagine he would have put him to death) but he promises that for the twelve days of Hector's funeral the fighting will be suspended. The *Iliad* ends with Hector's funeral: Hector 'the breaker of horses', which we know means the resumption of fighting (to be followed almost immediately by Achilles' death, though not before he has been put in touch with his humanity). The poem concludes as it begins on the eve of battle. It's that growth in self-awareness that is absent from Swofford's account. Instead, we find that, in an age of 'Shock and Awe', there is not much scope for personal development, only for programming.

The anxiety of influence

It is a challenge, it is interesting to note, that was anticipated some time ago by Karl Marx in a remarkable passage towards the end of *The German Ideology*:

> Is Achilles possible when powder and shot have been invented? And is the *Iliad* possible at all when the printing press and even printing machines exist? Is it not inevitable that with the emergence of the press, the singing and the telling and the muse cease; that is, the conditions for epic poetry disappear?[40]

What Marx grasped, in a remarkable foretaste of the future, was the fact that modern technology would soon redefine the parameters of human behaviour. Apart

from its economic implications technology also influences the ways in which people perceive reality. 'As individuals express their life, so they are', Marx added. Thus modern firepower, especially in the First World War, did more than bring to an end the age of chivalry. It spelled the end of the epic. With the death of glory so the epic proportion of war disappeared. And if war can no longer be portrayed in epic terms, can warriors still be depicted in an epic light? If there was no place for Achilles on the industrialised battlefields of the Great War, is there a place for him in the post-industrial battle spaces of today with their information flows and smart weapons?

To pose the question is to engage with the challenge which every poet since Homer has also had to face. It is what one of America's foremost literary critics, Harold Bloom, calls 'the anxiety of influence'. In his 1973 work Bloom likened the modern poet to Milton's Satan who fell from Heaven for aspiring to the perfection of God. The modern poet too, wrote Bloom, struggles to define himself in relation to the founding fathers of the Western canon, in particular Homer, Dante and Shakespeare. The dilemma produces two kinds of authors – 'strong poets' who accept the perfection of their predecessors and yet strive to transcend it through subtle subterfuges including a subtle misreading of their predecessors' work and 'weak poets' who find themselves overwhelmed. Not even the strong poets, however, can hope to approach, let alone surpass, the past masters. For that reason modern poets are essentially tragic figures, latecomers to the game.[41]

Modern warriors too are latecomers, and their burden is just as heavy. For them mimetic rivalry is just as acute, not least because they are always returning – even now – to the mythical figure of Achilles. In war as in politics myths matter. Indeed, the stories they tell shape war by allowing warriors to cast themselves as inheritors of great traditions. From the beginning immersion in the *Iliad* was a major part of a Greek male's education. Both Xenophanes and Plato refer to Homer as the teacher of Greece. In Xenophon's *Symposium* a certain Niceratus recounts how his father made him learn the entire Homeric corpus in order to become a 'good man'. A thousand years later, travellers could still visit the tomb of Achilles, one of the man-made tumuli that in the nineteenth century first attracted the attention of European archaeologists who found that they did indeed contain burials of the archaic period. Pausanias writing in the second century AD reported that the sceptre of Agamemnon was still on display in Boeotia, as was the spear of Achilles in Lycia. The spear was of bronze, proving that Homer was correct to say that the heroes fought with Bronze Age weapons. What is remarkable is that centuries after the *Iliad* was composed the intrepid reader could visit the battles scenes of Troy and the burial mounds of the heroes and even meet those who claimed (and probably believed) they were descended from them.

One man who certainly did was Alexander the Great. Aristotle introduced the young Alexander to Homer and the poet by all accounts remained his favourite author. He took the *Iliad* with him on campaign. On landing in Asia Minor his first act was to visit the purported site of Achilles' tomb. When he was asked at Troy whether he would like to see the lyre of one of Priam's sons he replied that he

would rather see 'the lyre of Achilles on which he used to sing the glorious deeds and actions of brave men'. Years later he was to lament that his greatest misfortune was to have no one like Homer to record his own deeds.[42]

Alexander spent his life, short as it was, trying to surpass Achilles, a task in which inevitably he failed, as every warrior must. Our fictional heroes are beyond reach because they are archetypes, not flawed human beings. But at least Alexander died in the knowledge that after Achilles he would be considered supremely worthy of emulation. It is not Achilles but Alexander who inspires the hero of Shakespeare's *Henry V*. Indeed, the Alexander motif runs through the play. We see the young king urging his men into the breach at Harfleur, extolling their fathers as 'so many Alexanders' who should sheathe their swords 'only for lack of argument'. Henry has the glamour of Alexander and like his hero dies young with worlds still left to conquer.[43]

More recently there have been many warriors who have heard in Homer not the verse of a distant, barbarous age but a voice which had once been ours, one of our own modes of being caught as it were upon the wing and preserved over the centuries. Thus another young English soldier, Patrick Shaw-Stewart, on rereading the *Iliad* on his way to Gallipoli felt a dreadful sense of déjà vu at the sight of Imbros and Troy, or what he called 'those association saturated spots'. Knowing that he would have to face the Turkish machine guns, he yearned for the strength of Achilles: 'I will go back this morning/ From Imbros over the sea/ Stand in the trench, Achilles/Flame-capped, and fight for me.'[44]

Englishmen of Shaw-Stewart's generation were also inspired by Shakespeare's hero Henry V, a man who is another of Bloom's 'strong poets', one who rebels against the influence of Achilles/Alexander by accepting the perfection of his predecessors and yet strives to transcend it by fighting on a different battlefield. Hence the importance of Marx's seminal question: is Achilles possible in the age of gunpowder, for it invites us to ask whether Achilles, or Alexander for that matter, would have survived the first day at Gettysburg, let alone the first day of the Somme? It is precisely by locating himself on a different battlefield, in a different era, facing different challenges that the warrior can strive to transcend Achilles, if he can no longer aspire to surpass him. By meeting challenges Achilles never had to face he can continue the great tradition. In this he differs from soldiers like Anthony Swofford who complain that there is no place for the warrior on the modern battlefield – these Bloom would have called 'mere rebels' – those who don't seek to transcend the tradition so much as to deny that it has any place in the modern world.

But that leads us to the real challenge which the age of gunpowder presents, one which bothered Swofford the most: the problem of authorship – or agency. Many warriors have to contend with a diminished sense of self in the face of the technological dynamic of war. It is technology and its place in modern life which distances them most from the world of Homer. As Martin van Creveld reminds us, when Homer sang the praise of the weapons made by the god Hephaestos for Achilles, or when the anonymous author of the *Nibelungenlied* lovingly described those wielded by Siegfried, nothing was more remote from their minds than to

attribute their respective heroes' victories to technological superiority. Such a suggestion would have appeared less as praise for the weapons, or the craftsmen who forged them, than as an insult to their users. For the opposite view to establish itself took a major revolution which is generally associated with the transition from the pre-modern to the modern world.[45]

Thus another Siegfried – the warrior-poet Siegfried Sassoon – went to the Front expecting to find the heroic battlefields that he had read about in his youth. His poetic achievement, alas, was to record the war in its last, most critical phase in the fifteen months between August 1917 and September 1918 when the war became most industrialised. As a result his poetry tended to show men not for what they really were, heroes, but victims (as some but not the majority came to see themselves after the war). For we must distinguish between warriors such as Sassoon and the great majority of soldiers who were not warriors at all but men willing to shoulder their lot without complaint. Sassoon, by contrast, was a born warrior who won a deserved reputation for aggressive trench warfare, and was noted for conducting raids into No Man's Land, crawling through the deep corn with a couple of grenades in his pocket and a knobkerrie in his hand.[46] One of his most famous exploits was to capture an enemy trench single-handed. Lacking a messenger to send back for reinforcements he began dozing over a book of poems. No one doubted at the time or after that he sometimes loved the thrill of combat – perhaps too much. For he escaped some of the worst of its horrors and so felt guilt as well as anger and later despair. And the despair is interesting too: he despaired because he didn't think his own side could prevail. This crucial factor in Sassoon's protest against the war is usually overlooked. After the war he confessed that his opposition had been mistaken.

Sassoon's disappointment is echoed by many would-be warriors, and even by warriors who achieved their aims only to emerge from the experience more chastened men. It is difficult for warriors – especially aspiring ones – to find much scope for their ambition on the modern battlefield. By default they are in danger of becoming 'mere rebels', confirmed in their belief that the increasing instrumentalisation of war has made it all but impossible to be anything else: hence the disillusionment that one often finds in accounts like Swofford's – men who want to emulate their role models but find they fail at the first hurdle.

Swofford, one suspects, protests far too much; he is a deeply disappointed man, hence a rebel but not an especially endearing one. He certainly hasn't endeared himself to the Corps.

Sassoon was very different. He managed to translate his anger into some of the war's finest poetry. Yet one suspects that his anger was prompted more than anything else by the fact that he found so little scope for his ambitions on the industrialised battlefields of the Western Front. And as he began to turn against the war so he came to suspect some of the words such as 'honour', 'courage' and 'patriotism' that have inspired all warriors through the ages. As he came to the conclusion that such words had unleashed the war so he felt a duty to devalue them, creating in the process a sense of futility and vanity of endeavour which persists even today.

The paradox, of course, is that it is not words that make warriors. Words make war. It is deeds that make warriors, and qualities such as courage. But the problem with warriors is the problem of war – it is always changing and not in ways some warriors find appealing. The problem with Sassoon is the problem of the warrior myth – it encourages nostalgia – and the problem with nostalgia is that it is an illusion, as the very word reveals, for it is derived from the Greek words *nostos* (return) and *algos* (pain, grief, sorrow). It is, in effect, a self-inflicted sadness caused by revisiting a bright imagined past that never existed, one that makes the present seem less worthwhile or fulfilling. History tells us how life was; nostalgia merely reflects how we wish it had been.

Achilles in Hollywood

Let us go back to Marx. For he questioned not only whether Achilles as a human type had a place in the industrial age but also whether 'the singing and the telling and the muse cease'.[47] Can we celebrate warriors any longer, if not in the currency of epic poetry, at least in the medium of film?

The problem is to be found in the new role models that make up the anxiety of influence. Swofford, of course, was true to the tradition. He engaged, or tried to, with the heroes of the distant, mythic past. Swofford never tells us whether he admired Achilles or whether like so many young recruits today his sympathies were with Hector, a warrior with many of the same skills but without the 'bad ass' attitude. But then the young grunts with whom he served in Iraq certainly did not read the Greeks; they went to the movies. Their heroes were the creation of the Hollywood studios. Of course the generals also go to the movies. A notable example of this is General Franks playing a clip from Ridley Scott's movie *Gladiator* to his command staff in the final huddle before operations commenced. In his own clumsy way Franks was trying to gee up his officers.

What the Hollywood moguls show, courtesy of special effects, is war close up. But they have great difficulty capturing its mythic dimension. And warriors live by myths, for their world is shaped by desire as much as truth. They wish to emulate their heroes. The warrior's world is not only the harsh, unforgiving truth of war but also what gives war its meaning. Myths are important for that reason, and the role to which they are put, for all myths perform a function.

Remember that it is myth, not history, that provides not only the role models but the *archetypes* by which we interpret life still, archetypes that are constantly reinterpreted and revised to fit their age. Myths demand more of those who believe in them; they inspire them so much that they are moved to act, and so meet a demand of our own humanity. None of us can be organised in terms of pure self-immanence. For some (the warrior), dying for others or sacrificing oneself for a friend or country is an objectively inescapable duty. It is objective because there is nothing that we can subjectively do to will it or even anticipate it. Sacrifice is usually the demand of the hour, but it is also a demand of our nature. An individual becomes other than he is or was; he becomes what he always has been in communion with others, and the moment. But what he becomes is shaped by the myths that echo in his heart.

This is why a myth is an allegory of the real and not its passive reflection. It is paradigmatic. In the case of war Achilles is the prototype of every warrior because his story constitutes a framework of reference which allows a soldier to assess, understand and judge the value of his own profession. And myths endure precisely because the archetypes they establish are more real than science, a paradox which we are usually reluctant to acknowledge. The ancient Greeks distinguished between factual and fictional, between *logoi* (science) and *mythoi* (stories largely about the gods). The former dealt with the abstract, the rational and the ethical, the latter with the human imagination. Myth is the transcendent encounter which tells us how to live our life. In our world its function has been taken over by art: hence the great existential questions posed so famously by Paul Gauguin in the title to one of his canvases: 'Where do we come from? Where are we? Where are we going?' Both science and mythology offer an answer to those questions, but myths speak to our imagination. Plato knew what intellectual expressions make for true humanity. In his ideal republic he suggested that the future citizen should begin his education with the telling of myths rather than facts or so-called rational teaching. As Aristotle grew older so he too came to favour myths more and more because they seemed to reveal to him, as they have more recently to the structural anthropologist Claude Lévi-Strauss, deep truths about the human condition.[48]

Myths permeate societies and institutions for that reason. They are destiny-defining. They help to identify and give fictional form to fears and desires deep in the human imagination which is why since the imagination is eternal we can empathise with characters from other eras and worlds. Even today we can even empathise, if we can't always identify, with Achilles. Even so, if our heroes are secular and very human we secretly identify with those that are superhuman, like all our comic-book heroes. Achilles is immortal but for his ankle, from which his mother lowered him into the river Lethe, that part of his body (in André Gide's ironic formulation) 'cursed with a mother's touch'. In that sense, his feats of strength and physical endurance are impossible. The *Iliad* is full of such super-human deeds, as are today's comic books; they feed our continuing appetite for wonder, which is why, in the end, warriors used to prefer Achilles to the strikingly human Hector. The *Iliad* dramatises our continuing attempts to escape from the secular back into a world of wonder and magic – and enchantment. Nothing could be more modern than that.

Even today myths continue to perform a number of instrumental functions not so much for society but for its different institutions. Let me identify three.

First, they help to sustain the authority of the particular group (a class or institution) which espouses them. They do more – they validate its social practices. 'We came to Fort Lewis afraid to admit we're not Achilles, that we're not brave, that we're not heroes.'[49] These words appear in Tim O'Brien's compelling account of his own tour of duty in Vietnam. The words are not the author's; they are those of one of the characters in the book chatting to a friend as they sit cleaning their M14 rifles and talking poetry and going back, as have so many aspiring warriors throughout the centuries, to the archetypal Western hero. Every war has its defining face and Vietnam was no exception: the friendly fire; the trip-mines; the invisible

enemy; the sharing of marijuana among officers and men; the 'fragging' (killing) of officers who led their men into 'unnecessary dangers'; the opulent support services. But even in Vietnam soldiers were not that different from those centuries before. What O'Brien's work suggests, like Swofford's reading of the *Iliad*, is that the Greeks still remained, and remain today, a common reference point – for a war without myths is difficult to imagine.

For today's warriors, as for O'Brien's, a myth offers us a way of living a social existence; it tells us how we should interact with others. A myth is a story that enables us to imagine our social surroundings and to carry out the collective practices that make up our social life. It inspires us to better things in our own lifetime. It instructs us in how we should act (the practice of being a good warrior), which is interwoven with the idea of how we ought to act (or which missteps would invalidate the practice). A myth offers us a framework within which we can identify role models (even if we know they are fictional). The appeal of Achilles is understandable. We will always fall short but, at least, we know what to aim at.

Now clearly, the myth of Achilles had diminishing appeal in Vietnam (which is the ironic point O'Brien makes in invoking him specifically by name). His contemporaries had as much difficulty relating the *Iliad* to their experience in Indo-China as did Swofford in Iraq, which must prompt us to ask whether any myth can ever be entirely false. Clearly, yes. Even in the original story Achilles himself is an unlikely creation. He is larger than life (not surprisingly perhaps, as he has a goddess, if a minor one, for a mother). Clearly, anyone who really tried to emulate him would fall short. But all myths have a constitutive function, that of making possible the practices that they make sense of and thus enable. In that sense, they are never *completely* false.

The second function of myth is psychological. It is a form of wish fulfilment or fantasising. It allows us to daydream, to act out a role, if only in our imagination. 'No habit is so important to acquire', Aristotle wrote, as the ability to delight 'in fine characters and noble actions'. When conveyed through literature (the *Iliad*, or *War and Peace*, and these days through film) a myth should inspire. It should compel us to live life more fully. It is when it inspires us to act differently or to demand more of ourselves that it becomes most real.

This is the hold that Achilles has held over soldiers and non-soldiers alike ever since Homer first spun his tale. Aristotle insisted that pleasure in mimesis is universal to apes and men. Imitation is indeed innate in humanity and has been from the time of the cave painters. We all need to tell stories and try to re-enact them. Mimicry can be unsettling for that reason. As Lichtenberg wrote, 'if an ape looks into a mirror it should not expect to see an apostle looking back'.

A mirror is fascinating even when it mocks us, as it does Cervantes' Don, one of the great fictional warriors, one of its major heroes (if an unlikely one). Take the passage in *Don Quixote* in which the hero instructs his page about the path of knighthood. As he tells Sancho Panza, he strives to emulate 'those knights errant' of chivalric romance at the apex of which stands not Achilles but Amadis of Gaul:

> I think that when a painter wants to become famous for his art he tries to imitate the originals of the best masters he knows . . . Amadis was the pole, the star, the sun for brave and amorous knights and we others who fight under the banner of love and chivalry should imitate him.[50]

Quixote's adventure is essentially mimetic. His imitation of Amadis transforms his judgements, his actions and even his visions. Much of the comic impact of Cervantes' novel, in fact, stems from Quixote's almost limitless imitative behaviour.

Today, the hero who inspired Quixote is hardly known except to a few scholars of early seventeenth-century Spanish literature. There was a time, however, when he was as well known as Achilles. He appears as a character in Garci Rodriguez de Montalvo's *Amadis de Gaula*, one of many *romances fronterizos* which told the story of the valiant deeds undertaken by fictional warriors in the 'reconquest' of Spain from the Moors. *Amadis* was the book that outsold all others. It spawned a sequel and a succession of imitations each inferior in their own way to the original. But they were popular at the time, and attracted a wide range of fans from the Emperor Charles V to Ignatius de Loyola, the founder of the Jesuit Order, who was, of course, a former soldier. Yet the greatest fans of all were the conquistadores, many of whom came to the New World with the novel in their kitbags. In our eyes Amadis may be a cartoon character in the way that Achilles is not but perhaps as a cartoon character he had a greater influence than the Homeric heroes could ever have done on the semi-educated young men who flocked to the Americas after Columbus's first voyage in search, like Achilles, of wealth and adventure, and even reputation.

For the importance of mimesis is that it has the potential to shape not only behaviour but the perception of behaviour. In other words, myth sets out what goals are worth pursuing. As René Girard argues, when Don Quixote ventures out into the world in search of glory inspired by the popular chivalric romances of his own day, the banal objects and events of the Spanish countryside are metamorphosed by his obsessive attachment to the Amadis myth. Ordinary surroundings become full of damsels in distress; windmills become imposing giants; even sheep are transformed into maleficent enemy warriors. Mimetic desire transfigures everyday objects, and thus enriches life.[51]

Defending himself against a priest who tells him 'to get real' – 'Go home – stop this wandering!' – the Don proclaims his achievement: 'I have set injuries and insults straight, righted wrongs, punished arrogance, conquered giants, and trampled on monsters.'[52] And he does all this in emulation of the hero of his imagination – an imagination which cannot be shared with most civilians (in this case the priest). It may surprise us to find this was carried over into real life. Take the conquistador, Bernal Diaz, who arriving in the New World found the Aztec capital Tenochtitlan the most imposing city he or any other Spaniard was ever to set eyes on in his lifetime. The only thing he could compare it with was 'the enchantment they tell us of in the legend of Amadis'. Similarly, his description of the great temple of Huitzilopochtli is lifted from Montalvo's description of an enchanted tomb.

And the process still continues. Thus just as the Spanish found the Arab world in Mexico, the Americans four centuries later found Mexico in Iraq. In the soldiers' own accounts of Operation Iraqi Freedom, a flat Arabic bread becomes a 'Hajji tortilla', a building becomes 'a Spanish church' and a particularly fly-infested town 'looks like fucking Tijuana'.[53] The locals, one Marine explains, are 'primitive people' like the Mexicans today. Invoking the painted skulls on display during the Mexican Fiesta do los Muertos, he adds 'What we should do is paint skulls on our faces. Come into these towns like demons. We would scare the shit out of them.'[54] Unfortunately, history did not pass by these particular young Marines; it passed them by. In this case disorder and chaos became metonyms for freedom and authenticity.

The third function that myths perform (and by far the most important) relates to the language we employ to make sense of the world about us. Roland Barthes tells us that myth is a mode of communication. It is a language, or rather what he terms a meta-language, by which we can make sense of a phenomenon. Until 1914 the language was provided very largely by epic poetry which referred back to a literary tradition and was intended for a literary audience familiar with the classics, for every epic poem referred consciously or not to the first by Homer. Obvious and successful imitation was a form of originality – hence the difficulty of using the epic once the world lost familiarity with the classics.

We live today in a pictorial world. What is most real for us is what we see on the screen. For the past half-century whenever warriors have sought to act the part they have invariably thought not of the written word but of the movies. Movies have brought warriors back to the foreground; they have given them a renewed lease of life, and a popular audience for the first time. Even as early as the Second World War Hollywood had defined the experience of war to such an extent that the authorities often replaced film clips from the battlefield with Tinseltown representations they believed would seem more real to cinema audiences. Movies have continued to shape our everyday expectations ever since. 'Where were you when we needed you?' John Wayne asked an American GI during the Normandy campaign, his knees and elbows raw after crawling up and down an irrigation ditch, surrounded by an unseen enemy, angry at his company for abandoning him and his men the previous night.[55]

Twenty years later Wayne's films were still the main point of departure for soldiers trying to relate their day-to-day experiences in the unforgiving environment of Indo-China. One of the characters in James Webb's Vietnam novel *Fields of Fire* draws inspiration from the films he has seen in his youth:

> Hodge and a half dozen friends would walk the five miles into the Hillsville on Saturday afternoon and sit through the *Sands of Iwo Jima*, *The Bridges at Toko-Ri*, *The Guns of Navarone*, *Anzio*, *The Battle of the Bulge* and dozens of others. It was all there on the screen. Standing up and fighting back. If John Wayne was not God then he was, at least, a prophet.[56]

Twenty years later during the Tet Offensive in 1968 Staff-Sergeant Joe R. Hooper, the war's most decorated soldier, found himself identifying closely with

Wayne. His own exceptional courage in taking out several Vietcong bunkers single-handed won him America's highest award for bravery, the Congressional Medal of Honor. Wayne has continued to exercise his spell. When the United States was humiliated by an Iranian mob in 1979 students of San José University in California marched around the streets holding up pictures of an actor who was deemed to represent the traditional manly virtues that had disappeared in the intervening years. Even his life off the screen was thought to correspond exactly with his roles on it.

It is all the more ironical, therefore, that Wayne himself should have failed to put his countrymen in touch with their own heroic past in the most crass of the Vietnam War movies, *The Green Berets* (1967). Wayne's film may have bombed at the box office but it is through movies such as *Platoon* and *The Deer Hunter* that we still understand the Vietnam War. Hollywood still provides the 'meta-language' by which warriors can talk about their own profession. Art may not imitate life but it often anticipates it. In the Second Gulf War soldiers related what they found on the ground to what they had seen on the screen. When the first Huey helicopters appeared inside Iraqi territory it became a real *Apocalypse Now* moment, and when Private Jessica Lynch was captured by Iraqi troops she became their 'Private Ryan' in need of heroic rescue.[57]

But here is the rub. The real warrior ethos is difficult to capture on film. Of course, one can see why Hollywood has such initial appeal; it tends to individualise life. It is much more interested in warriors than it is war; it makes them larger than life but it often renders them lifeless at the same time. Unlike epic poetry, film lacks psychological depth. It shows the outside of life; it shows behaviour in the light hours of consciousness. Epic poets could show behaviour in the dark hours as well; they were not time-constrained; they could range more widely. Film tackles the immediate, the action-packed: chases, and explosions; poetry tackles the soul.

For that reason Hollywood has great difficulty making war *mythic*. The mythic awakens a vision of greatness unknown in the experience of the present world yet it leaves all experience behind it including heroic deeds and great events that are remembered and are, therefore, on everyday tongues, events that have a continuing life. The mythic is everything that preserves the underlying substance of a living culture. In the case of war what is most mythic of all is the willingness of the warrior to consecrate his life to the rest of us, to his community, or his comrades, and sometimes (though not always) to a cause. Sacrifice is his covenant with death, and it is death that Hollywood has difficulty making sense of.

Let us take the case of Wolfgang Petersen's film *Troy* (2003). There is no doubting the continuing popularity of the story it tells. In recent years there have been several adaptations of the *Iliad* for television (such as USA Network's *Helen of Troy*). The book market has also seen at least four novels, including Dan Simmons's sci-fi palimpsest *Ilium*, the one modern reworking to capture both the savage poetry of the original and the terror in which the gods must once have been held (revealed in the novel as unimaginably enhanced post-humans from the far

future, their Mount Olympus the Olympus Mons, the Martian volcano).[58] But in Petersen's film version not only did the screenplay writers take liberties with Homer. Even the critics misunderstood the epic poem. Nowhere in the film do we find what for Homer mattered most: the hero's covenant with death. Thus David Edlestein confidently announced in *Slate* that the movie stays true to Homer's grim message. It:

> of course, comes to us largely from Homer's the *Iliad* and while artists over the centuries have added their own gloss the thrust remained unchanged. For all the heroics of these legendary warriors the Trojan War was a grotesque and needless waste of lives.[59]

Likewise in the *New Yorker* David Denby tells us that at the end 'the Greeks didn't win anything worth winning'. The 'bitterness of loss' is all that remains, a bitterness, we are told, that is the underlying theme of Homer's tale.[60]

Except that it clearly isn't. For the bitterness of loss is compensated for by remembrance of the deed. Achilles chooses a short life over a long, so that he will be remembered over the centuries. Homer's poem is not about loss but a work of celebration, which is why one writer calls his conception of poetry a song without limits. It has been sung ever since it was first composed. As the Scots poet Edwin Muir put it, 'Achilles and Hector slain/fight, fight and fight again/in measureless memory'.[61]

It is Nietzsche who memorably tells us that we find words only for what is already dead in our hearts, so that there's always a kind of contempt in the act of speaking. The same might be said of Hollywood. Today the contempt comes in misrepresenting the writers of the past, alluding to the 'grim inspiration' of the *Iliad*, or its alleged message: that war is a waste of lives. Hollywood's contempt in the act of speaking is to devalue the tragic dimension of war, which is not only its waste – material or human, its scarred victims, its traumatised soldiers – but also in equal measure the warrior's attitude to mortality itself.

The quality for which Hollywood is invariably praised is humanity, its great ability to tell very human stories. Personality is more like it. Intimate with both subject and viewer it dissolves emotional distance. Homer and those who came after him act upon our emotions quite differently. What they show – as do all the great myth spinners – is the warrior as a human type. Homer in particular, of course, did dissolve emotional distance in a way that no other poet has ever matched, which is why Achilles is still real for us, but he also insisted on that distance. Most of us are not warriors and we can never aspire to be. The importance of myth in the greatest works of literature derives from an awareness of the distance that separates us from each other, and the greatest distance of all is the warrior's attitude to death.

Hollywood fails to capture the tragedy of every warrior, which stems from what Jacques Monod called 'the heroic indefatigable effort of mankind to *deny in despair* its own contingency'.[62] For war is the ultimate expression of human contingency. A warrior's life for a short moment is bounded by death. No one knows when he

enters battle who will live or die, who will live to fight another day or be returned home in a body bag. No one, to invoke a very tired but familiar cliché, knows whether his name is on the next bullet or not. For the warrior, nevertheless, the battle is joined with gusto. He dares all, including death, to test his courage. In running into the face of battle (rather than running away from it) he transcends the contingency of life and thus asserts his own humanity. The inevitability of death is not disparaged, any more than is sadness in life. And a pain-free existence is not seen as the only appropriate value. Some feel they owe their lives a good death in battle. It is this belief that distinguishes the warrior as a human type from the rest of us.[63]

All art, insists the psychologist Roy Shaffer, deals in two concepts: the tragic and the comic. These are not the creation of artists like Homer, though Homer like Shakespeare and Tolstoy was able to communicate them in incomparable verse or prose. Both concepts are the distillation of the typical working of the human mind in imagination as revealed in mythic and later artistic production, such as the reworking of myths in the Greek tragedies. And they still shape our expectation of life and our sense of the place that glory, ambiguity, risk and triumph play in human affairs. Thus in Homer's story we find a tragic hero, Achilles, who is painfully aware of his own mortality, whose excellence makes him lonely and sets him apart from other men. For that reason he is a far more interesting figure than Hollywood can ever make him because he has a tragic, not comic, perspective on life. In the end, the problem with Brad Pitt's portrayal of Achilles is that he is such a thoroughly contemporary figure, a young man who is particularly prey to existential angst. He is a master of 'spin', a martyr not to his reputation but his image. As he lies dying, for example, he pulls out all of Paris's arrows except the one in his heel, leaving his body to be discovered with the single wound that will pass into legend.

Hollywood's version of history is 'comic' because its message is one-dimensional. On the one hand, it preaches that success is its own reward, when nothing could be further from the truth as true warriors experience it – many are unhappy for that reason. On the other hand, it also tells us that, even when they know defeat or failure, no dilemma is insoluble, no obstacle insurmountable, no evil so unrelieved that it is irredeemable, no suffering so intense that it is unmitigated, no loss ever final.[64] Nothing could also be more untrue.

In misrepresenting the tragic nature of war Hollywood has taken out its chief mythic element, what James Hillman calls 'the norms of the unreasonable'.[65] One might think that the movie moguls would be able to capture the poetic element of war, the 'norms of the unreasonable', as the Greeks managed to do by reworking myth in their tragedies, just as Freud reworked the archetypes to explain human behaviour at the unconscious level, to give human beings even greater psychological depth.

All of this is the prelude to my central argument: that Hollywood is unable to place today's aspiring warriors in touch with their mythic past. Instead it has hollowed out the great tradition; it has coarsened it. Unmoved by tragedy and conflicted by death, the mythic dimension of the warrior soul is up against it. Many

of Hollywood's archetypal warrior-heroes are often fragile, traumatised human beings like John Rambo, a modern 'nothing is impossible' man, another one-dimensional action figure engaged in a compellingly reductive vision of war as pure violence. Rambo to be sure is an Achillean figure in more than one sense. His kill count is as high as Achilles': over 130 people in the first three films in the franchise – *Rambo*, *Rambo: First Blood* and *Rambo 3*. In each of the movies the slaughter is unrelieved; the body count is daunting. And there is no end to his ingenuity. Those who fall victim to his murderous rage are garrotted, blasted, stabbed or strangled, blown up by mines, grenades or other explosives, shot by bullets or arrows, incinerated by flame throwers, bludgeoned or beaten to death or tossed off precipices or thrown out of aircraft. Like Achilles, Rambo is also distinctly low-tech. All he has is his will (he is driven by rage), his Indian hunting skills and – of course – with Achilles his near immortality.

But in sharp contrast to Homer, we watch Rambo's exploits as outsiders looking on: as spectators entertained but unaffected, like fans at a football match whose fortunes are not decided by what happens on the field. Some find themselves desensitised or numbed by the experience: for most of us, it is in no way cathartic. The moral universe of the production studios does not convey any deeper message. Watching these depressing formulaic films – a re-enactment of the warrior myth – does not allow us to assess the truth of it for ourselves. When it comes to portraying warriors they tell us little of the significance of the warrior's calling or his station, or what compels him to tap into his heroic potential, to live more intensely than the rest of us.

Aesthetics here discloses a growing recognition that war has become spectacle, a descriptive term standing for the indictable properties of the warrior rather than an appraisive term accrediting a certain kind of achievement (excellence). The *Iliad* as art combines representation (mimesis) with a degree of idealisation. We wish to emulate Achilles as Cervantes' hero wishes to emulate Amadis. Indeed, the Don as we have seen refers to the artist directly; his thirst for emulation is quite self-conscious, which makes so comic (and bathetic) his own failed attempts to live up to his ambitions. Yet he still inspires us today. What Cervantes brought to the literary and, through extension, the collective imagination was something new: 'Quixotic courage' – literal, moral, visionary, though, Harold Bloom adds ominously, even this metaphysic is waning in the age of the screen.[66] The Hollywood studios are slowly hollowing out this dimension too.

No true warrior would wish to emulate Rambo, a man who while undoubtedly brave is a damaged human being whose way back to psychic health is a form of aversion therapy: unadulterated violence. Yet for many soldiers he is the only hero they know. Regrettably, much of the gangland violence that disfigures America's inner cities breeds men like Rambo; more regrettable still, gangland villains are now popular in the military too. The historian Victor Davis Hanson even compares Hector's description of the Greek heroes to the rap lyrics that glorify rival gangs who shoot and maim each other for prestige, women, booty and turf.[67] As Francis Fukuyama writes of young adolescent gang members in America's inner cities who still are willing to die and kill for self-esteem:

> In our world there are still people who run around risking their lives in bloody battles over a name; or a flag; or a piece of clothing; but they tend to belong to gangs with names like the Bloods or the Crips and make their living dealing drugs.[68]

For Fukuyama a man is most human when he risks his life, when he allows his human desire to prevail over his natural instincts of self-preservation. In displaying his contempt for life at any price, he puts his dignity first and in so doing becomes a true moral agent. Indeed, the two gangs he invokes are like two rival armies even in their dress – the Crips (whose name is said to be an acronym for 'Crazy Real (or Ruthless) Insane People') wear blue; the Bloods wear red. And each has its respective cheerleaders – not lyric poets but hip-hop artists such as Snoop Dogg, Spider Loc and the late Eazy-E for the Crips, and Suge Knight and D.J. Quik for the Bloods. The Crips even dress differently, wearing British Knight tennis shoes, it is said, because the BK logo stands for 'Blood Killa'.

Now, it is true that one of the features that distinguishes gang warfare from murder is its existential appeal. Murder is usually instrumental. It is inherently utilitarian. It is motivated by the pursuit of individual profit. Gang violence, by contrast, is often existential. A man kills when his gang has been dishonoured. He is willing to kill for reputation. And although most criminals don't hazard their lives – most, when cornered, give up – this is not always true of the members of street gangs, like those of LA Central who blood themselves, or stake out a first kill as a rite of passage.

The difference between warriors and young gang members, nonetheless, is very real and we should acknowledge the differences if we are to make sense of why we should respect one and not the other. Gang members demand respect from others; they don't win it. Warriors in earning it come to respect themselves all the more. Self-respect is an intensely social and sociable quality for that reason. To punish 'dis-respect' imposes obligations on others, that they treat one as if one were of supreme importance. Young gang members, for the most part, are angry, often embittered and incapable of self-examination. For them respect is a right, and a world in which one's rights are never granted is an unbearable world, one against which revenge is often sought. Self-respect imposes obligations on oneself, for example that one behaves with decency even in the most challenging of circumstances. Self-respect is won by serving others; it is not self-referential, quite the reverse. It is at the very heart of that much misused term – the 'warrior's honour'.

Perhaps, it is our inability to find an existential dimension in war which makes us so attentive to the celebration of violence in the new and unfamiliar voices from the margins of our society. If so it is rather worrying that the margins can penetrate the US military too; it is regrettable that some soldiers think and act like gang members. When asked why he killed a woman at a checkpoint in Iraq, one young Marine replied: 'The chick was in the way', an impromptu response which was an authentic echo of the 'bad ass' attitude of gangster rap.[69] The fact is, writes Evan Wright, who accompanied a reconnaissance unit of the Marine Corps to Iraq in

2003, many of today's aspiring warriors have been raised on Rambo films, hip-hop and the lyrics of Marilyn Manson. Even the language they use betrays what has happened. 'Shooting motherfuckers like it's cool', one soldier described his experience in Iraq, mediating his own experience through the authentic language of a culture whose metaphysic is shaped by the entertainment industry:

> For them, 'motherfucker' is a term of endearment. For some, slain rapper Tupac is an American patriot whose writings are better known than the speeches of Abraham Lincoln . . . Many are on more intimate terms with video games, reality TV shows and internet porn than they are their own parents.[70]

'Shooting like it's cool' recalls Colonel Kilgore's classic line from Francis Ford Coppola's film *Apocalypse Now:* 'I love the smell of napalm in the morning.' It is one of the great lines of any war movie, writes J. G. Ballard, of an Armalite-toting Robert Lowell.[71] Is this a case of art anticipating life? The other classic scene in the movie is of American helicopters shooting up a Vietnamese village to the sound of Wagner's 'Ride of the Valkyries', which is highly appreciated by the young Marines in Sam Mendes' Hollywood version of *Jarhead* in which a thumping soundtrack of rap and T-Rex adds a comic beat to the sensory bombardment. Even as Swofford and his friends waited to be ordered into battle, overhead US bomber pilots flew missions with the heavy metal music of Van Halen pumping through their headsets.

Today, if anything, the musical accompaniment to war is more manic still. CD players in helicopters and tanks regularly provide soundtracks to the action on the battlefield, Slayer's 'Angel of Death' and Eminem's 'Let the Bodies Hit the Floor' being two of the favourites with the troops in Iraq.

> I was just thinking one thing (adds another soldier) when we drove into that ambush: *Grand Theft Auto: Vice City*. I felt like I was living it when I seen the flames coming out of windows, the blown-up car in the street, guys crawling around shooting at us. It was fucking cool.[72]

And 'cool' is what Hollywood and the military-entertainment industry have made war for many young soldiers experiencing it for the first time. 'Iraqis think we're cool', says one soldier, 'because we're so good at blowing shit up.' The rap lyrics, like the gangster-speak, are both reflective of a culture that not only celebrates mindless violence but also aestheticises it. The aesthetics are to be found in the special effects and in speed which tend to numb our senses, as well as sensibilities. Hollywood's violence is so often mindless for that reason. It encourages a mindless enjoyment of violence. Unfortunately, in 'aestheticising' violence so much it brings us perilously close to those societies that tend to 'sacralise' it in the form of the suicide bomber.

Conclusion

Recent conflicts may have produced much in the way of courageous and heroic acts but for some time now everything seems to have been transposed into a minor key. Speaking in his own day of the high horse in whose saddle Homer once rode, the poet Yeats found it 'rider-less'. We certain don't celebrate the warrior ethos as once we did and we have no Homer to sing of the warrior's deeds; instead we have Hollywood.

And the problem here is that if all great movie-makers love a good war – just as long as moral revelations can be rescued from the carnage and happy endings salvaged from the slaughter – what is 'dead in their heart' when they relay the message is the moral world in which the warrior has his being. This is why there is a crucial difference between soldiers brought up on PlayStations and the movies and the civilians back home safely removed from the action, both physically and emotionally. The latter are spectators; soldiers are not.

Yet the spectators remain sceptical of war for a reason. 'All battles are in some degree disasters', writes John Keegan, and so too is war for those who don't survive it, or return home maimed both physically and emotionally, and psychologically too.[73] Every war is an evil not in any lay sense (the sense Keegan understands) but rather as a tortured and ecstatic rupture of all our laws and social conventions. At the heart of war lies an excess incompatible with the values we celebrate in peacetime. The warrior soul is at one with excess, with the sublime of destruction, with 'awe' – war is indeed awesome in a way peace is not. But we are suspicious of those who love it because of that rupture.

Hollywood has difficulty capturing the sublime although it purveys the excess with stunning visual clarity. It also had difficulty coming to terms with death, to which war, of course, is inextricably linked – not death in the conventional sense of casualties, but death transfigured through sacrifice, courage or heroism: death defied. This is why the Achilles myth is still so potent. For the true warrior death confers meaning; retroactively it gives his life significance. That is the key to the tragedy of Achilles; he embraces his destiny willingly. So do many servicemen today. Many will experience it all the more intensely not because of a passing sensationalism but because combat is a self-defining moment in their lives. For some the importance of the moment is that it is educative and often transforming for that reason. A warrior's reaction to war the first time he experiences it will differ from his friends'. They will either love it or hate it. If they love it they may always love it; if they don't they may learn to love it in time but it is unlikely to become part of their soul.

3 Escaping the state of nature

Achilles may be the greatest representative of any warrior in any literature, a man without equal in Homer's world as he is in our own, but he is not a 'given'. He is, in part, a projection of each age mediated through the needs of the state and what it expects of its heroes. This was so even in the age of the Greeks and it has remained so ever since. Achilles remains the model of the greatest of all virtues, courage in combat, the ultimate example of a man combining the tragedy of death with memory of the lasting grace of the great deed. All warriors have had to emulate the man their society has wanted Achilles to be, which is why he has retained, and still does, his iconic status even if he is a creature of myth. Achilles can be whatever you want him to be. Homer does not settle the question of who he is; he invites us to ask that question anew every time war changes.

Do today's fighters in the developing world display a Homeric temper? The Chechen rebels engaging the Russian military reminded one journalist covering the Second Chechen War of 'Achilles with a rocket propelled grenade'.[1] He is not our Achilles, however. He may be Homer's (on one reading of the tale) but he is certainly not Plato's, and as I will contend in this chapter the Achilles Western warriors admire today is the product of Plato's rewriting of Homer's hero. This should not really surprise us. After all, we are closer to Plato's world than the world of the heroes about which Homer sang. Even Plato's world was not an age of enlightenment although it was one in which enlightened thinking began to flourish. Thus even in fifth-century Greece the citizens of Locri were still sending a group of their virgin daughters every year to Troy to atone for a 'wrong' perpetrated by their ancestors in the mythical age of the heroes. Plato and his generation also continued to pay a moral tribute to Homer, which is why (more in envy one suspects than admiration) they called him 'the great educator of Greece'. But their world was not Homer's any more than is our own.

It was Plato's great achievement to rescue the warrior from the state of nature, the unforgiving Homeric battlefield on which might alone determined a warrior's status, and thus make war possible for humanity in the only way it can be: when mediated through the 'political' or what at risk of anachronism we may call the state. The Achilles who inspires us still is the one who has escaped the state of nature, not the one who embodies it.

Escaping the state of nature

The man who clearly comes to mind here is Thomas Hobbes, the author of the greatest of all seventeenth-century political works, *The Leviathan*. Many readers may well recall his description of man's condition in the 'state of nature': 'In such conditions there is . . . no account of time; no arts; no letters; no society; and which is worst of all, continual fear and danger of violent death; and the life of man, solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short.'[2] Others may recall some of his other descriptions of the human condition – his definition of laughter as 'sudden glory' and of curiosity as 'a lust of the mind'. Hobbes had the ability to state his propositions in flashes of arresting prose. But the state of nature is the metaphor for which he is remembered most and what strikes the reader most in his depiction is how plain and barren a life it is. It is as dispiriting a vision as one could imagine. It is also the personal vision of a deeply troubled man.

Throughout his life Hobbes was afflicted with melancholy. In *The Leviathan* he created a vision of the world born out of fearfulness and nourished by desperation. You don't have to travel far into Hobbes's writings to reach the lonely interior. What he lays bare is his own psychic economy. He was beset by his own personal demons, and chief among all the passions he respected most was fear. For fear was to him not so much a personal affliction as the dominating passion of mankind, which is why he is such an attractive figure, his natural fear notwithstanding. For if Hobbes was by nature a physical coward he was an intensely courageous thinker. He understood the implications of his philosophy and did not shrink from stating them. He followed his thinking where it led him, and what his philosophy told him was that human beings have only one thing to fear in this life: not God, or Providence, but each other.

Even so we must read *The Leviathan* with care. It is important to recognise that Hobbes never claimed the state of nature ever existed. It was not a historical hypothesis. He had no knowledge of a pre-state society, or even of pre-history, although he glimpsed the possibility of such a society or the closest approximation to it, in the native cultures of pre-Columbian America. The state of nature in his writings was a logical hypothesis, 'an inference made from the passions'. It describes 'what manner of life there would be were there no Common Power to feare', a condition that could be found in his own conflict-ridden times.[3]

How conflict-ridden can be found in a striking passage in another contemporary work, *The Anatomy of Melancholy*, by a fellow Englishman, Robert Burton:

> I hear new news every day and those ordinary rumours of war, plagues, fires, inundations, thefts, murders, massacres . . . of towns taken, cities besieged in France, Germany, Turkey, Persia, Poland etc; daily musters and preparations and such like which these tempestuous times afford; battles fought, so many men slain.[4]

The Anatomy is a parodic work which mocks its own learning. Burton claimed his book was 'nemenis nihil' – nothing for nobody. But in the passage I have quoted

he was not exaggerating. He was reproducing an accurate bird's-eye view of the Europe of his own day. Civil wars are usually more destructive than wars between states, and the whole of Europe was in crisis at the time that both Burton and Hobbes were putting pen to paper. 'These days are days of shaking', declared an English preacher in 1643, 'and this shaking is universal. The Palatinate, Bohemia, Germania, Catalonia, Portugal, Ireland, England.'[5] The different countries of Europe seemed merely the separate theatres upon which some great tragedy was being played out simultaneously, though in different languages and with local variations.

Let me reiterate – Hobbes's picture of the state of nature is so unrelentingly bleak that we are apt to forget how he demonstrates its necessity. He deduces it from the appetites of the men of his own day who want not only to survive but to *thrive*, that is to live well, or commodiously. His description of the 'three principal causes of quarrel' is derived from the passions of existing men, that is, his contemporaries, passions which, in other words, were already shaped by civilised living. Hobbes is not describing a society without a sovereign, but a society with a weak one, a society that has once known the Law but which has dissolved through civil dissension and religious conflict into a stateless condition.[6] Today we would call such societies 'failed states'.

Like our own century, the seventeenth was an age of war or, more correctly, warlordism; it was an era of private armies and mercenary companies of men who sold their services to the highest bidder. The armies themselves were not the all-professional forces to come. The common soldier was the first proletarian: he had his wage disputes, strikes and lock-outs. Most armies were embryonic craft unions of skilled workers with grievances. Every officer was an entrepreneur, a businessman for whom war was not a vocational profession but a profitable enterprise.[7] And they made serious money by prolonging the conflict as long as possible. If anything, the years between 1500 and 1700 were the most warlike of any in European history, in terms not only of wars underway (95 per cent of the time), or even of their frequency (nearly one in every three years), but also of their average duration.[8]

In its destructiveness war in the mid-seventeenth century probably came nearer to Hobbes's bleak vision of the state of nature than any other time in the modern era. Just look at the engravings of the Lorraine artist Jacques Callot which are usually referred to in the English language as *The Large Miseries of War*. They are as graphic a picture of war as any we have, showing peasant homesteads being pillaged and burned, random tortures inflicted on defenceless peasants, women about to be raped, and trees weighed down with the suspended bodies of civilians caught in the wrong place at the wrong time. In one of the pictures that make up the series, Callot depicts the revenge of the peasants; he shows three men, two armed with pitchforks, the third with a club, bursting from their hiding place behind a tree and beating to death a bearded soldier. Above a wagon, suspended from a dead tree at the edge of the woods, we see a body – presumably one of their own number killed earlier in the day by soldiers who have now become the victims.

Another evocative description of that horror is Grimmelshausen's *Simplicissimus*, which illustrates two recurring motifs in the popular literature of the time – the decline of humour to the level of practical jokes, invariably of an obscene nature, and the picture of the simple-minded man adapting himself to the absurdity and corruption of an age gone mad. This was not the hyperbole of the religious mind; it was the depressing truth. What the latter work offers us is an account of war redeemed only by the grim humour of an age that, believing in nothing, could even mock its own insecurity.

And that insecurity was very real for ordinary men and women. Take Hans Haberle, a shoemaker from Neenstetten, whose diary records thirty separate occasions when he was forced to flee with his family to safety in the city of Ulm.[9] Hobbes himself was forced to flee England in 1641 from an impending civil war. In the particular climate of the time he felt he would fall foul of Parliamentary invective. His loyalty to the crown, moreover, was not such that he contemplated taking up arms, especially at his age – in the mid-40s. Indeed he prided himself on being 'the first of all that fled'. What he was fleeing from can be gauged from the despair of another contemporary witness, Nehemiah Wallington, a London tailor who lived in Little Eastcheap. In his diary he records the fears that fuelled the minds of his fellow citizens in the run-up to the war: 'The king hath armies of men come out of the North parts, with fierce countenances and with deadly weapons that put all of us citizens in great fear that there is no good meant towards us.' On Twelfth Night the alarm was raised that the king was about to strike. Wallington never forgot the terror of that particular evening:

> We heard (as we lay in our beds) a great cry in the streets that there were horse and foot coming against the city . . . Fear and trembling entered on all. Some women being with child were so affrighted therewith that they miscarried.[10]

Hobbes's mother did not miscarry when she heard the guns of the Armada as it sailed up the English Channel in 1588 but she did give birth to her son prematurely, as he tells us in his autobiography. Composed in Latin couplets, two lines are justly famous:

> Atque metum tantum concepit tunc mea mater
> Ut puareret geminos, meque metumque simul
> [At that time my mother conceived such great fear
> That she gave birth to twins, fear and myself together][11]

What Hobbes feared most was the riot of private armies, warlords and criminal gangs roaming the country, selling their services to the highest bidder. Indeed, he coined a wonderful phrase for them. He called them 'worms in the intestines of the state', gradually sapping its life and diminishing its power. 'Another infirmity of a Commonwealth is the . . . great number of corporations which are as it were many lesser Commonwealths in the bowels of the greater, like worms in the entrails of a natural man.'[12] It is these worms which have returned to sap the life of failed

states and failing societies on the frontiers of our own world – in the 'wild zones', or '*zones grises*' (grey zones), the 'Kalashnikov zones', the 'no-go areas', the theatres of low-level conflict in neighbourhoods such as the Greater Middle East.

Indeed, the political landscape of the mid-seventeenth century, especially in Germany, conjures up the contemporary landscape of other war zones such as the Congo, where cannibalism is often rife; or Sierra Leone, where the limbs of civilians were routinely amputated to terrorise society into submission; or Liberia, where women were systematically raped (in many cases deliberately made HIV positive by their rapists, who delighted in telling them that they could expect a slow and agonising death). In much of Africa children as young as 9 are still routinely conscripted to fight; many are forced to kill their parents as a rite of passage into their new 'family'. And there is evidence of the grim humour of *Simplicissimus* too. In one of the continent's most troubled countries, Liberia, the combatants used to routinely style themselves after heroes in violent American action movies such as *Rambo*, *Terminator* and *Jungle Killer*: 'many went under such fanciful "noms de guerre" as Colonel Action, Captain Mission Impossible, General Murder . . . Colonel Jungle Killer, Colonel Evil Killer, General Monster, General War Boss 3 . . . Major Trouble, General Butt Naked and, of course, General Rambo'.[13]

In Bosnia the situation was not dissimilar. One Serbian paramilitary unit actually called itself 'the Rambos' and its members went around dressed like Sylvester Stallone. An American journalist covering the war in Chechnya found that even the Russian special force fighters:

> were dressed in preposterous Rambo outfits – headbands, mirrored shades, sleeveless muscle shirts, bandoliers, belts packed with hunting knives . . . [They] wanted nothing more than to look like their movie hero – they had seen all the movies on video – and how they melted at the sound of his name. 'You know Sly' [they asked] . . . 'You *really* know Sly?'[14]

The trademark aesthetic is the chance for the entrepreneurs of crime – the soldier-criminals – to mock their own profession: to live a part, to win the kind of respect which Rambo wins, the ultimate rebel without a cause. Here they meet up with the other criminal class: the terrorist who kills not for kicks but for God. Perhaps, the two phenomena – the aestheticisation and the sacralisation of violence – are not that far apart. In the world of the terrorist, God has a hard enough time to be heard. As Kurt Vonnegut writes, 'the more violent a picture of Him you create the better you'll do . . . any God you create is going to be up against *Miami Vice* and Clint Eastwood and Sylvester Stallone'.[15]

Mired in the state of nature which today's 'warriors' in the developing world have not escaped they now have access to a globalised world with its definitive Hollywood icons. Branded merchandise and celebrity lifestyles have cast their spell; they dress like their Hollywood heroes; they even behave like them. They display the same ' bad ass attitude'. In the old days, however brutal life might have been, young men lived in traditional social structures, in the extended families into

which they were born. Today, the lyrics and images they find most attractive are beamed in from the outside; they demand the same 'respect' as young gang members in our own cities and for the same reasons; they demand the same lifestyles they see on television. The media both highlight their exclusion from a world they aspire to join and provide them at the same time with the stereotypes they aspire to ape in the war-torn zones of the globe where they have an opportunity to work out their own alienated, introverted fantasies and second-hand dreams. The West Side Boys in Sierra Leone used to watch Rambo movies; the terrorists of September 11 favoured Hollywood catastrophe movies. War offered both an infinite number of alternative realities which history, up to then, had proved incapable of delivering. The only difference is that the former were influenced by the lyrics of the rapper Tupac Shakur, lyrics from another world, that made the senseless violence seem less senseless, and the violence more intelligible to an outside world, looking on.

The *Iliad* and the state of nature

In Hobbes's state of nature men are not savages, still less hunter-gatherers; they are civilised men who desire to live in a civilised state. What makes them dangerous to themselves as well as each other is that, having no fear of Law, they are not sufficiently fearful of punishment. In the state of nature the problem arises not from the great majority being fearful, but the minority being *fearless*, or not frightened enough. It is a world in which the strong prevail, the strong in most cases being warriors.

We have encountered this world already. It is the world of Homer, which is as near to a stateless society as we understand the term today. The Bronze Age civilisations throughout the eastern Mediterranean collapsed or declined around 1200 BCE, the era from which the Trojan War is usually dated. The causes of the collapse are still hotly contested by historians but the Greek Dark Ages particularly evoke Hobbes's picture of a state of nature. And they were much 'darker' than the Dark Ages which followed the collapse of the Western Roman Empire fifteen hundred years later, for even writing was lost and with it an accurate memory of the Mycenaean age itself. What survived was the memory of a lost era of heroes who had built palaces that were now only rubble and ancestors who had ruled the Aegean, sacked Troy and then mysteriously disappeared from history into the memory of bards. What knowledge survived by means of the oral, poetic tradition was patchy: history was overlaid with fable. Perhaps, the most important consequence of the Dark Ages is that, lacking an accurate memory of the past, the Greeks improvised by creating the richest of all mythologies instead, including the heroic age of Hector and Achilles, those two incomparable warriors who set the template for everything that followed.[16]

The brazen reality behind the songs was very different. Homer's world is without a Leviathan; it is without a state which the Mycenaean Greeks had once enjoyed. The word *polis* is derived from *ptolis* (a Mycenaean word) but the state had collapsed and with it the concept of Law. Instead of a great king we find petty

kingdoms that are a shadow of the Mycenaean monarchies that once predominated centuries earlier. We are dealing with a subsistence and barter economy, with no use for money. Vico had already noted that Achilles cooks his own meals. Even more significantly, Priam's sons work on the farm, and even Priam himself feeds his own horses. In the *Odyssey*, which was probably composed several generations later, the point is made even more starkly: the hero of the tale, Odysseus, sleeps with his wife, Penelope, in a bed he has made himself; we hear of his skill with a sickle; we even see him reaping corn.[17]

In Homer's world there is no administrative back-up of the kind which flourished in the palace culture of the Mycenaean world: the scribes near the king who had formerly divided, subdivided, labelled, rationed and controlled all aspects of Mycenaean life. Agamemnon may be the nominal leader of the expedition, and the man who has the largest pick of the spoils, but he is not even first among equals. He can be – and often is – defied. He is what we would nowadays call a warlord with his own private army, linked to other warlords through patrilineal clan links. And as for the men he ostensibly leads there is nothing to hold them in check except their own sense of shame – their sense of obligation to their clansmen who, to our minds, are really only an extension of themselves.

Homer's world, in other words, is one that he himself would probably recognise were he to visit Afghanistan today. It is a society of warlords in search of status in the form of victories bestowing on them publicly recognised authority. War is not the exception but the norm, the bitter crucible in which reputations can be won or lost in a day. And when he loses his status the warrior is in trouble. Take those moments in which the battlefield of the *Iliad* is cleared for the expression of things not to be comprehended under the rubric of force – some include those 'necrologues' in which, at the point of death, otherwise unknown warriors are suddenly given brief biographies. But, as Simone Weil says, those 'infrequent moments of grace suffice to convey with deep regret just what violence has killed and will kill again'. The possibility of sudden death pervades the text as its central existential concern. Homer's poem articulates a world of might. Weil rightly called it 'the poem of force' because of the pervasive nature of Hobbes's third source of quarrel: honour.

Each warrior had his own followers or armies who meet together in great assemblies in which they divide up the spoils of war. These assemblies may well have been prototype of Greek democracy, but they are a world apart from the first Greek cities and the concept of citizenship that was to derive from them. A man's sense of his own worth is determined by the judgement passed on him by others, and the confidence of his own worth is what, for a hero, gives life itself its value. Honour is diminished by any infringement of a person's rights or denial of his legitimate expectations. Honour is enhanced by possessions and the usefulness of those possessions to their possessor and to the community. When the Greeks award the armour of Achilles to Odysseus not Ajax by acclamation, Ajax feels shamed, but the shame comes second to his bewilderment about his own 'disgrace'. What is most striking about the heroes is their obsession with self – with individual excellence, individual pride and individual reputation. Their drive for self-assertion

is especially ruthless, for the only thing that they fear is being shamed in front of their peers.

In the end, Homer's world, for all its glamour and glory, is a savage one because of the absence of Law, i.e. any public authority to punish anyone who breaks it. The victim and/or his relatives have to take personal vengeance on those who have wronged them. There is no criminal law, only family omnipotence. The conduct of the vendetta is the basic plot motivation of the whole poem. The 'theft' of Helen leads to a vendetta by her extended family of warlords and their allies. The laws of abduction, murder and personal injury are tied to kinship practices of vengeance. Homicide is a private, not public, affair.

It is only with the invention of the state that the Law *mediates* conflict through law courts. 'At the heart of what attaches humans to their fellow human beings is the turmoil of unresolved conflict', writes Marcel Gauchet, i.e. peacefully negotiated exchange and a restitutive chain of vengeance.[18] In the *Iliad*, by contrast, there is no concept of the principle of collective organisation over the will of the individuals it brings together. We can read about negotiated settlements, of course, including the one which allows Achilles to rejoin his fellow Greeks, but there is too much wilfulness even in this decision. In the end, Achilles has no concept of public duty; he goes back to battle to restore his reputation which is in the end what really matters to him most.

And what of war itself? Homer shows us not two states at war so much as two chiefdom-led societies which practise war in a way distinctive to themselves. The battles he portrays tend to be episodic. We think of the *Iliad* as a tale of hand-to-hand combat; we recall the bloody scenes of duels between warriors who are evenly matched. We tend to think of the war as one of individual heroes.[19] But of the three hundred or so battle scenes in the poem only eighteen of them involve personal encounters; the majority involve hit-and-run attacks. Thus Nestor describes a cattle raid that was characteristic of an earlier period of Greek history, before the rise of the state:

> We drove off much booty, fifty herds each of oxen, swine and goats. We took as many flocks of sheep. We also took one hundred and fifty bay horses, all female, along with many of their colts. We drove them at night right up to Pylos, Neleus' land, into the fortress during the night.[20]

The state has no place for personalised warfare. But chiefdom-led societies do.

On the Homeric battlefield warriors have wide latitude in deciding when, where and whom to fight. Although required to be brave they are allowed to practise every type of deception and stratagem. Odysseus brings down Troy by means of a ruse where force has failed. The Homeric mind has no place for strategy, only tactical ingenuity and practical intelligence. Odysseus, the cleverest of the heroes, 'thinks with his hands'. He is a gambler, engineer and athlete, not a strategist.

Finally, while most states tend to absorb their enemies – they are in the business of expansion, or empire building – most stateless societies, by contrast, tend to eliminate them. The smaller the society the more likely enemies are to be

butchered; the larger the more likely they are to be taken as booty, or ransomed back to their families, or enslaved.

Hence the darker side of Homer's narrative. The heroes are compared to 'eaters of raw meat', a term Homer only uses when he is describing warriors. 'Raw flesh eater' is Hecuba's description of Achilles, when she tries to dissuade her father, Priam, from the dangerous mission of visiting the man who has slain her brother. And she has every reason to be suspicious of Achilles' 'honour', for when he meets Hector in the final and famous one-to-one encounter he tells him that he would like to chop up his flesh and eat it raw.[21]

Later generations found in Priam's reconciliation with Achilles a striking example of 'the warrior's honour' as Achilles' wrath expires in cathartic reconciliation with the father of his greatest foe. In our eyes Homer's retelling of a familiar myth exemplifies a very humanistic reading of history: how the vain and meaningless self-worth of a hero is reconciled with another whose nobility is never in question. But there is another reading of the story, a darker one, if we care to find it. The metaphors Homer employs are dark indeed; they remind us of an earlier practice of eating one's enemies for the purpose of possessing their strength and power, something which in the *Iliad* is avoided probably only for fear that it would 'pollute' the warriors involved. In other words, the heroes are constrained by a social taboo, not their personal sense of shame. Pindar knew of a tradition that the young Achilles was brought up on the entrails of wild beasts. Indeed, the fact that they spend so much time imagining their enemies being fed to wild beasts, or left for carrion to devour, betrays a deep instinctive desire that has to be internally repressed. Vico was right: the heroes are not that much removed from the mire from which they had only recently emerged.

In sum, Homer invites us to contemplate a world suspended in time – one which is an echo of a past age, as well as an intimation of one struggling to be born. It is a world in which, if war is mediated at all, it is not by the state but by the blood pollution rituals of a much earlier pre-state era. What we find on the Homeric battlefield is a foretaste of the future, but no overall direction, no strategic planning: a world in which the warriors are largely a law unto themselves. We admire them for their courage but we also find them frightening for that reason. What is most frightening of all is that violence is largely one-dimensional. There is no politics here. The heroes kill not so much for an instrumental end, still less for a political programme: they fight for their own *existential* being. This is a state of affairs that through its very existence is exempt from all justification or rather its principal justification is ontological. It is what Herbert Marcuse famously calls 'justification by mere existence'.[22]

Achilles in Iraq

Isn't it becoming easier to find the Homeric temper in worlds other than our own? In reading the *Iliad*, perhaps we need to look at the subtext to better understand the nature of war that is being represented, as well as the nature of what war has become in so much of the contemporary world.

Let us take some of Homer's familiar themes, beginning with death. In the words of Harold Bloom, 'Achilles' final and most poetic greatness is that he keeps no covenant, except with death.'[23] Covenants with death, alas, are all too common in the Middle East and nowadays even closer to home. To illustrate the importance of death let me take a passage from the autobiography of the eminent British literary critic George Steiner, who writes how not long before his 6th birthday his father painted in broad brush strokes the story of the *Iliad* and read with him a passage from Book 21 where Achilles, butchering the fleeing Trojans, comes across one of Priam's sons, Lycaon, who begs to be spared, or ransomed back to his own side. At this point, Steiner tells us, his father reverted to the original Greek text and translated it for the benefit of his son:

> . . . fool,
> don't talk to me of ransom. No more speeches.
> Before Patroclus met his day of destiny, true,
> it warmed my heart a bit to spare some Trojans:
> droves I took alive and auctioned off as slaves.
> But now not a single Trojan flees his death,
> not one the gods hand over to me before your gates,
> none of all the Trojans, sons of Priam least of all!
> Come, friend, you too must die. Why moan about it so?
> Even Patroclus died a far, far better man than you.

At the end of the reading his father urged him to consign these lines to memory, so that 'the serene inhumanity of Achilles' message, its soft terror would never leave us'.[24]

Not many 6-year-olds, I imagine, now read the *Iliad* in Greek, and fewer still are likely to commit its more memorable passages to memory. But the message of the work that Steiner derives is an important one. Lycaon's fatal exchange with Achilles teaches us about the limits of human speech in the face of death. 'To carry this narrative with one (to learn it by heart) is to possess a tuning fork against illusion.'[25] It is a striking phrase. Achilles' fatalism instructs us as to how until quite recently we all accepted the triviality of human life. We do so no longer. Steiner invites us to remember that death was once the overriding theme of literature, as it was of life, which all great literature merely mirrors. Death in battle had meaning in such a world. In our world it doesn't. It is the haunting mystery of eternity that now eludes us.

Elsewhere in the world death is still central to life; it is not sanitised or quarantined away in a hospital or homes for the aged. For us the enemy is death itself as it was not for the Greeks, because it is we ourselves who have a problem with death and read it back into the experience of others. It is an example of our inability to penetrate into less self-conscious levels of human experience. It is we who have reached the point where in the face of life and death we can make no affirmation. For us all loss of life quite literally is a 'waste'. For the Greeks too it represented a profound sense of loss – loss of life even of an enemy one respects, not to mention

loss to oneself (in terms of human relationships). But no loss was without value if it was transcended through sacrifice, for example.

We should remember that once it was quite common for us to accept that we all owed death a life, but a life we knew would end, indifferent to whether we had ever lived it. Homer ensures that we never lose sight of the fact that Achilles is remembered because he led a short but spectacular life. In the end his death invested his life with significance for others.

But there is something else that can be deduced from the same passage which Steiner singles out in his memoir. Surely, when we describe some of the 'warriors' we now fight in the developing world as primitives habituated to violence, might not the same be said of Achilles too? And if in our eyes they are indeed 'primitive', we must pause to ask what is primitive about them?

The philosopher William James provides an answer in his book *Varieties of Religious Experience*, the lectures he delivered at the invitation of the University of St Andrews in 1902. In those days many students in the audience, like their professors, would have known the *Iliad* in some shape or form, even in its Greek version. Many would have recalled how Achilles kills Lycaon, a young Trojan prince who has the misfortune to meet up with Achilles when he is on his killing spree to avenge the death of Patroclus. In the darkness of his fury he is resolved to kill any Trojan who falls into his hands. Lycaon begs for his life; Achilles will have none of it. 'Come, my friend, you too must die. Patroclus died and he was a much better man than you.' The manner of his death brings out the character of his killer. Menelaus was kind-hearted but indecisive; Agamemnon ruthless but unreflective. Achilles kills savagely, severing the boy's neck with his sword, heaving him by the foot into the river Scamander, and called on the fish to eat the boy's white fat. Killing in the ancient world was hard work. It was butchery, carnage unending. The battlefield was quite literally a 'killing ground' and the killing often went on hour after hour. The mutilation of the body was part of the work.

What struck James most, however, was not the butchery so much as the one-dimensionality of the action. What struck him as remarkable about the passage is that both Achilles' sympathy for Lycaon's plight and his cruelty in killing him both ring true. One doesn't cancel out the other. Achilles is not conflicted. The boy's loss is regretted as one might regret the loss of any man, but there is no conflict here. Achilles can show sympathy for the boy's plight but he still kills him with a good conscience. He doesn't tell himself, as might we in his position, that what appears a callous act is actually for 'the greater good'. He doesn't lie to himself as does Shakespeare's Henry V the night before Agincourt when he mixes with his men and promises them that the king's conscience over the slaughter to come is clear. It isn't and he knows it as well as we. Henry is a 'modern' man who has self-knowledge. 'Can you hear me in the back there?' asked the Oxford don Walter Pater of the young Oscar Wilde, who spent most of the lecture talking to a friend. 'Unfortunately, sir,' Wilde replied, 'we can overhear you.' It is one of his first recorded *bon mots*. Overhearing yourself speak is the mark of modernity, as is hypocrisy, of course, denying what you 'overhear'.

Achilles never once 'overhears' himself speaking, especially when he is protesting loudly at the injustices he has suffered. He doesn't try to escape the horror of the existing world for another and better one of the imagination. He doesn't fight as we do for 'civilisation'. As James writes, it is precisely 'this *integrity* of the instinctive reactions, this freedom from all moral sophistry and strain that gives a pathetic dignity to ancient pagan feelings'.[26] It is we modern men who are conflicted. Our own warriors can no longer aspire to the 'moral integrity' of the suicide bomber or terrorist. A more differentiated self, writes James, makes for a more differentiated and interesting world. Our soldiers are not the heroes of myth; they are torn between insensitivity to others and bouts of inner self-doubt when they turn their most unsparing criticism upon themselves. What James invokes is a distant past in which life is more robust, more passionate and less complex than our own. Achilles' world is more pristine and in one sense uncorrupted by doubt because of its rootedness in a social world which knows the rules. It is this rootedness which helps give Achilles what James calls his moral integrity, which is why seeing his face reflected in war is like descending into the mystery of ourselves.

There is another passage I would like to cite, from Virginia Woolf's seminal essay 'On not knowing Greek', which says the same thing in different words. In six pages of Proust, she writes, we will find more complicated and varied emotions than we will in any Greek author, however gifted. This is what makes Proust's figures modern: they are multidimensional; they are torn between different emotions and passions, some which they recognise, others which they do not. But what we find impressive in Achilles, Woolf adds, is his originality. For a Western audience he is one of the first literary characters, one of the first human types before his 'emotions have been worn into uniformity' (i.e. before he has been socialised).[27] His character is not fully developed, so that we see his virtues on a larger scale unmediated by later concepts such as duty, or co-responsibility to his fellow citizens. He is self-willed because his self is raw, untamed, unmediated. Isn't that precisely what James was describing? Doesn't he display the 'integrity' of never knowing self-doubt? It is this primal state (or primitive state if we prefer the term) that fascinates us most about Achilles as the archetypal warrior precisely because our own warriors are so far removed from the archetype.

And isn't it this 'primal' nature which we find most disturbing today about the suicide bomber? For there are many other echoes of Homer's world in the Greater Middle East if we look for them. Thus Achilles keeps a covenant not only with death but with his clan, the Myrmidons, and to a lesser extent his extended family, the Achaeans. The Greek hero resembles the Mafia in this regard more than he does the Western warrior. There is nothing cosmopolitan here; we find no love of others. The heroes may speak much of honour and even humanity, but it is very narrowly based. Achilles' chief loyalty is to a tribal band, the Myrmidons. There is no love of country here. There is instead love of family, clan or tribe which is real enough; he will even die for it. But it is a very exclusive form of love – perhaps, not even that.

And as with a Mafioso family each warlord in Homer's world controls his own territory. Each territory is closely identified with a family: hence the pervasive (and

for us often tedious) practice in the *Iliad* of naming every member of a person's family, his ancestors included. The genealogies may not interest us much but they are all important for the action. For the Trojan War is a family affair or rather it revolves around the fate of three families, those of Peleus, Atreus and Tyndareus. Achilles and Ajax are first cousins; Odysseus is a distant cousin of Agamemnon's wife, Clytemnestra, and is also a kinsman of Patroclus, Achilles' friend. Or take the family of Tyndareus, which includes Clytemnestra, Agamemnon's wife, who is a cousin of Helen, the woman whose abduction provokes the war. And it is worth mentioning that Helen's daughter Hermione is married off first to Achilles' son and then Agamemnon's.

In other words, the power base of these heroes is local. Agamemnon may be recognised as the leader of the expedition to Troy but he is not an empire builder. He is on a raiding expedition for gold and slaves; and he is out to revenge his brother-in-law Menelaus. Honour demands it, for without honour in this Hobbesian world he would enjoy no authority and therefore no influence. In the absence of a state – in the absence of Law – trust can only be found in bonds between agnatic kinsmen (blood relatives related on the father's side of the family) or bonds reinforced by intermarriage. The blood line is still an essential focus of politics in many contemporary tribal or semi-tribal societies today.

In the West we instrumentalise our lives when we choose causes for which to fight based on affinity, not kinship. The existential realm is grounded, by comparison, on henatic kinship (consanguinity), affinal kinship (relatedness), ritual kinship (blood parenthood) and ritual friendships (blood brotherhood). Now kinship is something that is innate; you're born into it or marry into it. One is born into a clan and dies in it. Nothing is required of one but to conform to the life of the community; it even requires no special schooling. The rules are there from the beginning. Nations, by contrast, need doctrines and ideologies. They need nationalism; tribes don't need 'tribalism'. A tribe is not a value; it is a reality. Indeed, there is no life outside it. The clansman is free of existential angst; he is not conflicted for that reason – James's point about Achilles. The only escape from it is death, and that means reunion with the ancestors.

It's only when you choose for whom to fight (an instrumental choice) on the basis of an interest, an advantage, common norms and values that you transform kinship into affinity. In the German language this is much clearer than it is in English. For in English affinity means qualified kinship. In German it's quite the opposite of it; it's freely chosen. With affinity is born the modern understanding that we are determined not by genetic programming (by blood); we are determined by our own reason. We make our choices and fight for them. In other societies blood lines still matter most. Warfare is still tribal. And the chief point about a blood feud is that it is not a choice. The Icelandic sagas too are depressing in this respect. There is hardly a page in which revenge is not a theme, and feuds can – and do – extend over the centuries. Revenge – the taking of blood – is the way in which a dishonour is corrected. It solidifies the group, and is seen to make it stronger.

In such societies the shedding of blood is central to social bonding. One example is the blood shed in a feud or the blood shed in marriage. The shedding of the blood

of a virgin given in marriage to settle a feud is a kind of symbolic vengeance: blood for blood. It is often a symbolic compensation for the blood spilled in homicide. 'Blood washes blood' is a famous phrase. Blood, writes Anton Blok, symbolises the life of an individual and that of the group – the ties between fathers and sons, the bonds between blood brothers. Blok quotes a recent example from a military campaign, when he cites General Mladic's remark to his troops after they had overrun the Muslim enclave of Srebrenica in 1995. 'It's going to be a *miza* [a long feast]. We will kill so many of them that we will wade through their blood up to our knees.'[28]

In Homer the vocabulary of blood and kinship is all-pervasive. Blood for blood is the norm. Thus Hector's blood washes away the blood lust of Achilles just as the sacrifice of twelve Trojan prisoners at Patroclus' funeral assuages his demand for revenge. Indeed, the more gruesome the killing, the more effective it is. Hector's body is mutilated for that reason when Achilles hitches it to his chariot and drags it around the walls of Troy in full view of his family. In Homer's universe there is no getting away from the ubiquity of blood as a symbolic device by which an entire society is held together.

There is a third link between Homer's world and today's Middle East. When we look at a conflict like Iraq today we see more than an insurgency which is politically inspired; we see a criminal enterprise: the kidnappings; the smuggling of oil; the general grasp for money. But then Homer's heroes too fight for their own profit. They sail to Troy for more immediate gain. As Achilles reminds Lycaon, he is in the habit not of killing Trojans so much as ransoming them back to their families or selling them off as slaves. Like Odysseus (a more popular hero for our more rational age) he is a man bent on plunder. Looked at in this light the *Iliad* can be read as a story of a band of Greeks who having set up camp on a foreign shore plunder the vicinity of all it is worth. Even in the *Odyssey* what we find on one level is a tale of a bunch of marauders who support themselves by plundering whatever they can or whatever falls in their way. Thus we are told that Odysseus sacked the city of the Kolkonians, put all the men to the sword irrespective of age, seized their wives and possessions and divided them equally so that no one was cheated of their fair share, their loot.[29] In both poems war is a means of production. As Achilles puts it in Christopher Logue's free adaptation of Homer's poem: 'We land. We fight. We kill. We load. And then/After your firstlings – we allot. That is the end of it.'[30]

Three hundred years later Aristotle famously described war as a form of 'acquisitive activity'. Often this motivation is downplayed; we don't associate it with the great wars for freedom that Herodotus recounts or that a later age read into Thucydides' account of the Peloponnesian War. The twentieth century especially liked to see that particular thirty-year conflict as an analogue of another ideological contest, the Cold War. But Aristotle was writing about his own world, not ours, and he certainly had its measure. Thus in *The Politics* we find him discussing five main ways by which men live by their labour. We will find the ones we would expect to find: the pastoral, the agricultural, and fishing. But the inclusion of piracy as a legitimate activity may come as a shock. Even more shocking, given

our contemporary sensibilities, especially if we see the Greeks not as our remote ancestors but as our near kinsmen, is that to the last category, hunting, several significant subcategories are added. One is game hunting (wild animals and birds); but the others include the hunting of people (slave raiding); the hunting of movable objects (plundering); and the hunting of people and possessions together (or war).[31] The Greeks had a word for slaves – *andrapoda*, man-footed beasts. For the Greeks, man was an animal and animals were there to be hunted. Traditionally, warriors have been superb huntsmen of both wild animals and men. As one of Alexander the Great's most recent biographers adds, the central reality of his life was hunting game – human as well as animal – and the more numerous and dangerous the greater the thrill.[32]

And there is a final echo of the *Iliad* in the contemporary landscape of conflict: the role of religion. Most of our post-modern societies tend to disparage religious themes, especially sacrifice when it takes the form of martyrdom. Jung famously claimed that when we kill off the gods they return in the form of a disease. War degenerates; so too do warriors. The gods are omitted altogether from Wolfgang Petersen's film. It is a terrible blunder, though one of many, because it is the presence of the gods in the *Iliad* that makes Achilles less of the monster he is or the 'killing machine' that in our contemporary imagination he has become.

Here was a society that venerated the warrior, much more than it venerated war. Homer calls Achilles *dios* or noble, a word whose Indo-European root means 'god-like' or 'shining like the divine stars'. And indeed if we take out the gods we take out the immortal, which is the spring of Achilles' actions. It is through the use of omens or oracles (and they abound in the poem) that the heroes gain an insight into their own, or their enemy's, fate, even if as pre-modern characters they have little insight into their own characters. What distinguishes Achilles surely is that however reprehensible his behaviour, his pettiness, his arrogance and his vindictiveness – all of which Homer exposes to the light – unlike the gods he takes risks. He doesn't live in safety, one stage removed from life on Mount Olympus.

There the gods are above 'the battle', metaphorically as well as literally. They show a heartless disregard for casualties, a total indifference to human life. In our eyes, writes Jonathan Shay, invoking the language of the modern military, they are 'rear echelon officers'. For there are always two enemies the soldier confronts in war: the enemy who is out to kill him, and the enemy behind the lines – the generals – who place him in a position to get killed.[33] The gods may protest their love of mankind, but they use them like pawns. The true heroes – even the brutish Ajax and the vainglorious Achilles – are prepared, at least, to lead from the front, to hazard all in battle, including their lives. The great failing of *Troy* as a film is that Achilles is such a hollow figure in the absence of the divine. He can only redeem himself in our eyes by the contrast with the gods, who are worse. It is the gods who have now returned to the battlefield. 'Unholy warriors' both al-Qaeda and Taleban may be but they fight in the name of God and they have no doubt they do so with his blessing.

But however useful it is to draw such analogies we must add a note of caution. An anthropologist's perspective can only take us so far. We shouldn't transpose

Achilles to the modern world. This would be as absurd as the predisposition of our Victorian forefathers to envision the Greeks as robed sages moving decorously down perfect colonnades. Historians have spent fifty years applying anthropological insights to the study of the ancient world, especially its uglier features. They have encouraged us to see the Greeks unsentimentally and to see what they have in common with other primitive people.

So why read Homer if his world is so distant from our own? Because of the human archetypes they represent. The more we listen and become aware of the differences the more meaningful the dialogue becomes. In part, this is not a dialogue between ourselves and our ancestors, between the people we have become and those we used to be; it is a dialogue between ourselves and others we meet up with in battle. But, of course, today's terrorists are not Achilles, as I shall contend at the end of this chapter.

Hobbes, warriors and fear

Homer, of course, tells such a wonderful tale that we are seduced into ignoring how much his world conforms to Hobbes's state of nature. If the reality of both worlds is the war of all against all, Homer's is a deeply heroic vision nonetheless. It is a vision steeped in an intense understanding of the cruelty of war, yet one nurtured by the conviction that its evils are outweighed by the warrior ethos or at the very least that it is compensated by the memory of the heroic deed. This is the essence of the Homeric vision, a deep pessimism about war combined with hope of its saving grace which is to be found in the concept of sacrifice. And for sacrifice, in turn, to have meaning for the rest of us the warrior must be *tamed*.

Let me take the other traditional mark of the warrior – killing. Some writers contend that warriors like killing.[34] This is not necessarily true of every one – indeed I would argue it is not true of most even though killing is central to their profession. And killing is very different from murder because it is state-sanctioned (the state grants immunity from prosecution). In killing, unlike most murders, a soldier does not yield to an impulse such as a biological need for release (e.g. violence and sexual aggression). To be legitimate, killing has to be programmed, disciplined and directed and it must above all conform to the social construction of an enemy. For it is society which determines when a soldier kills, whom he kills and even how he kills (discriminately or indiscriminately). Indeed, it is in its power over life and death that the state manifests its ultimate control over the individual.

Now, skill in killing may be grounded in a natural gift, or it may be located in a biological drive (one which may explain why some men are less likely to be traumatised by killing than others). But the important point to grasp is that in war men are trained to kill. Their natural gifts or biological drives are socially channelled. Similarly, however, once they join a military unit – any military unit – they inherit a code, an ethos, which tells them that there is no honour in killing an unarmed man, let alone a child. Both may be killed in the heat of battle, both may even be killed for a purpose, but one can't celebrate the fact.

In other words, a warrior code is not something one is born with; it is something one acquires. Every profession has its own. Warriors are tamed to the extent that they are socialised. Their natures are formed by living in a civilised society, living in fear of themselves. The state of nature – Hobbes tells us in his own words – describes 'what manner of life there would be were there no common Power to fear'. The state of nature is a metaphor and as such stands for many things: but in the context of war it can be taken to mean a state where fear, except for the hero (warrior), is the overwhelming passion not because violence exists – it does in every society – but because violence is *unmediated* by the state.

What is striking about Achilles is that he knows the gods can intervene at any time to frustrate his purposes, or even further them on a whim, but he has no fear of them. In one case he challenges Apollo to single combat. There is no divine check on his power. The fact that the heroes like Patroclus and Hector lived in a world in which they were cremated and not buried – another break with the Mycenaean past – reveals that the ancestors too could no longer wield their power from the grave. The world of the dead had become remote, cut off from that of the living: cremation had severed the earthly ties of the deceased. In this Hobbesian world there is too little fear, not too much.

Hobbes, of course, was a product of his times, especially in his attitude to warriors. His world, like Homer's, was an aristocratic one. Honour was among the most important virtues – honour and respect, which aristocrats demanded of one another, and for which, Hobbes added, men continually compete. Even in the Elizabethan court Sir Philip Sidney had been rebuked for seeking honour only in killing. Another Elizabethan hero, Sir Walter Raleigh, insisted that valour was 'a disposition, taken by itself, not much to be admired'.[35]

Like most of his contemporaries Hobbes was much taken with heroic deeds and like them thought that heroism made the best theme for great literature. He admired the aristocracy for its *thymotic* needs, its thirst for reputation. He considered the desire for praise and fame led to laudable actions. True, of course, one could be deceived by worldly fame into a false estimation of oneself, yet the reputation a man won in his lifetime was likely to rebound on his offspring. A world without honour would be one in which men would have no inner constraint on their own actions. Hobbes acknowledged that we are creatures of our passions. What makes us human is our willingness to accept or even invite death, particularly through love of glory and honour (the esteem of others). Honour and violence in this sense are conjoined.

In reaching this conclusion Hobbes remained attached to instrumental reason. He rejected any cult of military glory for its own sake. He had little sympathy for the heroes of the medieval romances in which he saw fortitude without temperance. 'A disposition of the mind to war' was for him an offence against nature.[36] Courage was to be put at the disposal of the commonwealth, or the state. In expressing these views he was speaking for the majority of his fellows. By the mid-seventeenth century even in aristocratic circles there was a strong predisposition to instrumentalise courage too.

In his respect for the physical courage he himself lacked (as well as the moral courage which he displayed throughout his life) Hobbes remained entirely true to

his own belief that men pursue their own self-preservation, which is why he agreed that a soldier might run away from battle provided he did so not out of treachery but fear. Yet only a few lines later he insisted that fear was no argument for cowardice. Once we have escaped the state of nature by contracting into a state we owe a duty to each other to defend it. It was precisely to clear up any possible ambiguity on this point that in the conclusion to *The Leviathan* he added a further law of nature: 'that every man is bound by nature, as much as in him lieth, to protect in war the authority by which he is himself protected in peace'.

For Hobbes, war was not the problem; the problem was what we find in the state of nature – unmediated conflict, that is *expressive* violence without an instrumental end. And the warrior was not the problem either; it was the pursuit of reputation for its own sake, or what we might call the unmediated pursuit of glory. The trick here was to find a passion that contained within itself reason. And for Hobbes that underlying passion was fear: 'the foresight of future evil'. One way in which foresight is gained is by imagination. Imagination is cultivated by education, which for Hobbes was the essential key to a mediated (i.e. civilised) life.

In the infancy of life, Hobbes tells us, men are 'unapt for society'. By nature they are gregarious creatures and therefore desire it but they are not fit for it.[37] It is education that domesticates them. In Hobbes's state of nature men are educated; without it they could not imagine a social contract, i.e. a world other than it is, but they are not disciplined enough to make it, still less thrive in it. It is implicit in his analogy of the socialisation of children. The human child is almost entirely wilful. It has to be taught to think of others. Discipline is what the state provides in subordinating the passions of the warrior to reason. And discipline can be subjective too. The warrior turns his self-regard into a socially prescribed good. Reason is the key here too. For it would be quite wrong to think that reason gets the better of our passions. Reason serves the passions; it doesn't suppress them. It helps the warrior to discover the best way to channel them into effective action.

In short, if fear is a mediating factor it has to be learned. In military life this translates into a healthy respect for dangers and risks. In that respect, fear has an elective affinity with reason. It is the one passion that does not seek to displace it. It is a rational emotion which is put to the service of a rational end. The warrior will accept death as part of the bargain but he will not actively seek it. What fear does, according to Hobbes, is remind us that the principal value of life is life. A soldier who hazards his life may be brave but he must recognise also that he is more useful alive than dead. It is more useful for everyone if he is still alive to continue the fight. To lose one's life usefully is indeed to instrumentalise it. To put one's life in the service of others, not only oneself, is consistent with the warrior ethos.[38]

This brings us back to Homer, or rather to Homer's world interpreted by a fifth-century writer, Plato. By the fifth century the warrior had been tamed. War was now an object of rational thought linked to public debate and discussion. The warrior was subject to criticism. What we have here is a major change involving not only the social status of the warrior but also his social role, and following closely upon it a change in his psychological make-up as well. By the fifth century

Homer was still what Plato called 'the educator of Greece', but, like the tragedians, the philosophers were interrogating him more systematically than ever. For both of them Achilles had become a problem.

The warrior and Hobbesian castration

The real danger of the Homeric hero is his immense self-absorption. Indeed, Homer tells us that when Achilles sends out Patroclus to battle he expresses an astonishing wish: if only (the passage runs in the Lattimore translation) 'not one of the Trojans could escape destruction, not one/of the Argives, but you and I could emerge from the slaughter'. Achilles is praying for the death of everyone so that the glory alone is his. And we should not think that even his friend Patroclus is spared, for what he is, in the end, is but an extension of Achilles' own persona, symbolically so when Achilles sends him out to battle in his own armour where he meets his death at Hector's hand.[39] This is solipsism of the highest order; and it really is frightening. This is indeed a Hobbesian world in which a man's life is almost entirely 'solitary', as well as short.

Peter Sloterdijk puts it very nicely when he writes that in stateless societies no one has known 'Hobbesian castration' – that is 'submission of the citizen's savage pride to the sovereignty of the state'. Violence is not latent or repressed but consubstantial with the political culture of the world in question. This is why from the Victorian age onwards we have had a distinct predilection for Hector, the Trojan warrior par excellence, a man who has a simple humanity which Achilles lacks, as well as a family through which his humanity can be given expression (his wife, Andromache, and son, Astyanax, who in Euripides' play *The Trojan Women* the wily Odysseus insists must be killed – precisely, of course, to avoid a blood feud, Hector's revenge from the grave). But as far as we know not one Athenian tragedy took Hector as its subject. Admire him the Greeks might have but unlike the young cadets of the US Naval War College they admired Achilles much more.

Yet it was precisely for that reason that they spent so much time attempting to come to terms with him. Myth in its original form provides answers without explicitly formulating the problems. When tragedy took over as it did in fifth-century Athens it employed myths to pose problems to which there were no solutions.[40] The same can be said of philosophy, though philosophers are more practical. Like the tragic poets, Plato explored deeper themes of the human condition. Virtues such as courage which had been portrayed by Homer unreflectively were now subjected to more critical analysis. With Plato the warrior emerges from the mythic imagination into the realm of philosophical investigation. Philosophy begins when myth reaches a dead end.

History doesn't stand still. We are always 'becoming' for that reason. The more sophisticated a society becomes the more it will analyse the logic of how things work, and why. Knowledge exists, of course, prior to theory. Experience produces it even though experience is often conflated with anecdotal evidence, or myth or received stories. But there will come a time when a society interrogates itself more

systematically, when it begins to theorise, to establish general principles and abstract rules, at which point we move from a world which is 'pre-theoretical' (i.e. known, because everyone knows it) – an assemblage of maxims, morals, values and beliefs – to one of philosophy, which objectifies knowledge by turning it into a public property and asking what is good for society as a whole.

The Greeks felt the need to ask themselves more questions than others, which is why they invented philosophy. All our values are derived from the questions we ask of the world and the answers we come up with. Although the questions usually remain the same over the centuries the answers are always changing. The value of war too differs over time as well as across cultures, according to the questions we ask of ourselves. In short, a society is an object of interest to itself. We would not have the capacity to achieve anything unless we reflected upon ourselves. A society's identity, its feeling of its place in the world, its sense of purpose – all three are derived from the questions it asks and the answers it comes up with. Every society has to come to terms with itself, to objectify the external world and its place in it and to take its own – and the world's – measure. Our conception of the world is the one from which we derive our moral codes, our central belief systems, our conventions. Reflection helps to objectify the world. And what is objective reason but the common interest, the collective good, the interest of the state. This represents a fundamental conceptual leap and a bold one for the warrior. For a principle to be derived from the collective good as discovered by reason, the warrior has to acknowledge that certain universal principles obliterate the differences that for all aristocrats matter most: differences grounded in natural merit.

When we start to judge we start to problematise. Achilles is a 'given' in Homer's world; he is a problem in Plato's, and the problem is how to harness his passions to instrumental ends. The solution is to give him a *soul*. With Plato the treatment of the soul becomes the central task of philosophy, and the central philosophical question is how to live the good life independent of the 'humours' that we are prey to.

Bloody humours

Let me invoke Nietzsche once again. In his first book, *The Birth of Tragedy*, Nietzsche proposed that there were two poles in Greek life – daylight, intellect, the mind and measure, all represented by the god Apollo, and darkness, emotion and inspiration, represented by the god Dionysus, who for him was the more important of the two. Even before the modern era, however, society had a conception of the irrational in life. Thus in the Shakespearian canon a number of characters are described in terms of their 'humours', the combination of fluids within the body which the Elizabethans believed governed a person's mental disposition. For them the main humours were blood, phlegm, choler and melancholy. Good health and rational behaviour were thought to come from keeping the humours in balance. Some characters, however, were deemed to display a predominance of one over the other, and their actions were interpreted accordingly.

'You are altogether governed by humour', complains Lady Percy of her hot-headed husband, Hotspur, the greatest warrior, save one (the man who eventually bests him is the future Henry V), who has an excess of blood which makes him passionate and courageous, in his case foolishly so. His wife describes him thus:

> In military rules, humours of blood,
> He was the mark and glass, copy and book
> That fashioned others.
> (*Henry IV, Part 2*, II, 3: 30)

But Hotspur is too intemperate and too impatient. He lacks judgement. As another of Shakespeare's characters complains, 'he apprehends a world of figures/But not the form of what he should attend'.

We know little about Shakespeare's own 'humours' but we know a lot more about Nietzsche's. Nietzsche was writing with the unique insight of the modern age which had just discovered the Unconscious. Nietzsche was well aware of the psychological theories of the day which pre-dated Freud – the idea that humans are frequently unaware of their own motives and driven by impulses and needs they don't always acknowledge; and that the self is a complex, by no means entirely rational, entity, subject to impulses which are not always acknowledged, let alone understood.

Every great philosophical work, Nietzsche once wrote, is the personal confession of its author, a kind of 'involuntary memoir'. *The Birth of Tragedy* is not a great work, but it was the first and most personal of his books. It cost him his academic reputation and with it his academic career. Richard Schain has made a compelling case that he suffered all his life from a 'manic depressive psychosis' which gave way at times to chronic schizophrenia. If so, the categories of the 'Apollonian' and 'Dionysian' may be seen as Nietzsche's attempt to name his own bipolar disorder.[41]

War is bipolar too, however much the modern military may wish to privilege its instrumental dimension. While the Apollonian is associated with instrumental reason – rationality, knowledge, technology and moderation – the Dionysian is linked with excess, the irrational, insight and intuition. In the Dionysian realm individual reason is suspended; so, too, individual identity is dissolved as the individual finds himself responding to the elemental forces and energies of nature.

The Greeks called it *chairo* – rejoicing in war. Although our soldiers are not encouraged to rejoice too much, any memoir or book written by a warrior captures a sense of intoxication: war as spectacle, as an epiphany in a man's life. It offers an adrenalin rush. 'War is the only thing they don't exaggerate', writes a US Marine. War is 'cool'. And destroying things is the 'coolest' thing of all. 'It's cool because I am able to shoot my weapon out the window', declared another. 'Iraqis think we are cool', claimed a third, 'because we're so good at blowing shit up.'[42] In his own memoir of the Second Gulf War, Nathaniel Fick does not shrink from the truth, however personal or unpleasant. 'I was aware enough', he wrote of one particular firefight, 'to be concerned that I was starting to enjoy it.'[43]

It is this Dionysian dimension that we find increasingly difficult to assimilate into Western military culture, in part because it is deemed to seal off the warrior from the moral activity of everyday life, to place him beyond 'good and evil', to locate him in a purely aesthetic world: the sublime of destruction. One especially vivid example of this is T. E. Lawrence, who came to Arabia a soldier-scholar and left a warrior having discovered in war his ultimate vocation. And if we are honest what fascinates us most about this otherwise quiet English scholar was his love of combat. It flares like a blowtorch. You sense his passion like a physical force. Lawrence's memoirs are important for what they also tell us about the Arabs with whom he identified or, in other words, the ancient passions that today's warriors are expected to suppress in themselves.

Lawrence's partisanship for a tribe of the Hejazi Arabs is, in our eyes at least, a strange one as there is little attractive about them. What Lawrence claimed to love most about the Bedouin was their primitive nature – he came to admire their cruelty 'untainted with doubt, our modern crown of thorns'. What he admired is what William James called their 'integrity of feeling', which meant that, unlike himself who could kill only when intoxicated by violence, they could kill with a good conscience all the time. When intoxicated he joined in with the worst of them. By the end of *The Seven Pillars of Wisdom* he was killing Turks with abandon, with an 'obscene' (his own word) bloodthirstiness. In the words of Eli Kedourie, Lawrence 'was in truth engaged on an elicit adventure, in a kind of witchcraft with black magic'. If we follow Kedourie's analysis, adds Robert Irwin, then Lawrence's boast that he and the Arabs had not spared themselves any evil should be taken seriously.[44]

Lawrence remains for that reason an ambivalent figure, in touch with the elemental, his Dionysian side. But if he did indeed look into the heart of darkness he didn't succumb to it. Remember Conrad's prototypical nihilist Kurtz who loses his soul in contact with the elemental forces he finds in the Congo which mirror those deep within himself. Kurtz does indeed look into the darkness in his soul; ultimately he is reclaimed by it. Conrad's tale is about an otherwise resolute person who foundered in his soul; despair seized him. 'Exterminate all the brutes!' is his final despairing advice.

Lawrence did not die spiritually. When he claimed in his memoirs that he had travelled into the heart of darkness, he had actually moved towards its opposite: a darkness that is really an overwhelming illumination about the wellsprings of his own being. What drove him? An ascetic vision (his great capacity for pain)? Human pride: his obvious need for self-esteem which stemmed from a lack of self-worth? Or his own psychological fixations which have intrigued his biographers for the past seventy years? As the questions mount the answers become a matter of indifference to us – what matters is to capture, if we can, that unfathomable, unnameable phenomenon: the warrior soul.

To talk of Lawrence's 'warrior soul', or Patton's, is to enter a quite different world from that of the Bedouin. When *we* talk of the soul we mean what the Greek philosophers of the fifth century understood by the term. It involves an inner command, including conscience. In Homer the soul appears too. But it is a shadow

– it needs others for its realisation. It seeks approval. It needs to be inscribed in stone or commemorated in epic verse. The only immortality is memory. For Plato, by contrast, the soul is a command from within; to live in harmony with one's soul is to live in harmony with the state. What's good for the soul is good for everyone else. For the public man is happier than the private and Achilles is very unhappy indeed.

Achilles' unhappiness, writes Angela Hobbs, presented a particular problem for a city state like fifth-century Athens. First, his rage is a danger not only to himself but to the whole Greek cause. He almost undoes nine years of struggle single-handed. He is only just prevented from deserting his post altogether. Warfare had evolved since Homer's day. The archetype of civic courage, the Athenian general Laches tells us in the Platonic dialogue of the same name, is the man who stays at his post, who doesn't think of deserting. This specifically recalls the soldier standing in line with others, working in unison with his fellow citizens.

Plato believed Achilles deserted his post because his soul was divided. To this he attributed Achilles' most inhumane acts such as dragging Hector's corpse around the walls of Troy and slaughtering the young Trojan prisoners at Patroclus' funeral pyre. No less a figure than Apollo accuses him of destroying pity and lacking shame. But then Achilles is pitiless because he is clearly unhappy. He has too much anger, which is why he is as much a danger to himself as he is to his fellow Greeks. What we have is a very unhappy warrior, one who attacks not only the society to which he belongs – his friends and comrades-in-arms – but also himself. His life in a Hobbesian sense is 'solitary'. What is interesting about Plato's depiction of Achilles is that he is represented as a very lonely man. Like Coriolanus, another warrior who turned against his own community, he is a 'lonely dragon'. As Nestor says of him in Homer's poem: 'he will enjoy his own valour in loneliness'. When Patroclus is killed, of course, he really is alone. He has no other friends, or at least none that we know of.

There is also no room in Plato's ideal republic for vainglory or insubordination. He specifically criticises Achilles' indiscipline, his attack on Agamemnon as 'a wine sack with the eyes of a dog and the courage of a doe', and his refusal to obey even the river god Scamander and his wish to fight him. There can be no place in the state, Plato has Socrates insist, for a man who puts his own pride before the collective good, for it is the collective good that is the essence of political life. The warrior who serves that good is a just man, one who is at peace with himself.[45]

But there is also something more in Plato's questioning of Achilles as a role model. A warrior who is unconstrained by instrumental reason is one who is clearly dangerous because he is in love with death too much. Achilles is attached to life, of course, and bitterly complains to Odysseus when they meet up again in the Underworld that he has left it early, making it seem that even eternal glory is not compensation enough. Yet in the act of obtaining glory he takes risks that will lead to his death, and which even encourage him to seek it prematurely.[46]

And Plato mounts a final line of attack which is worth mentioning. The more resentful you are of death the more bloody and dangerous you become. For Achilles the joy of war is *charme*, which means blood lust. Achilles tells the world:

Food and drink mean nothing to my heart
But blood does, and slaughter,
And the groaning of men in the hard work.[47]

And this explains what happens in that most seminal of passages from the *Iliad* when Achilles meets Lycaon. For a man who is so wedded to the idea of death is not, of course, a man who will show mercy very often.

'Great havoc makes he among our originalities', Emerson ruefully observed of Plato.[48] And nowhere was this more true than in Plato's reading of the *Iliad*. Achilles, as Virginia Woolf tells us, was an original – the first warrior and the most formidable, a prototype whose skill can hardly be called prototypical since it could not be emulated by anyone else, a man who William James claimed had real 'moral integrity' because of his primal state. Plato won't have any of this – the warrior must subordinate himself to instrumental rationality.

Now, Plato puts all these views into the mouth of Socrates and we still don't know which passages in the dialogues express Socrates' real thoughts and which reflect Plato's own. Plato himself once described his dialogues as the work of Socrates 'embellished and brought up to date', which doesn't help us to deconstruct the text.[49] There is an alternative version of the philosopher and we find it in Xenophon's *Conversations of Socrates*. Xenophon was a soldier, the author of one of the most famous books on war, the *Anabasis*, his stirring account of his exploits as a mercenary working for one of two warring brothers fighting for the throne in the dying days of the Persian Empire. Xenophon's picture of Socrates is not Plato's. Plato portrays a man whose creed is irony. He claimed he did not know anything for certain and therefore could not know the truth. The philosopher portrayed by Xenophon does know the difference between good and bad. He is the kind of teacher a soldier would respect much more and he may even be nearer to the real man than we are prepared to recognise, enchanted as we are by Plato's portrait of him.

But perhaps it doesn't matter. For although condemned to death by Athens for breaking ranks, for voicing his own opinions, for putting his own conscience first before that of the city, the historic Socrates never once broke ranks in the three battles he fought during his lifetime. He did what any post-Homeric citizen would. He stood shoulder to shoulder with his fellow citizens. We can imagine this is what a soldier like Xenophon admired about him most.

At the battle of Delium, Socrates found that discipline came naturally. He was an immensely disciplined person in life. It has been said of him that in the strength of his character lay the weakness of his philosophy for that reason.

Aristotle was also later to attack Socrates for dismissing the importance of passion, for finding no place in life – the good life, that is – for impulses, for the wilfully irrational. Plato had an answer to this too. Virtue was not just a matter of knowing better, as opposed to knowing more; it was a matter of behaviour. But what is noteworthy about the Greek approach to war is that behaviour is conditioned. The warrior is instrumentalised. He has to control himself. The private realm exists – and it is still honoured – but it is increasingly *patrolled*.

Remaining in the state of nature: why suicide bombers aren't warriors

Let me conclude, however, by discussing what happens when warriors' humours are not policed by society. In such circumstances killing becomes disproportionately more important; killing is almost all that they do. Take today's main battlefield in the war on terror – the Greater Middle East – where we are confronted with a different *grammar of killing*. Our own is largely instrumental and tries to minimise bloodshed, not always with success; our enemies' is largely expressive and involves the shedding of blood.

Michel Foucault makes an important point when he reminds us that 'blood' used to be the crucial axis of life not only in the pre-modern but in the modern age. In one respect the break between the post-modern and the modern age is more radical than the earlier break for that reason. For much of our own history blood was vital in a society which was divided into castes and classes, and blood lines. Blood descent was at the centre of *noblesse oblige*. Power spoke through blood. In its own eyes the aristocracy differed from every other class because of its willingness to risk blood. The shedding of blood in war by the state, or in public executions, or in torture was once central to our penal codes. The purity of the blood line was a critical theme of politics in Western society as late as the 1930s. For a time it was the central myth of European fascism.[50]

What distinguishes the post-modern era is that the mechanics of power are now addressed to the body, to the prolongation of life, to the general health of the population. The key now is not blood but the fate of the human body. For us the body is there to be super-empowered. It is there to be reconfigured through cosmetic surgery. The body has become autotelic – its own purpose, a value in its own right. Its well-being is for us an absolute value. Our societies minister to our health. We may not quite have reached the point of Samuel Butler's *Erewhon* where illness is regarded as a crime but we are getting there. We patrol our lives for anything which puts the body at risk. The body is now socially regulated.

In the Middle East none of this applies. Violence itself is ritualised. It is employed to make a statement and it is the task of anthropologists to decipher what the statement means or what message is being conveyed. Violence has the character of theatre in which things are said as much as done. One cannot understand violence purely in terms of instrumental goals. In the Levant it can take an expressive form: violation to the human body; the public display of corpses; the burning of the bodies of soldiers; or in the case of Mogadishu the parading of the bodies of Pakistani soldiers through the streets. Honour can only be reclaimed by blood. Both the violation and the vindication of honour are represented in the idiom of the human body: the maiming of the body through either a suicide bomb or a beheading is part of the message being sent.[51]

What makes their 'warriors' different from ours, however, is that they don't know 'Hobbesian castration'. There is such a large personal element in their sacrifice that we suspect it; we find it too personal to be political. We are suspicious of martyrs. All martyrdom is expressive. It is testament to the Truth – the Greek word for truth, *aletheia*, means 'not forgetting'. Once again we should read the

Greeks in an anthropological light. And although a contempt for life – one's own and that of others – is not the exclusive privilege of religious belief, it is now mostly cast in a religious vernacular. A martyr who dies for the faith goes to his death uncomplainingly as a testament to his personal faith, frequently with no other motive in mind than his own salvation. Dying is the way of winning salvation. The martyr dies for the salvation of his soul – the act is self-referential. In a famous essay on suicide the English writer G. K. Chesterton wrote that 'the man who kills a man kills a man. The man who kills himself, kills all men; as far as he is concerned he wipes out the world.'[52] There is much truth in Chesterton's observation. The reason why suicide (as opposed to suicidal bravery or near-suicidal acts of heroism) has never been encouraged in the professional armed forces is that usually it has no instrumental purpose. A soldier's death must have a purpose for others in which case it is usually not suicide but self-sacrifice (the soldier who throws himself on the grenade). It is a soldier's duty to kill others but if possible to avoid being killed himself. As Chesterton remarks, suicide is very different: the world really does end with the death of the man who takes his own life.

The Western hero on the battlefield is different again. He is a man who is willing to die (he is often near-suicidal – as Will Rogers memorably quipped, 'being a hero is the shortest-lived profession on earth'). But usually he does not die alone. He dies for others, including his friends, and he usually takes others with him: for his sacrifice to be meaningful the enemy must die as well. A hero is a modern figure, more modern than the martyr because of this profit-and-loss calculus. He wants his death to mean something to others.[53]

The suicide bomber is both a martyr and a hero (in his own eyes and that of the community from which he is drawn). Take the young Western-educated Muslim who, told that he can never master classical Arabic and therefore read the prophet's true words, can, at least, 'upgrade' his status in the next life by taking infidels with him when exiting this. It is this deadly combination that we find most baffling: for us this is a supreme paradox – the soldier who is 'dying to kill'. But paradoxical or not, the suicide bomber's actions are not in the end ultimately suicidal as we traditionally understand the term. They are not fatalistic. They are intended to make a difference. Their world does indeed survive them.

Suicide as a political act

What then of another objection to calling them warriors, namely that suicide is not a political act? It is easy to argue this, but then again we might be well advised to go back to the Greeks. In Plato's *Republic* sons are urged to accompany their fathers into battle so that they can learn their trade young. War is their character-forming commitment to the *polis*. How does this compare with the summer camps in which children as young as eight are trained in military drills and encouraged to write poems about the bombers and to learn how to take their life as well as the lives of others? Visit any Hamas kindergarten and you will see slogans proclaiming 'Children are the holy martyrs of tomorrow'. On the streets of Gaza children play a game called *shuhada* which includes a mock funeral for a suicide bomber.

Teenage rock groups praise martyrs in their songs. Ask many young Palestinians to tell you their heroes and the names of suicide bombers are likely to come to mind first.

Suicide bombers are popular in the Middle East precisely because they are regarded as civic heroes. One man whose son was martyred claimed that everyone in his village treated him with more respect: 'when there is a martyr in the village it encourages more children to join the jihad. It raises the spirit of the entire village.' His wife added, 'I would be happy if all my seven sons should be martyred. They will help me in the next life which is the real life . . . We do this to create justice in the world.'[54] For the jihadist, martyrdom both fulfils a personal existential need and provides the spiritual fulfilment that comes from sacrificing oneself for the well-being of one's family and community.

There are two ways to look at this. One is that parents feel so wronged and humiliated by the outside world that they would rather lose their children than endure humiliation in passive stoicism; the other is that the cult of the suicide bomber has infected the broader culture to the point where large parts of society including the bombers' parents are addicted to the adrenalin rush of vengeance and murder.

Yet the Levant is a distinctive region. Despite the individual diversity of its members what is most impressive about the region is its similarities of language (Turkish, Persian, Arabic), architecture, socio-economic conditions and indeed entire way of life. This is also a region that has bred a style of warfare first identified seven hundred years ago by the Arab writer Ibn Khaldun. These were the tribes discussed in the *Muqaddimah*, the introduction to his universal history. What fascinated him most about the tribal societies of Central and Western Asia was their blood feuds, clan structures, sense of honour and, above all, enthusiasm for revenge, which ensured permanent feuding. Indeed, he found that economic conditions had created fierce tribal units bound together by patrilineal clans. What is striking about his work is that he described a way of warfare specific to nomadic groups: the tribe prevails when it employs 'hidden factors of war' such as ambushes, when it uses terror as a tactic and when it tries to demoralise rather than outfight an opponent. War, wrote Khaldun, had its origins in a desire to take revenge on others.[55] So too does terrorism.

The Levantine world is still distinguished by social networks, quasi-tribes and alignments formed on the basis of kin and common experience. Ibn Khaldun was not much impressed by city life with its social divisiveness. He had little time for its citizens' taste for luxury. Indeed, he thought nomads made better soldiers than citizens. Today, however, the nomads are not camped outside the cities; they are to be found camped within them. Tribal feelings persist in urban areas of the Levant, as the West found to its cost in Beirut in the mid-1980s and in Mogadishu, a city once divided between fifty warlords. It is also to be found among the neighbourhood and Sunni brotherhoods who make up networks such as Hamas and Hezbollah. The nomads have been inside the cities for decades practising a nomadic form of warfare, as the Americans and Israelis both found to their cost in Lebanon (1983 and 2000).

What is important about the Levant is that attitudes to the city and citizenship are diametrically opposed to Western (Aristotelian) concepts of the urban sphere. For Aristotle, the city is the place of the political. Man is a political animal, the word derived from *polis* (the Greek city state). For Rousseau the noble savage falls from grace and enters the city. There's no escaping the city if you're a Western philosopher. For Ibn Khaldun, however, the Bedouin/nomad falls from grace when he enters the city. For he loses more than his integrity; he loses his fortitude, his ferocity, his passion. He makes a lousy soldier.

The difference in Levantine and Western thinking cannot be more graphically illustrated. We find it in Vico's history of civilisation. The nomads, he tells us, enter the city with their private passions: ferocity, avarice and ambition. The city *emasculates* them, transforming their private passions into public virtues. Ferocity becomes patriotism. Avarice becomes capitalism. Ambition is transformed into politics. This concept of transformation and with it the Aristotelian thesis that the best soldier is the citizen who fights for his own freedom is totally absent from Ibn Khaldun's thinking even though he was a city dweller himself. As Ernest Gellner writes, 'the possibility of civil society, of associations within the city strong enough to re-site the state (or even to turn it into its servant) does not seem to have occurred to him'.[56] This is what makes his analysis so striking. For at its heart is praise of the nomad who refuses to submit to authority, or 'Hobbesian castration'. Even today city boys in many Arab countries are sent into the desert for training in manhood and moral integrity. And what they learn there is a contempt for authority. 'There is scarcely one among them who would cede his power to another, even to his father, his brother, or the oldest member of his family', added Ibn Khaldun. The rejection of authority, of course, is inconsistent with the very Western notion of submission to the law.

Remember the memorial to the Spartan soldiers who died at Thermopylae? They didn't, as we would say today, die for freedom. They never used the word. They died, Herodotus tells us, 'in submission to their laws'. But what made them free was the fact that they submitted only to the laws of their own making. By civil law, adds Hobbes, 'I understand the laws that men are bound to observe because they are members not of this or that commonwealth but *a* commonwealth'. In other words, by virtue of living in a civic order men are bound to observe its law. Obedience for them is freely chosen.[57] Civil obligation is at the heart of Western liberal thinking. John Locke called men who had no sense of civic obligation 'corrupt and vicious'.[58] He used another word, 'delinquent', a word that doesn't mean what it does today, a criminal or social offender, but a man who has failed in his civic duty. In the absence of civic duty the Levant still produces delinquents: warlords in Afghanistan or Somalia; mullahs in Iraq with their private militias; Hobbes's 'worms' gnawing away at the intestines of the state.

Yet there is, of course, a deep yearning for civility in the Middle East. It is found in religion. Islam means submission to God's law. Thus Hamas has conducted a jihad from the start of its intifada against Israel in 1987 on two fronts, not one: first against Israel in pursuit of an independent Palestinian homeland; secondly a holy war which is intended to make the Palestinians better Muslims, a war waged

specifically against the corruption of organisations like the PLO. In that sense the suicide bomber is a citizen. War is his commitment to civil society. His death is a civil sacrament, almost a civic obligation.[59]

And there is in the suicide bomber's actions a civic obligation of a different kind: obligation to the Umma (the Brotherhood). This is very different from the Western belief that the civic realm is cultural: that democracy is the city state or the nation state or, in the case of the European Union, a transnational community. The Umma is not a stage towards the nation state but its alternative. It is directly in competition with it. This explains why the anger of the suicide bomber or terrorist is directed at a universal enemy, or the alien 'other': Zionism, or American imperialism, or Western values. Violence is directed not inwards but outwards.

This is well illustrated by the answer that an American camerawoman is given in Beirut in a novel by Don DeLillo. Why take Westerners hostage at all, and why put their heads in hoods, she asks a masked gunman? So that we don't have to look at them, she is told, for they remind us of the way we once tried to mimic the West.

> 'He is saying that as long as there is a Western presence it's a threat to self respect, to identity.'
>
> 'And you reply with terror?'
>
> 'He is saying terror is what we use to give our people their place in the world. What used to be achieved through work, we gain through terror. Terror makes the new future possible. All men are men. Men live in history as never before. He is saying we make and change history minute by minute . . . We do history in the morning and change it after lunch.'[60]

Terrorism offers a transcending moment historically, a chance to escape a world of limits and limitations. It can even provide hope. As a young Hamas suicide bomber told one researcher: 'To die in this way is better than to die daily in frustration and humiliation.'[61] Humiliation is the worst thing in a shame culture, and violence can be the best antidote to it. Expressive violence is designed to live in the memory. Like warriors, terrorists have *thymotic* needs of their own

In this world great importance is attached to pain, especially those who inflict it. In DeLillo's novel, terrorist acts which we consider barbaric (or senseless) are undertaken not to accomplish a clear objective so much as to make a symbolic statement. The very adjectives used to describe acts of religious terrorism – 'symbolic', 'dramatic', 'theatrical' – suggest we should look at them not as instrumental but performative. We should see politics as theatrical in form and war as expressive in inspiration.

This is another theme which DeLillo captures at the conclusion of his novel, which ends with his American camerawoman looking over the night skyline of her hotel in Beirut. As the morning dawns she sees a flash in the dark, and then another in the same spot, and then several more intense and white. At first she thinks it's the first sign of dawn, which is beginning as usual with an exchange of automatic

weapons fire. Almost immediately she realises that there is another Western photographer out there with a camera and flash unit photographing the dying city. For if history is indeed to be made both morning and evening the camera is essential to its making. Terrorism, DeLillo adds, 'is the language of being noticed'. It is the act which impresses irrespective of its practical consequences; the power lies in the 'doing' not the effects or consequences of the deed. The doer empowers himself. He becomes a character in one of his own screenplays addressing the largest audience ever.

Through the power of television he has the chance to transform himself from a marginal player in the region into a major one in the eyes of the world. He has the power, DeLillo recognises, to shape history by shaping our reality. He has the power to shape our history by the power through which he gets us to take notice of him. In transmitting that message, *Mao 2* is *the* novel of contemporary terrorism for it offers us a critique of our inability to take seriously anyone other than the lethal believer, the person who kills and dies for his faith.

The warrior as nihilist

And yet even if we are willing to concede that the terrorist can be a political actor, and that his sacrifice can have political meaning, there is in fact a very good reason why we should be wary of seeing him as a warrior. In our eyes he has not escaped the state of nature.

One of the most important lessons of the *Iliad* is that there is no place for hatred on the battlefield. The moment Achilles in his unrestrained grief dishonours Hector's body is also the moment of self-loathing. Achilles in the end comes to his senses. The *Iliad* ends with the burial of the greatest of the Trojan heroes and the brief suspension of hostilities so that he can be buried in full accordance with the honour due him by his own side, and the respect he has won in the eyes of the other. Indeed, the poem ends on that symbolic note.

It helps, of course, that Troy and Greece are largely mirror images of each other. The two sides speak the same language, which allows the competing warriors the necrologues – the many monologues which punctuate the text, usually prior to one warrior slaying another. They worship the same gods, who are wilful, cruel and arbitrary in their favours. They share the same customs and sensibilities. So it is not all that surprising that Achilles should call Lycaon 'friend' before dispatching him to the Underworld. It is much easier for men who share so much in common to respect each other's fighting skills but it is not unknown even when cultures differ. Warriors worshipping different gods can honour each other's skills. After all, most are members of a freemasonry with obligations to each other, as well as the society in whose name they kill.

But we must also grasp something else specific to the instrumental realm: state-sanctioned killing, which makes war very different from every other act of collective killing. Anthropologists call it *social substitutability*, and it has a distinctive logic that is entirely foreign to murder, or capital punishment or even a duel. A murderer kills the man he hates, or envies, or whose possessions he covets.

Hatred though not necessarily personal is the product of a specific relationship. In a blood feud a man kills either the person who is deemed to have dishonoured him, or a representative of the same family, usually a cousin, sometimes a brother. And blood feuds continue over the generations. In war the killing of an individual is perceived as an injury to his or her group; the same logic engenders the community to hold responsible not only the individuals who have committed the act but the whole community. War cognitively and behaviourally involves competing groups and the aim is not to punish a particular perpetrator but the community of which he is a member. War involves not only collective vengeance but an obligation on everyone's part; it requires a coordinated effort. It is the involvement of the whole community that makes it a morally sanctioned act.

It also follows, of course, that the enemy to be killed is a token, a substitute. One side takes the life on the battlefield of someone from another who is probably personally innocent of any harm or injury; the same is not true of a blood feud or capital punishment. If the destruction of Troy is the object of the war (if its men are to be put to the sword, and its women and children sold into slavery), if such destruction alone can atone for the dishonour visited upon Menelaus and his clan, Hector and his fellow warriors are not personally held to blame.

Homer brings this home to us in a dramatic scene in his epic poem. Nine years into the war, exhausted by the interminable fighting, longing for peace, for the chance to return home, the Greeks agree to settle the issue by allowing both Paris and Menelaus to meet in hand-to-hand combat. Alas, the gods will have none of it. War is war, not a personal blood feud. Both parties to the dispute may try to resolve the issue personally but at a critical moment in their duel, as Paris is about to be slain, he is spirited off to safety so that the war will continue to its inevitable conclusion. The gods are in deadly earnest, and so too in the end are the Greeks.

Now, it may well be that societies usually demonise their enemies in order to mobilise their citizens. Hatred like everything else has a history and, with its need to mobilise entire societies for war and to put millions of young men into uniform, twentieth-century states tended to demonise their enemies more intensely than ever. The century engaged in continuous debates about the moral nature of aggression which were particularly intense when nation clashed with nation, race with race, or class with class. Enemies were imagined, as well as real, generic as well as individual.

In the absence of restraint there is no limit to either killing or dying, which Europe soon discovered to its cost in the great ideological conflicts of the late modern era. 'And we must tremble so long as we have not learned to heal the sinister ease of dying.'[62] The words are Victor Hugo's, writing after the high death rate in the Paris Commune in 1871. Sacrifice becomes problematic when dying becomes too easy. Sacrifice becomes problematic when it betrays a contempt for life, not an affirmation of it. Like Leonidas and the 300 at Thermopylae a warrior dies for the life he leads: he dies so that others may live it on their own terms and not someone else's. A second objection to suicide bombing is the killing. It reduces life to Hobbes's state of nature – the war of all against all, 'every man the

enemy of every man'. The twentieth century was distinctive because the young were corrupted by the violence to which they were exposed. Why was it so easy in the 1920s, asked Nadezhda Mandelstam in her memoir, *Hope against Hope*, for young people in the Soviet Union to become killers? Why do the young in revolutionary periods look upon life with such criminal frivolity? What happens when murder becomes such an ordinary everyday thing that it ceases to be extra-ordinary? And what happens to a society in which violence becomes contagious because it's what young men do – it defines their humanity. 'The headhunting mentality', Mandelstam tells us, 'spread like a plague. I even had a slight bout of it myself.'[63]

It is in this sense that a one-dimensional, existential view of war is so deeply corrupting. Referring to the lone individual who takes his own life, Camus also used the same phrase as Hugo – a 'terrible strength'. Suicide, he wrote in his famous novel *The Rebel*, helps him 'to dominate others through the terrible strength and freedom which he gains from his decision to die'.[64] The Irish poet Yeats used a different phrase, a 'terrible beauty', about the Easter Rising in Ireland in 1916, another foolhardy revolt by young men. Camus's 'terrible strength' is now, alas, a feature of politics in the Greater Middle East. And because it's 'political', because it's intended to influence others, particularly impressionable young men, it is used to dominate others. It allows the terrorist to occupy the moral high ground in a region where a willingness to die for one's beliefs is so often taken to be a sign of moral conviction.

This terrible strength used to be nourished by secular ideologies; it is now fuelled by religion. 'God has come back into history through the door of terror', wrote Paul Virilio in 1983,[65] the year that witnessed the appearance of the first suicide bomber in the Middle East in the Hezbollah campaign in Lebanon. 'When the old God leaves the world what happens to all the unexpended faith?' asks a character in *Mao 2*.[66] He is watching his estranged daughter getting married with 1,300 other Moonies at a mass wedding ceremony in the Yankee Stadium in New York. With this picture DeLillo establishes his theme that the future belongs to crowds, the crowds that in their millions were led to sacrifice in the course of the twentieth century by false prophets, pathological leaders and psychotic gods. And the madness persists. 'When the old gods go they pray to flies and bottle tops.' They follow anyone who gives them what they need – unexpended faith. Today much of the world has returned to the old faith but now the old gods demand human sacrifice.

And here, perhaps, we have the key. For it not only the 'terrible strength' of dying that explains the impulse to kill. The West has produced religious warriors too, such as the medieval crusaders. But the purpose of a crusade is to convert others. This is not the suicide bomber's motivation. It might be useful to cite the philosopher Hume here: 'if suicide be criminal it must be a transgression of our duty either to God, our neighbours or ourselves'. The key concept is duty: for war is mediated, as we have seen, through the duty the warrior owes his comrades, his unit, his country. The warrior has a covenant not a contract with each; this is the reality of 'Hobbesian castration', for there is no duty in the state of nature.

What makes Islamic suicide bombers criminal in our eyes is not the fact that suicide is deemed to honour God, or that their justification in doing so imparts a sense of metaphysical emptiness which does not sit well with their invocations of the Quran. What transforms them into 'unlawful combatants' or 'erratic primitives' in our eyes is that they break the covenant with the enemy which is also at the heart of our own warrior ethos. For we have duties to those we fight too. In that sense we, like Chesterton, can add that terrorism threatens to 'wipe out the world' because it threatens to end the dialogue which constitutes war and which paradoxically makes peace possible.

The suicide bomber challenges the very concept of war as a dialogue. His actions are *unmediated*, which is why, suggests Mary Midgley, we must distinguish aggression from destructiveness. Most disputants to a debate don't in general hate their opponents; they simply want them out of the way. 'That is in the context of the argument – they want them silenced – their silencing will satisfy them.'[67] 'Silencing' does not usually take the form of eliminating our adversaries but forcing them to concede the argument, for the time being, at least. For silencing to be physical there must be hatred. The whole point of instrumental warfare is to win an argument but not necessarily to wish one's enemy dead or even damaged. For the most part, history shows that, as long as the enemy is prepared to accept one's argument or perhaps, more to the point, in accepting defeat to grant one the right to win it – as long as both sides recognise that the argument does not represent the Truth – then the dialogue can continue even after the battle has been won. That is why so many victories are provisional, but their provisional nature means that the argument goes on. Death is not necessarily the end of the argument.

In that sense, the suicide bomber is not a warrior. The warrior is an aggressor who uses aggression for ends which the state determines or which, at least, make sense to him. The terrorist is one who is committed to destruction as a manifestation of his own rage. This is not the rage of Achilles, who even in Hades where Odysseus visits him bemoans his death, who loves life and who is saved from his own hatred by a cathartic reconciliation with his enemies. The real danger of the nihilist is that he identifies his enemy in universal, even generic, terms: he is at war with Americans, or Zionists, or Westerners, a universal enemy in a cosmic struggle which permits no compromise. And enemies are demonised as 'objectively criminal' – people who are not guilty of any subjective crime, of course, for most have harmed nobody, but people who are simply guilty by virtue of being members of a criminal class or nation. In the twentieth century they were Jews or kulaks; today Israelis or Americans. Objective criminality, alas, has not departed the field as we enter a new century. It may have been abandoned by governments but it has been taken up in earnest by non-state actors who are perfectly willing to kill in the name of God, as men once killed in the name of History.

What is especially interesting is that in the West social substitutability is being redefined. Western governments no longer find it easy to hold citizens accountable for the misdeeds of their own governments. 'We can't do Dresden any longer', claimed an American general after the First Gulf War. It is no longer considered legitimate to carpet-bomb a city in the hope of making the world safe

for democracy. It is now important to target the regime itself. Like smart sanctions, smart bombs are aimed at states and their clientship networks, at economic interests, not people. In this respect, ironically, war for the West, at least, is becoming more like a blood feud.

4 Emerson and self-trust

One of the great memoirs of the Second World War is Robert Leakie's account of his time as a young US Marine, starting from boot camp and ending on the battlefields of Guadalcanal and Peleliu. War became for him a rite of passage, as it did for so many young men at the time. But in reflecting on the war years later, in trying to grasp the point of it all, he captured a glimpse of something much more profound than a passage to manhood. In explaining why he decided to record his experiences he wrote: 'for myself a memory and the strength of ordeal sustained; for my son a priceless heritage; for my country, sacrifice'.[1]

Almost the same sentiments are to be found in Eugene Sledge's account of his time in the Pacific, which ends with perhaps the most brutal campaign of all, the capture of Okinawa. After acknowledging that war is 'brutish, inglorious and a terrible waste', he nevertheless ends with this thought: 'Until the millennium arrives and countries cease trying to enslave others, it will be necessary to accept one's responsibilities and to be willing to make sacrifices for one's country – as my comrades did.'[2]

Two American soldiers, serving in the same theatre of war. Both sum up a highly dialectical relationship. It is the interaction between the instrumental and existential realms which generates sacrifice for one's community or country. The state cannot demand its citizens sacrifice themselves for it is a duty from within. It is strictly speaking 'beyond the call of duty'. It is a private impulse. And the military cannot demand it either because though it may be consistent with the warrior's honour it will not be recalled by the community at large if it is based on a selfish impulse. The creative tension between the two dimensions, the public and private realms, is overcome or fulfilled in a richer synthesis which translates war into something much more than state-sanctioned murder.

It is sacrifice, above all, which legitimises war in the popular imagination. Try to imagine war without it. It transvalues suffering, and secures the warrior in social esteem, in his *thymos* – the search for recognition. A warrior may be dispossessed of the ultimate value, life, but in giving up his life he is consecrating it to society and thus investing it with value. This is the ultimate message of Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, which after the *Iliad* offers the greatest insight into the warrior soul.

Tolstoy and the battle of Borodino

Tolstoy is the nearest echo we have of Homer in Western literature, in terms of the heroic temper and the heroic vision. For both writers the gods (or God) are at once ever present but at the same time detached, impassive and relentlessly neutral. In both there is the joy of war. No measure of Tolstoyan pacifism, no understanding of the pathos of war, can negate the ecstasy which the young Rostov experiences as he charges the French stragglers on the retreat from Moscow.[3]

Part of Tolstoy's canonical authority as a writer is that he does not take sides. He is not partisan. He presents war as he knew it, and observed it in person. He even allows himself admiration of the 'sensations' that can make war so vital for those who experience them. For both Tolstoy and Homer heroic deeds are worth recording, for war is the most human activity of all. Even in the midst of carnage there is life. Not even the burning of Troy, or Moscow, is final, for both cities live on in the collective imagination.

What makes Tolstoy different from Homer is that he set himself a task that was definitively modern – he went in search of what in *War and Peace* he called 'the human differential', a scientific explanation of why men act as they do in battle. Much of his adult life was spent trying to find a scientific explanation of human conduct in adverse circumstances, the social dynamic which leads soldiers to act in the way they do. He failed, and his failure is important. If the instrumental dimension of war may yield to empirical explanation, if states often behave in predictable ways, human beings rarely if ever do. In the heat of battle soldiers behave unpredictably according to the demands of the moment and the demands they make on themselves. They can be drilled and trained, and even to some extent programmed, but that will never explain why some are heroic or cowardly, why some stand and fight and others run away. No doubt military units can be 'infected' by similar feelings in the face of danger – even courage can be infectious – but every soldier's actions are ultimately determined by the sensations he feels.[4] This is especially true of the greatest gift of all – sacrifice.

For Tolstoy sacrifice was the key and he knew what he was writing about. He knew of war from first-hand experience in both the Caucasus and the Crimea. What interested him as a novelist most was the effect of an event on the individual. What his experience of one battle – Borodino (1813) – does for Pierre is to teach him an invaluable lesson, not in spite of but because of the horror. To live for oneself is not enough. We must live for other people.

Pierre discovers this from the moment he steps out of his carriage and climbs up to a hill from where the field of battle is visible. The sun shining overhead makes the field look like an amphitheatre. For a moment he is transfixed by the spectacle:

> It was the same panorama he had admired from the mound the day before but now the whole prospect swarmed with troops, smoke clouds from the guns hung over head and the slanting rays of the bright sun, rising slightly to the left behind Pierre, filled the clear morning sky with rosy glowing light and long dark shadows.[5]

For Pierre time literally stands still; reality is briefly disjointed. At this point he is quite literally divorced from the battle as a spectator, unaware (as we – the readers – are not) of the moral world in which soldiers are getting killed down below on the field of battle.

No sooner, however, has Pierre entered the field, spurred on by an inner voice, than his perceptions change. It is at this point that sensation does not give way to sensationalism. For at the centre of the battle he finds what he calls 'a family animation', a family from which hitherto he has been excluded but into which he is now inducted as the battle unfolds. His at first unconscious delight in the sights and sounds of battle gives way to another feeling altogether: 'He was entirely absorbed in the contemplation of that fire which blazed more fiercely with every moment and which (so he felt) was flaming in his *soul* too.'[6]

Tolstoy now takes us further into Pierre's warrior soul. We find ourselves no longer observing him from the outside but from inside his mind or psyche. The external impressions are now related to the inner self of his conflicting emotions. Pierre experiences 'a joyous new feeling, the feeling of the necessity to undertake something and sacrifice something'. What that something is he doesn't know. It's the sacrifice itself which constitutes the feeling. In the face of death Pierre finds himself engaged in a battle for his soul – the battle of life. When the unit's ammunition runs out it is he who volunteers unthinkingly to fetch it. Once he gives of himself in a single, reflexive act of courage he experiences his own moral worth. Confused, frightened but now engaged, he finds himself sharing in the life of others.

Tolstoy's achievement is not only to have found such feelings within himself but also to evoke them in us. What he shows is that war can be an 'awesome' experience. Let me return here to what I said about awe. In recent years a new interest has arisen in the concept in sociology and philosophy, in this world of generally exaggerated feeling. All battles can inspire awe on the part of those who experience them at first hand. Vastness is one part of that response: the idea that you are involved in something bigger than yourself which certainly accounts for Pierre's personal epiphany. He finds himself involved in nothing less than the defence of Russia, a cosmic battle against a force (Napoleon) that invokes in him a deep patriotism, for what is at stake is his own motherland. But another response is *accommodation*: that is the way by which human mental structures undergo an adjustment in the face of the challenge posed by new experiences. Stress, psychologists tell us, involves a *need* for accommodation which may or may not be satisfied. Pierre accommodates himself by recognising his affinity with other men, even common Russian soldiers. It is an affinity that transcends the narrow class-based categories by which he has so far lived his life. In Pierre's case he is reclaimed by the nation, that larger brotherhood which he finally discovers in the midst of the carnage and chaos of battle.

Some historians claim that Borodino may have seen the worst single day's fighting in all history. The true casualties may have been 100,000 (a death rate equivalent to a Boeing 747 crashing with no survivors every five minutes for eight hours).[7] Napoleon himself called the Russian formations 'human citadels' which

only cannonballs could demolish. Tolstoy took them to represent the spirit of an entire nation. Indeed, the subtext of the novel is how the aristocratic world of Pierre as represented by the great families, the Rostovs and Bolkonskys, struggles to break free from the foreign convention that has dominated life at the court. One of the key passages in the book is that in which Natasha, a French-educated young countess, dances to a folk tune in the Russian style. Until that point she has been self-absorbed; now she finds herself in tune with the spirit of Russia. Borodino is cast (somewhat anachronistically for the time it represents, though not the time Tolstoy was writing) as an act of national redemption and Pierre himself is cast as a quasi-freedom fighter who becomes aware of the patriotic virtues of the peasant soldiers in the ranks, and thus experiences a sense of Russian nationhood for the first time. Pierre comes to maturity at the same time as the Russian nation. Both are children of the time with a newly awakened sense of achievement.

Here we see the second dimension of war: the existential. And for Tolstoy that dimension was not only very real but vital. Anyone can kill or be trained to kill; it is how you motivate soldiers to die that is important. Indeed, for Tolstoy individual acts of heroism like Pierre's were actually real turning points in a battle. Warriors make a difference whether they realise it at the time or not. He was convinced that historians distort the true picture of war, that they exaggerate the commander's role, or genius. In their obsession with instrumental reason historians tend to downplay the subjective, existential realm. In reality battle often turns on chance events and individual acts of bravery.

Civilians such as myself who have no experience of battle often feel that anyone who courts death or hazards his life may not appreciate its true value. But this is far from the truth. S. L. A. Marshall, who spent much of his life explaining why soldiers so often fight more bravely than they themselves anticipate beforehand, arrived at the same conclusions as Tolstoy. To hazard one's life, or risk all in battle, is 'to face life bravely', for life should be shared with others, not lived alone:

> the only answer which comes to me as supportable in all that I have seen of men on the battlefield is that he is persuaded largely by the same things which induce him to face life bravely – friendship, loyalty to responsibility, and knowledge that he is a repository of the faith and confidence of others.[8]

This is not only Tolstoy's message; it is also Homer's. For we learn little if we dismiss Achilles, as he is often dismissed today, as a 'serial killer', a one-man killing machine. He is undoubtedly a killer even by the standards of his own day, which was much less squeamish than our own. But there is another side to his behaviour which is the main theme of the *Iliad* – his inconsolable grief at the loss of a friend. The battlefield is the place where friendship is forged because it is shared with others. And the phrase that comes to mind is the 'love that soldiers have for each other'. It is a love that is found nowhere else but the battlefield. It is the camaraderie of the soldier for his fellows which makes war such an intensely human (and even humane) experience.

'Humane' may seem a strange word in this context, but it is surely the appropriate one. Hannah Arendt came near to expressing this better than anyone else. The world is not humane, she tells us, just because it is made by human beings. And it doesn't become humane just because the human voice sounds in it. Humaneness is achieved in the discourse of friendship, or what the Greeks called *philanthropia*: 'love of man since it manifests itself in a readiness to share the world with other men'. What Achilles grieves for is what Aristotle called 'another self'. To lose a friend in battle is to lose part of what counts for goodness. As Aristotle continues, friendship is part of the good life, perhaps the most important part of all.[9]

Sacrifice is both political (instrumental) and personal (existential). It is sacrifice which makes Hector the most noble of Homer's heroes, even though Achilles is the better fighter. For the warrior, sacrifice when it comes – and if it comes, for not even the warrior seeks death – must be a grand summation of life, not a negation of it. Sacrifice is not nihilistic. It is the only genuine driver of a warrior's actions, if they are to be moral. Sacrifice, in short, is characteristic of a man who understands his well-being as essentially *political*, that is one who acknowledges that his own well-being and that of the community are one and the same. For him it's better to die rather than to turn his back on his *political* nature.

Sacrifice and the importance of the political

Let us take the battle of Thermopylae, one of the defining battles in the Western imagination. The engagement took place at the beginning of the second of the Graeco-Persian wars. Ten years earlier the Persian king, Darius, had invaded Greece only to be stopped at the battle of Marathon. The task of avenging his defeat fell to Xerxes, who embarked not on a punitive raid to discipline the Greek city states but a full-scale invasion to bring them into his empire. To accomplish this he took with him the largest force that Europe was to witness until the Allied armada that arrived off the Normandy coast in 1944.

Thermopylae was a narrow pass of less than 50 feet between the mountains and the sea which provided the only practical route from the north into central Greece. To seize the pass Xerxes' army of 100,000 men faced less than 7,000 Greeks led by the Spartan king, Leonidas. To Xerxes' surprise, Leonidas held firm until he was betrayed by a traitor who told the Persians about a narrow, hard-to-find mountain track which enabled them to encircle and annihilate the enemy. In the final stand some 299 Spartans and their allies perished.

The historian Herodotus tells us that the Greeks fought to the very end even after losing their spears and swords. They then fought with knives and, when they too were lost in the mêlée, they fought on with their hands and teeth. If the Spartans had been fighting merely for life we would be discussing the metamorphosis of proud men into cornered beasts in a situation not far removed from the Hobbesian state of nature. But the Spartans were not fighting for life; they were fighting for their freedom. They were willing to give up their lives for others, a choice which they made as free men.

In other words, though we all fear death some of us are not willing to live life on someone else's terms. Even Hobbes recognised this, despite proclaiming that we all have an overwhelming wish to live, that we all struggle for self-preservation. He recognised that we fear death not because we fear extinction; we fear death most because we do not want to relinquish our tie to the friends and family we have acquired, the ties that make life worth living. Yet strangely he avoided his own radical insight that life itself is mediated through culture (or community). Where he erred was in thinking that we love our friends and family so much that we would not wish to be parted from them; we prefer to cling to life. He thus missed another possible explanation for a warrior's willingness to surrender life: our friends are sometimes so important to us that we are ready to die for them; to hold a pass while they retreat; to stand with them when all is lost rather than flee the battlefield. When we claim that we are political animals, isn't that to acknowledge that our beliefs are so important that we are ready to die for them? Might we not prefer to sacrifice ourselves for what makes life worth while rather than submit to a fear of death (to the end of our own physical existence but not the community or the ideas that have sustained us as human beings)?[10]

This is the message conveyed by the picture of the battle which Herodotus paints for us. Even the manner of the Spartans' death – their closing of ranks in a circle at the very end – expressed the value they prized most highly, their own freedom. They died, not simply as individuals but as political men. A memorial erected to them on the battle site, which stood for centuries, proudly recorded this: 'Go tell the Spartans, stranger passing by, that here obedient to their laws we lie.' John Ruskin considered these lines among the most noble ever penned, for their death in battle was a political act; it was better for them to die than to turn their back on their political nature.

Philanthropia is at the very heart of the existential dimension of war, just as it is central to what the military call 'primary group cohesion'. It is discipline that requires every soldier to stand by his fellow men. It is the shame of breaking ranks that makes it a collective hero in its own eyes, and the eyes of others. Going berserk, breaking ranks in the frenzy of battle, or showing courage that is mere foolhardiness – to act in this way is dangerous not only to oneself but to others. It is the mark of a bad soldier. One example is Aristodemus, the Spartan who Herodotus tells us proved to be the bravest of the soldiers at the battle of Plataea, the last major battle between the Persians and the Greeks. To his eternal shame Aristodemus was the only man to return from Thermopylae alive. Anxious to redeem himself for not remaining at his post with his friends, he sought – and found – death at Plataea in performance of his duty. Even then the Spartans denied him any honours because he had broken ranks once again, this time in his eagerness to shine.

Now, the Greeks clearly were very different from us, as anthropologists for the past fifty years have continued to remind us. Eight hundred years after Thermopylae the citizens of Magara were still sacrificing bulls to the gods in celebration of the final victory over the Persians. In our eyes the Spartans were a pretty savage people who toughened up the blood line by throwing weak children down pits. And the freedom for which their warriors fought was not ours. It was freedom

'from' – from enemies who would kill or enslave them. At Thermopylae the Spartans did not die for a cause, or anything as vague as an abstract principle. Their political nature, in our eyes, was very narrowly conceived: a nobleman might own slaves but not be enslaved by another nobleman. Free speech meant the right to speak his mind as befitted his social station. But when we read Herodotus' account of Thermopylae it is difficult not to be stirred by the tale. For by a historical sleight of hand we can see as it as part of a longer trajectory which ended when our own warrior-aristocrats fought for the freedom of others, even that of slaves. If we choose to, and our Victorian forefathers did, we can see their role in the light of a greater struggle for freedom not 'from' tyranny but 'for' free speech. Our political nature has changed significantly in the intervening two thousand years, which is why today we feel remote from the Greeks with their blood sacrifices, pollution rites, gods, slaves and deeply misogynistic attitude towards women. But we will almost certainly feel a good deal closer even to the Spartans than to the modern suicide bombers of the Middle East. If most of us cannot see in their 'sacrifice' anything especially worthy of praise that is not only because their cause is questionable; it is because their death has little instrumental value, or none that we can discern, which is precisely, of course, why it also has for us such little *existential* appeal.

Sacrifice and Shakespeare's reading of the *Iliad*

To appreciate what war becomes when sacrifice is absent from the battlefield, let me return to the *Iliad* or rather Shakespeare's reading of it in one of his lesser-known plays, *Troilus and Cressida*. It is not one of the plays which seem to resonate most with the military. The two most popular would seem to be *Henry V* and *Titus Andronicus*. The latter appeals probably because its seems to be an early version of Bret Easton's *American Psycho*, which was later turned into a Hollywood slasher movie. *Henry V*'s appeal is more easily understandable – it is bombastic, and heroic at the same time, if Henry himself is a much more ambiguous, even conflicted, figure than his set-piece speeches would make him out, especially the one most frequently quoted – his address to the troops on the day of Agincourt with its reference to 'the band of brothers' who will live or die by his side.

Troilus by comparison is much heavier-going. Its language is frequently opaque and it is profoundly, indeed relentlessly, cynical about everything, including war, the soldier's profession. Perhaps, then, it is not surprising that between Shakespeare's death and 1907 there is no record of any British performance. Since then, however, it has been revived with increasing frequency for it has struck a chord with an age which in the wake of the Great War has never again been able to take war on trust. It has remained since the Vietnam War an anti-war play; it has been taken to be an expression of Shakespeare's disillusionment about war as a kind of lechery and lechery as a sort of war. In one London production I saw in 1995 the director had Ulysses declaim his famous speech about degree to the accompaniment of channel surfing by his fellow officers, searching for fragments of news on CNN about Bosnia. Long before that, however, one com-

mentator could write that, more than any other play of the time, it 'speaks forcefully to contemporary audiences acutely sceptical about ideas of honour, nobility and military glory'.[11]

Shakespeare himself can never be accused of economy of expression but he is admirably short when the most loathsome character in the play, Thersites (a slave brought unwillingly on the Trojan expedition by the Greeks), sums up what the war represents, though there is no reason to suspect that he speaks for Shakespeare: 'Here is such patchery, such juggling and such knavery! all the argument is a whore and a cuckold; a good quarrel to draw emulous factions and bleed to death upon.'[12] Between Menelaus, a man robbed of his wife, and Paris, the man who has cuckolded him, there is not much that is worthy at all. When the two men finally meet up in battle, Thersites mocks both of them from the wings: 'The cuckold and the cuckold-maker are at it. Now, bull! now, dog!'[13] Like us he finds the contest between the two ridiculous.

Now, as far as we know, Shakespeare himself had no direct experience of war, but the historian John Hale writes of the remarkable range of his acquaintance with contemporary ideas that were apparently not derived from active service or (as was once asserted) culled from the military manuals of the time.[14] And what the manuals show is the progressive instrumentalisation of war as the state began to claim for itself the monopoly of violence. There was much less emphasis on loot and plunder for individual gain as the military profession became a discipline with its own rules and codes of conduct: hence Iago's contempt for the new soldier Cassio, a product of the academy, a man whom he dismisses as 'a great arithmetician that never set a squadron in the field'.

By then the instrumental dimension of war was becoming more pronounced and the warrior was being encouraged to take greater pride in his profession. And the man-at-arms was becoming important too. Armour and arms are a frequent theme of Shakespeare's plays, and an effort was now made to give the man at arms the best arms. Thus in *Measure for Measure* we are told that Benedict would 'have walked ten miles to see a good armour'. The soldier also began to take greater pride in his profession, and this pride was reflected in Shakespeare's vision of the age. *Troilus* shows us the creative tension between a world that still looked back to the medieval *chansons de geste* (the ballads of war which so sparked the enthusiasm of that incurable old romantic, Don Quixote) and yet which also looked to the future, to a fast-approaching age in which courage was not about giving blows, but receiving them, or standing firm in a line under fire.

Yet there is no reason to suppose that the play is anti-war. For Shakespeare is not one of us, a writer with a post-modern sensibility, a post-1914 distrust of war. At times, he sings its praises more eloquently than any other playwright of his age. Take his portrayal of Coriolanus, a man described by Harold Bloom as 'a battering ram of a soldier, literally a one man army, the greatest killing machine in all of Shakespeare'.[15] And then there is his portrayal of Henry V, for the English the greatest hero in the Shakespearean canon. It is true that one of the most famous speeches in the play, Henry's 'Once more into the breach, dear friends,' is immediately followed by Bardolph's parody 'On, on, on, on, on, to the breach'.

The juxtaposition may be intentionally ironic, but no sixteenth-century writer, not even Shakespeare, is likely to have ridiculed so great a warrior as Henry in quite such a self-reflecting manner.

In the end, we might conclude that Shakespeare was not guying war so much as the concept of *unmediated* conflict – unmediated, that is, by instrumental reason, and reason unmediated by the personal honour of the warrior himself. Both sides are one-dimensional. One is governed exclusively by reason, the other by passion. For the Greeks the war involves no passion, therefore no nobility; the Trojans, by contrast, are all passion and therefore without common sense. Neither side can think in terms of a worthwhile cause, which alone can translate death into sacrifice.

Thus Ulysses – the voice of the Greeks – condemns even Achilles, the existential hero par excellence, for being distinctly out of tune with the Greek (i.e. modern) cause. In his heroic feats he finds too much individual heroism, and too little discipline. He attacks him as an absurd figure, puffed up with pride, a vainglorious man, and a stupid one at that, since he recognises no value in the intellect. He condemns him for skulking in his tent, threatening to leave with his Myrmidons because his pride has been affronted. True worth, Ulysses reminds him, can only be reflected among others. Just as an eye seeks a mirror to see itself so true self-worth is reflected in the esteem of others, especially one's peers. All of this is true but misses the point – Ulysses' worldly wisdom may have greater appeal but we don't like him the better for it.

Another Greek hero who is mocked is Ajax, the warrior whom Homer called after Achilles 'the bravest of the Achaeans'. In Shakespeare's play, however, Thersites uses him as a favourite target for his wit: 'Thou art but to trash Trojans' (nothing else), he tells him. He also expresses disgust at the uncontrolled instincts of Patroclus, which he attributes to the lack of instrumental reason: 'Let thy blood be the direction to thy death.' But Theristes, like Ulysses, is a deeply ambiguous figure because his cynicism is highly corrosive. Lacking passion and honour, he has no place in his heart for sacrifice.

The Trojans, by contrast, are all existential worth. They talk not about interest but about honour. Troilus rejects the suggestion that Helen be returned to the Greeks. He agrees it might save the loss of more Trojan lives, but the honour of his family is a thing 'infinite' in comparison with the 'reasons' for making peace. In fact, adds Troilus, reason will always counsel cowardice:

> . . . Nay, if we talk of reason,
> Let's shut our gates and sleep; manhood and honour
> should have hare-hearts, would they but fat
> their thoughts
> With this cramm'd reason: reason and respect
> make livers pale and lusthood deject.[16]

If Troilus is the true hero of the play, a true 'prince of chivalry', his world is an entirely existential one. As Hector remarks with some truth, Troilus and his fellow

Trojans have spoken 'not much unlike young men whom Aristotle thought unfit to hear moral philosophy'. The anachronism for all its truth – perhaps, even because of it – probably mattered no more to Shakespeare's audience than it does to us, except as a joke. But nothing really matters to the Trojan war council save that the cause is worthy only because they believe in it.

In the absence of sacrifice the war itself becomes the chief protagonist; it brings out the worst in everyone: the petulant Achilles, the stupid Ajax, the deceitful Ulysses. For this is a play in which there are no heroes. Ulysses deceives his own men; Troilus mocks 'the fools on both sides who have died needlessly', yet he still advocates continuing the war, not sending Helen back to her husband. Even Hector is guyed as a fool, a man undone by his own chivalry. In sparing Achilles' life when he comes across him on the battlefield he pays for his compassion with his life. For when Achilles returns later in the play and finds Hector unarmed he gets his own clansmen to kill him, afterwards claiming the prize himself and dragging the corpse through the dust in mock triumph. No wonder the play continues to have such widespread contemporary appeal for a generation that has fallen out of love with the warriors it once took to its heart.

Warrior ethos

What Shakespeare takes seriously so should we. He may not have been a warrior but then he was not any of the characters he portrays. He makes them real enough, nonetheless, for he knows. He knows our lives, out passions, our desires, our fears and our despairs. We find our own faces reflected in the characters he created and our own stories refracted through the tales he tells. War, after love, is the second major theme of his plays – as it was, of course, for his age, and what is tragic about both is the measure of sacrifice his characters are asked to make by the unforgiving times in which they live.

Sacrifice is what we used to take for granted – sacrifice for unit, country or cause. Perhaps, we loved it too much, for the sacrifices demanded of societies in the last century were the greatest of all. As the last global struggle came to an end, the Cold War – a conflict in which there was little demand for warriors – so the concept of sacrifice came to lose its purchase on the popular imagination.

One of the key figures who fought back in the closing years of the Cold War was James Webb, Secretary of the Navy between 1981 and 1988. A decorated Marine combat soldier, he had no doubt of the importance of the warrior ethos. 'There is an old naval saying', he once remarked, 'it takes three hundred years to build a tradition and only three days to destroy one.' What I understand by the warrior tradition can be gleaned from his first novel, *Fields of Fire*, an echo (which is not meant to be ironic) of the 'champs d'honneur' of the First World War, the killing fields of France on which so many soldiers went to their deaths. What makes Webb's novel unusual in the literature of the Vietnam War is that it is unapologetically pro-war. 'Man's noblest moment is the one spent on the fields of fire.'[17] The novel, in fact, is a eulogy for the Marine Corps (as personified by his imaginary Marine platoon commander operating just west of Da Nang in 1969),

as well as a reflection on his own experience as a company commander with the First Battalion, 5th Marine Regiment.

Two key members of the warrior brotherhood in the novel are Snake and Hodges. Snake is a warrior because war for him constitutes what is most valuable about his own life. It fills a void in an otherwise unremarkable life:

> There was a fullness that no other thing in the remainder of his life would ever equal . . . If he were to go back now . . . there was nothing, not a thing that would parallel the sense of urgency and authority – and the need of being part of something.[18]

Snake is not an imaginative man but the war enables him to win self-esteem and to do so, of course, through being esteemed through the eyes of others. The battlefield is a place where he can consecrate his manhood.

As another of Webb's characters tells his wife, after returning home from a few weeks of rest and recuperation, his entire time on leave was spent thinking about his comrades back in Nam:

> Like I belong here, and all the other stuff is only important because I *earned* it here, because its part of being *here*. Like I have been here all my life and the people in the bush are real, are my people. Like nobody in the world except for us understands this, or gives one toss about it, but that's all right because it matters to us.[19]

The platoon commander Hodges is more articulate. Like Webb himself, he comes from a warrior line, and is conscious of his heritage: 'it was the fight that mattered, not the cause. It was the endurance that was important, the will before certain loss, unknown dangers, unpredictable fates.'[20]

Whether *Fields of Fire* can be considered great literature is highly debatable, but what makes it important is that it is representative of the period, not only because of its content but also because of its upbeat style. It is at once a eulogy to the warrior spirit and a vote of confidence in its continuing vitality. It is impressionistic, elegiac and romantic, a rare combination in contemporary war literature. What's most important of all about the novel is that it voices sentiments hardly ever found in other novels about the war, but they are echoed in plenty of memoirs by Vietnam veterans. Webb gave a celebrated speech at the Naval Academy which brought the midshipmen to their feet as he tried to put them in touch not with their emotions but with the warrior ethos that was far more unfashionable than it is now. The question we must ask is whether as a nation America feels at ease with such sentiments any longer.

Reading Webb's novel today its voices seem a generation away. Its characters seem to be prisoners of their own illusions in their attempt to defy a world which persists in changing. They all seem distanced from us, and from this springs their pathos. To use the language of the day they may strike many readers as somewhat

'unreal'. And the main explanation is that the warrior is no longer allowed the self-trust that he has been permitted to exercise in the past.

Self-trust is the very heart of the warrior ethos. Webb's fellow Marines were quite conscious of belonging to a very special world. The trust we allow the military to display is that not of any individual but of a group. The warrior is an intensely social animal. The warrior *internalises* the objective world by translating a value into a social norm. He sees himself as a member of a particular class, or profession. He experiences himself in contact with others like himself. He can only express himself, or as Nietzsche would say he can only 'become what he is', by becoming a member of a society of like-minded men.

The idea that the Marine Corps exists to turn people into something special can be found in Thomas Ricks's engaging book *Making the Corps*, which follows a platoon composed of individuals from all walks of life during their basic training:

> In a society that seems to have trouble transmitting values the Marines stand out as a successful and healthy institution that unabashedly teaches values to the Beavises and Buttheads of America. It does an especially good job of dealing with the bottom half of American society, the side that isn't surfing into the Twenty First Century on the breaking wave of Microsoft products. The Corps takes kids with weak High School educations and nurtures them so that many can assume positions of honour and respect.[21]

This is the existential ideal of war: the soldier is one who is respected for what he does and who through the respect of others respects himself much more. The army performs this function for many adolescents from the slums or ghettos taken out of an environment that hardly nurtures the concept of self-esteem, even if it breeds demands for 'respect'. Respect can be won at the point of a knife, or earned by 'blooding' – killing, or maiming a member of another gang. To be 'dis-respected' is dangerous for an adolescent young man in many inner city areas in the US, unforgiving Darwinian worlds where only the fittest can expect to thrive. Self-respect, by contrast, has to be earned the hard way in service to one's country or each other.

In Ricks's description of eight weeks at boot camp, a Marine colonel tells a group of recruits: 'Aristotle tells us that as human beings we are what we repeatedly do.'[22] He goes on to explain who Aristotle was, this dead, white, European male. He was undoubtedly dead, unquestionably male and, with a little licence, European. 'Excellence is not an act it's a habit', the colonel adds. This is drummed into the Marines on Pariss island: it is the absolute core of their self-belief. In terms of its ethos, its sense of elitism, the number of decorations its members have won in war and, above all, its self-image the Marine Corps sees itself as an outfit which trains warriors. Indeed, the eighth and most demanding week of a recruit's training is quite self-consciously called 'Warrior Week'.

When a man joins up he learns the language of his unit. He begins to familiarise himself with its traditions, history and habits of thought. As Samuel Huntingdon writes, 'people who act the same way over a long period of time tend to develop

distinctive and persistent habits of thought'.[23] As they come to respect the norms of an organisation over time so they will internalise the norms and make them part of their social, and even personal, identity. They will internalise the 'cultural grammar' of the unit they join.

To be a warrior is to subscribe to a specific ethos. Every ethos is social. The decisive step comes when the soldier recognises what is expected of him by others. He identifies very soon with other men in his unit. He wants to live in their esteem. Only by virtue of this generalised identification can he be confirmed in his own evaluation of himself. In that sense every honour code – the implicit belief that soldiers have a higher sense of honour than civilians – is a form of institutionalised programming. It is this programming which differentiates one's identity from that of others: the idea that we find in the US Marine Corps that its members are the best. 'People expect a lot from us', writes one officer, and 'we expect more from each other. That's the difference between us and the other services.'[24] The Corps indeed sees itself as an elite within an elite. Not only do its members believe that they are physically fitter than the members of other units; they also share a deep conviction that they are more likely to survive the supreme test of battle.

What matters for the vast majority of its members is ritual and tradition, their 'Marine-ness'. Their faith in the military service and commitment to their profession are enhanced by a regular round of rituals. What fosters commitment is training – devotion to the practices of the Corps. What gives them a common identity is the camaraderie, the society, the community. These routine experiences are supplemented by the occasional drama of combat and the esteem which they are able to derive from a service well done. For the warrior the occasional dramas are remembered, and commemorated in the history of the Corps. For such a man being a warrior matters most of all.

Warriors, of course, can be found in other elite formations such as the Rangers or the Navy SEALs, and we should expect to find them in the whole military profession. There, warriors may be fewer on the ground but they exist in most units and all three services in their intense self-belief. They exist in all times, but the demands of the modern battlefield are beginning to bring into question the key to self-belief, what the great nineteenth-century American writer Emerson called 'self-trust'.

Emerson and self-trust

'Self trust is the essence of heroism – it is the state of the soul at war', wrote Emerson in his 'Essay on heroism'.[25] Courage, for example, is a matter of rational choice. Aristotle tells us that if it is irrational it is fanaticism – the courage shown by the suicide bomber on the West Bank or London:

> The man . . . who faces and who fears the right things and with right aim in the right way and at the right time and who feels confidence under the corresponding conditions, is courageous; for the courageous person feels and acts according to the merits of the case and in whatever way reason directs.[26]

This is what Emerson meant by self-trust, for there is no way to 'cash out' the right way as 'reason directs' other than by consulting the courageous person. The courageous thing can only be appreciated from inside the courageous perspective. It is for that reason intensely *existential*. No matter what circumstances the courageous man may face (even those for which he has not been trained to respond) the courageous person will be sensitive to what in those circumstances is the courageous thing to do.[27]

Self-trust is the essence of heroism for that reason. Emerson called it 'the state of the soul at war'. Self-trust, he added, is generous; it is scornful of petty calculation. 'It persists; it is an undaunted boldness and of a fortitude not to be wearied out.' And then he adds: 'Its jest is the littleness of common life. That false prudence which dotes on health and wealth is the butt and merriment of heroism. Heroism, like Plotinus, is almost ashamed of its body.'[28] If this passage does not provoke a thrilling horror of self-recognition one should go back and read it again. It is one of several passages from Emerson's work that on rereading becomes more and more timely. For if there is a distinctive ideal of modern heroism its metaphysics are Emerson's, which is why reading him today should make us question what sociologists call our 'structural fitness' for war. In our overwhelming concern for 'health', in our preoccupation for conserving life and extending it, we have lost our taste for heroism. Instead, we have objectified the uncertainties of life and recast them in the amplified form of risk beyond a person's control.

Sacrifice is the highest embodiment of other institutions including the strongest of all, the family. The altruism gene is not unique to humanity but it is culturally conditioned. A mother may be programmed biologically to sacrifice herself for a child; the rest of us make sacrifices for the professions to which we belong because we hear an 'inner voice' demanding that we should – the voice of culture. No profession can survive without altruism; only the military, however, has translated it into the central core of the profession. The soldier engages with it at two levels: the public and the private – two very different spheres, two different realities. Both involve love – love of country, love of friends – and the latter is usually by far the stronger. This love is not an abstraction; it involves a web of preferences and exclusions, and its highest power is *philanthropia* expressed through a unique currency: courage. For the Greeks the word *philos* meaning 'friend' also means 'our own'. We love what is our own because in some sense it is ourselves. Sacrifice in that sense is not a denial of self but an extension of it.

But it is here that we must draw a critical distinction between the professional contract which binds the ordinary soldier to the state and a warrior's personal *covenant* with his own profession. Social contracts produce governments, nations and centralised power: they are the basis of all political society. A covenant, by contrast, produces families, communities, traditions and norms. The two forms of association are maintained in different ways: a contract by external threat if it is broken and a covenant by internalised identity, loyalty and obligation. What makes a covenant more 'virtuous' than a contract is that it is unconditional. 'It were a great deal better', Cicero declares (*Offices*, 1, ix) apropos the duty to 'save and protect' one's fellow citizens, 'would they do it voluntarily. For an action,

although honest, is not truly virtuous unless it is done out of choice, and with a good will.' Contracts are bilateral and are based on terms. They are enforced by penalties. Their conditions precede agreement. Covenants, by comparison, tend to be open-ended.[29]

A contract, moreover, is between two equal parties. An ordinary soldier enters into a contract to safeguard himself and the contract ensures that others will safeguard him. But the warrior is one who has more to give, which is why his covenant with his peers is unequal, exceptional and in every case irreplaceable. As such he is answerable to the demands of his own inner nature for though we tend to use the phrase quite often there is no such thing as 'going beyond the call of duty'. We tend to use the phrase unthinkingly. Duty is contractual: it is the service owed the state. Going beyond it is an existential choice translated into sacrifice for a higher end. And it is always and necessarily voluntary in nature.

The whole point of it is that you cannot legislate that realm. For the true hero (in Alasdair MacIntyre's words) is one who can only legislate for himself, which is why, he adds, saying Captain Oates 'went beyond the call of duty' when he disappeared into the snow on that fatal Antarctic night is actually meaningless. Duty is contractual. The nature of a contract is that duties of both sides are negotiated, defined and agreed before an act. Behaviour is determined in advance. Every soldier, in this case, knows what is expected of him, in terms of his contractual obligations, and penalties are enforced if the contract is broken.[30]

The hero, however, is not disciplined to respond heroically. He is obedient instead to that 'secret impulse of the heart' which Emerson invoked when he described courage as 'self-trust'. To show exemplary courage or fortitude in adversity is to do so because you expect it of yourself, not because it is expected of you by others. A hero gives more of himself than he is asked, which is why, of course, he is esteemed by his fellows, and why, of course, he is able to esteem himself in turn. He has more to give than others but he is not obliged to. He gives because it is in his nature. But it is precisely because his action is 'in character' that it cannot be predicted or even expected. It cannot be policed, or punished if the gift is withheld. No soldier can be court-martialled for refusing to be 'heroic'.

The warrior as diminished self

No idea or concept has dominated the understanding of what a warrior is more than the idea of the hero, and perhaps none is more elusive in spite of the universal conviction that we all think we know what we mean when we deem certain actions 'heroic'. As a concept heroism, in fact, includes everything from risk taking to selflessness and fearlessness, but not foolhardiness. All are more or less expressive of what is considered the finest of a warrior's existential virtues.

The imaginative power of heroism does not derive only from its utility. A heroic act can be futile. We find this in medieval romances like the *Song of Roland* and the example of the 300 Greeks holding the line for two days at Thermopylae. Sacrifice can also be on a smaller scale – there have been many

other Thermopylaes in history for lesser stakes. Time and again writers have loved to capture the hero who fights knowing the day is lost. One of the most memorable episodes in Ernest Hemingway's novel *For Whom the Bell Tolls* is El Sordo's last stand with his little knot of partisans against the vastly more numerous and heavily armed fascists. The warrior is not only concerned with success or failure. The heroic can transcend both, just as, more disturbingly, it can go 'beyond good and evil'.

But if warriors were once venerated they are no longer. Take Audie Murphy, the classic hero, although perhaps not so much classic as exceptional. Awarded twenty-one medals including America's highest decoration, the Congressional Medal of Honor, he went on to a long film career which included the film of his bestselling book *To Hell and Back* (1949). What is amazing about his career is that he was in the front line from North Africa to Northern Europe almost continuously for three years. For much of that time he was out front, leading scouting patrols into hostile territory, or putting himself in harm's way whenever fierce fighting was expected.

There are two versions of Murphy's career. The first is wholly negative. He fashioned himself into a lethal one-man weapon. Murphy was not only a lethal machine but 'a natural born killer', credited with 240 enemy 'kills'. Unfortunately, he inspired the young Lieutenant Calley, a 26-year-old, mild-mannered, boyish-looking combat vet with the nickname 'Rusty'. Later court-martialled for his role in the My Lai massacre, Calley recalled: 'We went to Vietnam to be Audie Murphys.'[31] My Lai disgraced Murphy's memory and dishonoured the American army but killing, of course, is what Murphy did consummately well. So did many other American heroes. One was Sergeant York, who in a three-hour encounter with the enemy on the Western Front not only survived a machine gun assault, a bayonet charge and a fusillade of bullets but still managed to kill twenty-five enemy soldiers. Even more remarkable, he managed to capture 132 more.[32]

The second version of Murphy's career is more heroic, or at first glance would appear to be. 'I will learn to live again' are Murphy's final words in *To Hell and Back*. But he never really learned to do this. He was pursued by demons for the rest of his life. Murphy was a driven man yet the sheer relentless force and intensity of his energy as a warrior could not be translated into relentless energy in civilian life. Murphy found in war an inner peace he never found in peacetime. His death in an air crash at the early age of 46 may well have come as a release.

Murphy died at the height of the Vietnam War, a conflict which produced a new phenomenon. The returning heroes were spat upon; it was the victims (especially the POWs) who were honoured. Even the Pentagon went to great lengths for closure by ensuring that their stories were properly told. Searching for a politically correct alternative hero, the military began publicising the stories of returning POWs because many saw themselves, and were seen by others, as victims. Thus began the trend of glorifying soldiers not as the authors but as the victims of their circumstances.

Jump almost thirty years to Bosnia and Captain Scott O'Grady, an American pilot who was shot down in enemy territory in the Bosnian countryside in 1995.

He survived for six days on rainwater while evading capture before being picked up by an American rescue team. His story was covered widely by the media and was eventually adapted as a feature film, *Behind Enemy Lines*. O'Grady was labelled a hero but his was the story of an ordinary man whose survival was due to luck, training and, most importantly, a coordinated rescue effort involving more air sorties than the RAF mounted in the Kosovo War. By escaping capture, O'Grady did nothing to directly advance the American cause. Instead he saved the Clinton administration from potential embarrassment and a diplomatic crisis. At the press conference called to celebrate his return he asked for a tissue and cried. 'Everyone is saying, "You're a hero, you're a hero", but all I was, was a scared little bunny rabbit trying to survive.'[33]

The media took O'Grady to their hearts. Here was a soldier who cried at a press conference and engaged with his feelings. He was a strange kind of hero, of course, for he hadn't saved anyone, only himself. He had performed dutifully under pressure, but the same would have been expected of any pilot in a similar situation. But he was an 'authentic' hero for a country whose president too not only felt his nation's pain, but also engaged with his emotions at a critical moment in his career.

Fast-forward another decade to the Second Gulf War and we find two kinds of heroes, the warrior and the victim, and it is the victims who have been eulogised. One of the unsung heroes was Captain Harry Alexander Hornbuckle, a 29-year-old staff officer who had never been in combat before. Caught in an eight-hour firefight, he and his men killed between 200 and 300 Iraqi soldiers. Yet until *The Wall Street Journal* discovered him Hornbuckle's name never appeared in the press. A public affairs officer for his unit acknowledged that the public would probably be uncomfortable with the story, and no press releases detailing his heroism were released.[34]

Another hero of the old type was Sergeant Paul Smith, a combat engineer, trained to clear minefields, build bridges and disable enemy explosives. His twenty-five-strong platoon, attached to the 2nd Battalion of the 7th Infantry Regiment, was looking for somewhere to build a holding pen for Iraqi prisoners near the city's airport when they ran into about 100 Iraqis massing to attack. 'Feed me ammunition whenever you hear the gun get quiet', he barked at one of his comrades as he took over a .50-calibre machine gun on an armoured car and charged into the Iraqi lines. Smith actually made a difference. Had he not succeeded in blocking the Iraqis' advance the poorly defended American command post at the airport might well have been overwhelmed.

The media 'hero of the hour' was very different. She was a woman, Private Jessica Lynch, one of a group of ten US soldiers captured by the Iraqis in the early days of the campaign. The story the American people were told depicted a true warrior, a soldier who ambushed on a road had fought to her last round of ammunition only to be overcome, stabbed and invalided out to an Iraqi hospital. There she was held for nine days before finally being rescued. Asked about her fame, Lynch later replied: 'I'm not a hero. If it makes people feel good to say it, then I'm glad. But I'm not. I'm just a survivor.' She was unlucky to find herself in the wrong place at the wrong time; she did not choose to face her

suffering for some greater purpose which used to distinguish a true hero from the rest of us.

Yet the American people found it easy to idolise Lynch for what she had been through: an average young girl, caught in a much larger conflict, who survived against tremendous odds. Overnight she became a media sensation. She was offered a $1 million publicity deal from a publishing firm. *Saving Jessica Lynch* became a TV movie. Anxious to show its own 'caring', compassionate side to the world the Pentagon put out a film within a week of her rescue, produced to order by a former assistant to Ridley Scott, director of the film *Black Hawk Down*, a dramatic recreation of a famous firefight in the streets of Mogadishu, based on the graphic account of the battle by the journalist Mark Bowden. *The Saving of Private Lynch* echoed an earlier film, Steven Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*, but with a difference. Ryan was the only survivor of a family of four brothers, three of whom had lost their lives in different theatres of war. He was indeed 'saved' but not before doing his fair share of fighting.

Lynch's wounds (a broken arm, a broken thigh, a dislocated ankle) were not even the result of gunfire but of a road accident when the truck she was driving crashed. And even her rescue was something of a scam. The doctors who tended to her wounds had already informed the US military, at some risk to themselves, that the Iraqi army had pulled out of the hospital. The Commandos who surprised the staff in the dawn raid put at risk not only her doctors but also Lynch herself. One of the former later described the scene to a BBC reporter: 'It was like a Hollywood film. They cried, "Go, go, go" with guns . . . They made a show for an American attack on the hospital – like in action movies, like Sylvester Stallone or Jackie Chan.'[35] Jessica Lynch was not a warrior; she was not even, according to her own lights, a hero. She was portrayed as a victim in a society in which the heroic norm now encompasses the passive sufferer rather than the hero – or heroine – who actively courts danger or takes risks on behalf of others. Victimhood is now very much in fashion.

This phenomenon stems from two developments. Anxiety has replaced fear, and what makes us anxious is the knowledge that all our actions have consequences especially for our health. Adverse consequences now outweigh the benefits of risk taking. In the past risk taking was illustrative of bravery. Today it is seen often as evidence of irresponsibility, and we are particularly anxious about the risks of going to war.

The contemporary Zeitgeist is brilliantly captured by the contemporary writer Don DeLillo in his novel *White Noise* in which the chief protagonist, Jack Gladny, a history professor in a small liberal arts college, is so frightened of dying that he wants to immunise himself not only against death but also against the fear of it and chooses to do so by taking a drug called Dylon. His colleague, a chemist, warns him against losing the fear of death altogether. 'Isn't death', she asks, 'the boundary we need? Doesn't it give precious texture to life – a sense of definition?'[36] In Gladny's case it's not death that makes him anxious but the fear of it, and his fear, of course, is a reflection rather than a reality of the fact that we live at a time when death can be postponed. After all, if you are from the Western world then to die at 50 is to die young.

Death is now the problem. 'I don't want to achieve immortality from my work, I want to achieve immortality by not dying', quips Woody Allen.[37] This is a profound insight into our own times and our obsession with a long life which transforms immortality from an idea into an experience. It's the way you live – for the moment – that makes that moment into an 'immortal experience'. Unfortunately, heroism is a largely inexplicable concept without the delimiting horizon of death which allows a soldier to see his own sacrifice as a gift to those who live on. But how does a society cope with death when it no longer dreams of eternity (as opposed to its enemies who cannot wait to get there)? Eternity was once the great consolation, and suffering in this life was a preparation for it. The more one suffered the greater the eventual rewards.

To quote Novalis, the young German romantic poet who died of tuberculosis just before his 30th birthday, 'the one who flees from suffering has given up life'. And Schopenhauer concluded his famous chapter on 'The theory of abnegating the will to love' with a frequently quoted sentence from the Dominican priest Meister Eckhart: 'The speediest beast carrying you to perfection is suffering.' In our world, what can no longer be expected from the next world – immunity from distress and suffering – is projected into the life we now lead.[38]

We also find it difficult to give meaning to the suffering soldier's experience; we are especially unable to relate it to concepts of public duty. Of pity, grief and sorrow we know much but our emotions often never go beyond that. The death of our sons in battle does not become luminous in our minds. Instead we tend to rob death of its significance by finding the loss of life a 'waste'. Death has been instrumentalised as a risk to be avoided, which is profoundly at odds, of course, with the humanist message at the heart of the warrior tradition, i.e. that the warrior takes risks to make a difference, that he hazards all including his life, which is the supreme reason why his death is a gift to the rest of us.

We seem to live in a culture which regards most forms of human experience as a source of emotional distress, not, as they used to be seen, as an experience. There is little joy in war, and even less in battle. Even to confess a liking for war is considered an addiction which is 'bad for your health'. Thus Chris Hedges, the foreign correspondent for the *New York Times*, describes war as a form of drug, often a lethal addiction. 'Once we begin to take war's heavy narcotic, it creates an addiction that slowly lowers us to the moral depravity of addicts.'[39] We wouldn't have employed that particular metaphor before the drug-induced haze of the Vietnam War, or for that matter before our own addiction to therapy counselling.

War is fast becoming a pathology, an abnormal experience which produces an abnormal reaction. Soldiers have become not so much the authors as the victims of their circumstances. Increasingly the emotional well-being of soldiers is represented as a health issue. Of course, war is distressing but it's only in recent years that it has been considered not only dangerous to a soldier's physical well-being, but also bad for his health (both mental and emotional). War now comes with a government health warning. It gives you syndromes: the Gulf War Syndrome, the Kosovo Syndrome, the Iraq Syndrome. The Israeli army even has to deal with

'intifada syndrome'. All of these may be real, in the sense that damaged minds and bodies are real in every conflict, but they can also be seen as an attempt to find a medical or psychological explanation for the normal pain, disorientation and shock that every war brings.

The traumatised hero

'No theorist and no commander', wrote Clausewitz, 'should bother himself with psychological and philosophical sophistries.'[40] Yet psychology has been part of the social imaginary of war since 1914, since the recognition of post-traumatic stress. The devastation of the First World War opened Freud's eyes to the devastation the mind could impose on itself. A scientific age demanded a scientific method and that is precisely what Freud provided. 'Dreams occurring in traumatic neuroses', he wrote in 1915, 'have the characteristic of repeatedly bringing the patient back to the situation of his accident, a situation from which he wakes up in another fright. This astonishes people far too little.' What astonished Freud most was that there was no way to explain these dreams as 'wish fulfilments'. There was no way to explain them as pleasurable, which they clearly weren't. The compulsion to repeat involved no possibility of pleasure. This offered Freud a critical insight into the nature of war given that repetition is the key to every creative virtue including acts of courage. What distinguishes a warrior from a soldier is not that one is courageous and the other isn't: it is that for the warrior courage is habit-forming.[41]

Now, the range of experience that produces trauma is as old as war itself. Damaged minds as well as damaged bodies can be found in the literature – if we care to look for the evidence. If the evidence has to be hunted down there is a reason. Just as societies until the invention of epidemiology could only describe not explain disease, so too, in the absence of fully fledged psychology, writers such as Xenophon could only describe, not analyse, cases of what are clearly traumatised casualties of war.

And Xenophon is one of the first writers to record the exploits of one of the first traumatised soldiers we actually know of, a Spartan soldier named Clearchus whom he calls a *philopolemos* – a lover of war. Clearchus is interesting because we also meet him in Thucydides' history (he saw service in the closing stages of the Peloponnesian War). Xenophon was particularly impressed when he met him on the expedition to Persia recorded in his book, the *Anabasis*. But when we read Xenophon's account we soon discover that although undoubtedly brave he was not really an ideal soldier. Indeed, quite the reverse. We are told that he was a brutal disciplinarian, incapable of forming close relationships with his fellow comrades-in-arms, a man who could not serve under the command of others. Ultimately he was a danger to his friends, for he was quick to anger and take offence. He is described as isolated, uncommunicative and sullen. He would seem to have been a classic case (in both senses of the word) of PTSD.[42]

What is surprising today is that soldiers would seem to be less resilient emotionally and psychologically than ever. Since the mid-1990s mental health problems have been the second-largest cause of hospitalisation of active personnel

in the US military.[43] According to some reports the US military is facing a mental health crisis as the fighting continues in Iraq. A New England journal of medicine study published early in 2005 estimated that one in six soldiers returning from the war zone could expect to experience major depression, anxiety or post-traumatic stress. As many as one in three reported milder symptoms.[44] The terrors in Iraq, of course, are of a variety and intensity not seen since the Vietnam War: masked insurgents ambushing even humanitarian and reconstruction convoys; makeshift bombs at every turn in the road; internet videos of kidnapped victims being beheaded. But there is reason to ask whether all the reported cases of trauma are, in fact, what they claim.

For society seems intent on making us all victims of stress. Today stress is officially registered as a disability, and the gap between what constitutes being disabled, or 'differently abled', and not being disabled is narrowing by the week. In Britain between 1998 and 2003 there was a 25 per cent increase in the number of people claiming disability living allowance.[45] In recent years the very concept has been broadened out. On the basis of a study of mental health agencies in the US, the *Wall Street Journal* concluded that 77 per cent of Americans are suffering from some sort of emotional disorder. The trauma industry in recent years has evolved an army of experts to explore feelings and vent them: 'self-esteem educators', 'degrieving professionals', 'traumatologists' and 'ventilationists', all busily identifying and measuring emotions, the better to expose them to the light of day.

To what extent, however, does a society amplify trauma by forcing soldiers to revisit it again and again? To what extent does it compound the suffering by encouraging them to see themselves as victims? Today's servicemen and women are no longer encouraged to repress memories, or push the horrors they see to the back of their minds. Take the Virtual Reality Therapy Project developed in 2004 by the Institute for Creative Technologies with the help of the US Office of Naval Research. Virtual reality (VR) therapies have been used by some mental health providers since the 1990s to treat phobias but never before have they been applied so early in combat. Now they are used to catch soldiers returning from combat zones in Iraq. The new immersive simulation technologies can recreate the situation in which the trauma occurred. The control interface can add or silence the sound of gunshots, or flood an area with blasts and smoke. Stress-induced factors can be increased or decreased depending on a patient's psychological reactions; VR systems can even reproduce the smell of burning rubber, diesel fuel and rubbish.[46]

Scientists hope patients will be able to assert greater control over their memories by confronting a Virtual Iraq. The intention is laudatory enough, to stop the nightmares, outbursts of aggression and other readjustment issues that afflict many returning servicemen and women. Unfortunately, forcing people to relive their experiences as the military now does in virtual reality systems can be counterproductive. Yet in many cases the grisly harping on terrible events, like the morbid theatricals of public mourning after September 11, only encourage people to see themselves as victims. Often, it is a sure way to break their spirit.

Equally striking is the assumption that every soldier who returns from active service is potentially in need of psychiatric counselling. Requiring soldiers to undergo mandatory counselling is problematic. Servicemen must deal with what they experience or witness as they always have, through reliving it with their friends, those who have undergone exactly the same experiences, not with those who can only imagine them (therapists included). Servicemen are probably tougher than many psychiatrists believe. There is probably no emotionally correct response to shock. Some gain strength through airing their feelings; others do not. Warriors' lives are often blighted (Audie Murphy being an example); others apparently experience no trauma at all, Sergeant York being a case in point. Some remain doggedly untouched by what they have witnessed. It diminishes the latter to portray them as damaged human beings who refuse to confront their own 'inner demons'.

Freud might well have agreed. He may have written about PTSD; indeed he may have been one of the first men to diagnose it, but he was also a man of his time. He used to recall a phrase of Shakespeare's: 'Thou owest nature a death.' Life, Freud added, is impoverished if it loses its interest, when death, the highest stake in the game of living, may not be risked. Risk is life-affirming for the warrior; risk management is not. We are paralysed when we exclude death from life. Even in his 1915 essay he added that there is in death a concept – sacrifice that can make meaning of our lives.[47] Not everyone will feel it; most in fact won't. But some will – it will be part of their psychic economy; that is what makes a warrior still distinctive from other people. If you deny the warrior the right to risk his life, if you deny him that part of his economy, then you bring into question his self-belief.

But then Freud was writing in a very different era from our own. The problem is that the relationship between the narrative of illness transmitted through culture and its impact on people is a *dialectical* one. The narrative of illness does not merely frame the way people are expected to feel and experience life; it is actually an invitation to infirmity: hence our litigation culture. The more vulnerable you feel, the more you will dislike being put at risk. The more you read about 'syndromes', the more likely you are to experience the symptoms. The more you feel vulnerable, the more you will calibrate the level of risk deemed acceptable with the kind of adverse situation you feel you should be asked to face. 'We weren't trained for this' is now a common complaint, as if anything in war is predictable and the response always programmable.

None of this is to deny that the military is the one profession in which trauma exists without a doubt. Soldiers frequently witness scenes most of us are spared. But it is quite another matter to suggest that any of them are fragile human beings, or that what they experience in the form of grief, stress and sadness is a pathology to be cured, usually by pharmacological means. Remember DeLillo's anti-hero Jack Gladny. The problem of pathologising war as an experience is to erode self-belief and thus undermine self-trust. Indeed, to suggest that soldiers are as vulnerable as everyone else is to suggest that there is nothing especially remarkable about a warrior. Compare this with the past when we took warriors to our hearts

– and extolled them as heroes – precisely because they saw war not so much as traumatic or distressing but as a challenge.

Every culture contains a set of ideas and beliefs about the nature of human beings: what motivates them to act, the way they perceive their world, how their minds work and the emotions that are natural to them.[48] A soldier is less likely to be traumatised when he is able to see war not as emotionally scarring but as a challenge. In short, we heal psychic wounds when we are able to give meaning to our experiences. Clearly, if an experience is deemed 'meaningless' then so is the pain and suffering that results. We heal our wounds when we are provoked by an individual challenge to fight on. It's the sense of solidarity that allows a soldier to make sense of adversity. Whether a soldier is traumatised or not will depend in part on how he interprets that experience or how he is *allowed to*.

Conclusion

On September 12, 2001 a small crowd gathered outside the ruins of the World Trade Center in New York holding up placards which read 'We need heroes – Now'. The public acceptance of heroism continues – it is an accepted part of political life, the accepted expression of American civic patriotism, but I think it broadly true to say that it has been hollowed out. Indeed the progressive decay of civic patriotism has left the citizen free to choose his own heroes, and few of them are likely to be military. One of the reasons why, claims an authentic hero awarded the Bronze Star who found himself in May 2005 leading a Marine assault in western Iraq, is that 'We are always painted as victims.'[49] America is today a culture that knows how to honour the casualties and the dead but not the strength and prowess of its warriors.

Not that we lack authentic heroes or that the world is not a heroic place. The young Marine I have cited was Christopher Ieva who came across a fortified terrorist stronghold in the town of Ubaydi during Operation Matador, which was mounted in an effort to clean out the insurgent safe havens along the Iraqi–Syrian border. In one house the terrorists had built a crawl space under the front door; they lay on their backs and shot upwards through the floor with armour-piercing bullets as the Marines came through the building. The Americans had to mount five assaults before they were finally able to destroy the house. By the end of that hot spring day, seventy-five insurgents had been killed.

Why aren't more stories of war heroes told? Perhaps, because society as a whole can no longer interpret sacrifice except as a waste of life; perhaps, because the individual soldier is unable to interpret negative experiences in a positive light. Indeed, our predisposition to regard soldiers as victims encourages them to exaggerate their own vulnerability to emotional and psychological stress. Warriors, like the rest of us, are only human.

Let me return to my last point: how quickly we recover from an illness or condition depends, in part, on the meaning we attach to our own suffering or that of others. 'The proof of a poet is that his country absorbs him as effectively as he has absorbed it', wrote Walt Whitman in his preface to his seminal work *Leaves*

of Grass. In the past a nation used to absorb its heroes such as Murphy and York in the case of the United States (a country which Whitman believed was the greatest 'poem' ever written). Today, we no longer live in communion with the heroes of the past, let alone those of today, like Hornbuckle or Ieva.

There is a dialectical process at work here. On the one hand, a society that cannot invest the death of its soldiers with the force of sacrifice freely undertaken is unlikely to produce many in the future. For a soldier whose sacrifice is likely to be dismissed even by his parents as a waste of life is one who will find his own death – or risk of it – difficult to find meaningful. Whitman never served as a soldier at the front; but he did serve as a hospital orderly during the American Civil War looking after the walking wounded. He knew the nature of sacrifice and suffering – both mental and physical – at first hand. He knew also that the hero deals with suffering only if it has meaning for others, which also means, of course, for himself or what Emerson called 'the other me', the world itself.

Heroism, in the end, is what poetry was for Whitman. It is what used to make heroic deeds a theme for poets. Poetry, he wrote, is the truth free, unbuttoned and inclusive and, above all, fearless. Its subject matter is 'the roughs and beards and space and ruggedness and nonchalance that the soul loves'. Its theme is that 'of performance disdaining the trivial'.[50] This is why Emerson's metaphysics are indeed the warrior's. 'In as much as the soul is present there will be power, not confident but agent', he adds. The warrior soul is the locus of self-trust. The warrior trusts himself to act well. From this stems the core of his ethical self and we should, in turn, trust him. For the warrior is the agent of his own acts and when he loses his sense of agency – or is denied it by society – he loses his self-belief. The warrior must be the author of his acts if he is to be true to what Emerson calls 'the great stoical doctrine – obey thyself'. Nothing is more true of the warrior ethos than this doctrine. To hedge him in with laws and risk assessments, to police his actions by values external to his own profession, alienates him not only from society but from himself.

Let me conclude with another American, William James. James was 59 when he delivered the Gifford Lectures at St Andrews. He chose an unusual theme for him – the psychology of the religious impulse. James had a genius for the vivid phrase and could make even the most abstruse theories translucent, which is why when published the book became an instant bestseller and has never been out of print ever since. What is striking about his approach was that he saw religion as an existential experience. And just as I have analysed the warrior in terms of such existential features of his make-up as courage, stamina, physical endurance and above all the need for recognition, so James examined such spiritual phenomena as conversion, repentance, saintliness and hope and reward: what we might call the heroic features of the religious experience.

James himself was a spirited man and had more of the warrior than the priest about him. He once confessed that after lecturing on philosophy for a week he longed for action, for something 'less blameless and more admiration worthy'. For James life was to be lived; passion was more interesting than reason because it made one more alive, which is why it was not religious creeds he chose to discuss

in his lectures, but religious *appetites*. There was also something of the mystic about him, as there is about many warriors: 'We and God have business with each other and in opening ourselves to his influence our deepest destiny is fulfilled.' As James confessed to the students, he had no such faith himself; he could claim no personal experience of God, but he recognised even in himself 'the mystical germ'.

He was not a Christian and could not buy into theology, let alone take the leap of faith in Christ's divinity which makes Christianity compared with other religions so testing especially in a scientific age. It is increasingly difficult – without faith – to accept the mediation of God through humanity, and thus the divinity of Christ. James did not even believe in God. He was an atheist by choice, if a mystic by inclination. He did not believe in any instrumental purpose in religion, for example faith as the road to a concrete end: salvation, or redemption from sin. He believed in religion as an existential choice. His starting point was the 'will to believe' as a means of mobilising people to act better. The fact that his book has never been out of print suggests he put a powerful case, not for religion but religious belief, and not so much for belief as the will to believe; he moved from that to the *right* to believe, the right of everyone to take a chance on salvation. 'No fact in human nature', he told the young St Andrews students, 'is more characteristic than the willingness to live on a chance. The existence of chance makes the difference between a life of which the keynote is resignation and a life of which the keynote is hope.'[51]

We must accord the warrior the right to believe in himself, the right to this private realm which translates death into sacrifice. Our warriors cannot have the 'moral integrity of Achilles'; they have an integrity, nonetheless, that stems from the great tradition that begins when Plato interrogated Achilles. If we seek to instrumentalise away the private realm – to patrol our soldiers' thoughts as well as actions as well as to determine (and even regulate) the risks they are asked to run – we deny them a great deal. In the end, the heroic is a gift to all of us if we would but acknowledge it, if we would but allow those who serve us to exercise 'self-trust'.

5 Brave New World, Brave New Warriors

> For centuries men have tested themselves in war. War was the final test, the great experience, the privilege, the honor, the self-sacrifice or what have you, the absolutely ultimate determination of what kind of man you were. War was the great challenge and the great evaluator. It told you how much you were worth, but it is different today . . . War has always told men what they were capable of under stress. Now it informs the machines. It's the best test of a country's technological skills . . . War brings out the best in technology.
>
> (Don DeLillo, *End Zone*, 1972)

For centuries technology has redefined war and the warriors who fight it, but the pace of change is now accelerating at a dizzying rate and it has implications that many warriors should find disturbing.

Warriors have always been under threat from the development of weapons. When, for example, the young hero of Stendhal's novel *The Charterhouse of Parma*, the young idealistic Fabrizio, first encounters the Napoleonic battlefield, an old woman warns him: 'your grip isn't strong enough yet for the sabre fighting that will go on today. If you had a musket I wouldn't say anything, because you could fire your bullet as well as anyone else.' Even the old woman recognises that to fire a musket requires a minimum amount of training learned quickly. The action is largely mechanistic. The swordsman, by contrast, has to devote years of practice to master his art.[1]

This is what so shocked the samurai when they first encountered guns. It offended a class of warriors who devoted their whole lives to perfecting their art in order to discharge their duty. No one has to perfect firing a gun except through technique, which is precisely what the Japanese began to do when in the 1570s they developed a serial firing technique to speed the flow of bullets, increased the calibre of guns to increase each bullet's effectiveness and developed a helical mainspring and an adjustable trigger pull. They appreciated that the skill of engagement had moved from the warrior to the manufacturer; they began to suspect that weapons had begun to overshadow the men who used them.[2] This is why in the end they chose to give up guns until they were forced to reintroduce them when challenged by the West two centuries later.

For good or ill, weapons have long determined the view we in the West have had of warriors – their skill at using weapons that kill anonymously, from a distance, and their ability to withstand for hours on end high attritional rates of firepower from a largely unseen enemy. Only in the course of the early twentieth century was there an attempt by the most militant country in Europe, Germany, to insist that heroic will-power could transcend the material realities that had begun to determine military life. Only in Germany (and a semi-Europeanised Japan) was the warrior code translated belatedly into an anti-materialist ethic.

The German high command and the 'triumph of the will'

Let me go back to Patton's article on the warrior soul. It is worth pointing out that Patton was mistaken about the Germans. In both world wars they tended to attach far more importance than their enemies to the existential dimension of war: the cult of the individual warrior. Indeed, in the breakthrough of 1918 they pinned everything not on the mechanical dimension but on a specific warrior type: the storm trooper, the real hero of Ernst Junger's great work *Storm of Steel*.

Junger set out to glorify his fellow storm troopers as heroic figures, the latest metamorphosis of the warrior called into being by the demands of the industrialised battlefield. The storm of steel was for him not what it was for the Americans – a war of attrition in which the enemy was as much out-produced as outfought. Instead he was reinforced in the conviction that while the majority of soldiers never thought about the war at all – they merely endured it – for the true warrior life at the front was 'an incomparable schooling of the heart'. The German soldier, he added, had discovered within himself in that fateful last summer of the war an elemental power which made him distinctive. And Junger captured the Homeric qualities of the men beside whom he fought:

> We hurled ourselves forward. Scarcely had a look glanced over the crumpled body of a foe who had played out his hand than a new duel began. The hand grenade exchange reminds you of foil fencing; you have to spring as in a ballet. It's the deadliest of contests for two, and it's ended only when the opponent goes flying into the air.[3]

Homer could not have described the storm trooper better – the archetypal warrior in his private 'contests' with the enemy, crawling towards the trenches and springing across shell holes in a balletic, if grotesque, pas de deux.

In the spring of 1918 the storm troopers were given the task of infiltrating enemy lines under a barrage of artillery shells from their own side which landed often as little as a few yards from the first-wave attacks. Using light trench mortars, machine guns and flame-throwers they were tasked with clearing the way for attack by regular infantry companies. But the system failed to work. Not only were they expected to advance the line of combat, but they were also expected to become it, and in the brutal circumstances of a large-scale offensive their particular advantages – their autonomy and small arms – proved a distinct disadvantage. The German high command unwittingly sacrificed strategy to tactics, the end to the means.

Breaking through the enemy trench system proved so important that its desired effect, operational freedom, was soon lost sight of. The storm troopers could only fight on for three days before their own material and human resources were spent. In the event they were squandered in the summer of 1918. Their casualty rates were horrendously high, often as high as 50 per cent.[4]

The Allies, by contrast, relied largely on material factors as much as if not more than the fighting spirit of their troops. The British army was the most wedded to firepower – a quarter of its men on the Western Front by the spring of 1918 (some 500,000 in all) were in the artillery. The coordination of infantry with all other weapons systems including artillery, tanks and aircraft provided the first 'system' to be seen in any war. The great technical achievement of the British was to integrate each component. 'It was not that the British had developed a war-winning weapon. What they had produced was a weapons system: the melding of the various elements in the military arm into a mutually supporting whole.'[5] 'Systems management' is what war has become. Since the First World War the integration of its different components – the managerial, scientific and logistical – has played an increasingly decisive role in helping the winning side to win.

And what of the Germans in the Second World War? The most mechanised branch of the military was not the army but the air force yet even a rudimentary comparison between the German and Allied forces will show how far the latter had reached the future first. In 1940 the Royal Air Force (RAF) was run by professionals who had spent years mastering their profession. The Luftwaffe high command was run by a swashbuckling adventurer (Goering) and a key commander (Kesselring) who had been trained as an artilleryman and who had spent only one-third of the time in the air that his principal opponent (Dowding) had. By 1940, the British had also carefully prepared a system which applied modern technology, including radar, to air war. The Germans, by contrast, largely improvised their attack and did not fully exploit the technology at their disposal, including radar. In addition, the British worked as teams and played down individual effort, whatever the public love affair with the idea of the lone Spitfire pilot.

Many Germans pilots, by comparison, thought of themselves principally as individuals, or knights of the air. One example was Lieutenant Hans-Otto Lessing, who wrote home to his parents in the summer of 1940 that the previous day he had registered his fifth kill. No one did he admire more than his commander, who had already registered twenty. And he also admired his enemy, the British, particularly one Hurricane pilot who had 'played a game' with thirty Messerschmitts without himself getting into danger. He was having the time of his life, he told his parents: 'I would not swap places with a king. Peace is going to be very boring after this.'[6] He never had a chance to find out. The following day he was shot down over the Channel.

This letter – and there are many like it – provides a telling insight into the peculiar warrior ethos of the Luftwaffe. For many pilots war was indeed a game. Many were interested in the 'scores' of individual units involved in aerial dogfights. Indeed, the Luftwaffe went out of its way to promote individual heroes. It encouraged score-chasing by pilots, and the rivalry between aces during the

Battle of Britain was particularly intense. By contrast, the RAF refused to officially recognise aces throughout the war and cooperated only reluctantly with press interest in the life story of the heroes like Douglas Bader which the public demanded, and in Britain's case demand still.

The result of the battle, writes Stephen Bungay, confirmed 'the bankruptcy of the warrior-hero', which might seem an extreme evaluation until one recognises that what he means by the phrase is the single-minded belief that élan, or the prowess of the fighting serviceman, is enough. The 'Few' who were mythologised by Churchill may have become heroes in the minds of the public back home but Churchill's rhetoric, stirring though it was (for the British it weaves its spell still), can be deeply misleading. The pilots who won the battle regarded what they did as a job, a collective effort, the work of a team. There was little talk at the time of glory; and those values that were extolled were not especially 'martial': they were the values that make for a high level of achievement in every sphere including business.[7]

What made the Allied warrior ethos different from Junger's or that of the young Luftwaffe pilots of the Third Reich is that it never degenerated into indulgent, aggressive or unhealthy emotionalism. It kept abreast of science or what we now call 'the system'. The Allies had no illusions about modern war; they never believed that courage or will-power would be enough in the face of material factors such as firepower. In both world wars the Germans believed in technology, of course, but their commitment to modernity was arrested, or incomplete. For they also believed in the higher metaphysics of the will; they believed that war would be determined by the superior German spirit and that acts of self sacrifice, and even nihilism, were the measure of a nation's spiritual well-being (or what the philosopher Hegel famously called its 'ethical health'). War was reified, as too was sacrifice, with fatal results for their cause.

The warrior as 'smart missile'

Some things, of course, cannot be translated. National character – if it exists – lies in practices and sentiments for which other nations have no words. When we wish to distance ourselves from behaviour we consider foreign we borrow foreign words. You can sense disapproval in the way these words are proudly mis-pronounced. In the West it is hard to be a kamikaze. One of the reasons why the Western warrior tradition is so difficult to export is that culture does not travel well. Instrumental rationality does: the Japanese imported the idea of a nation state from the West after the Meiji restoration in 1868 and with it military manuals, academies and even military organisation including universal conscription (which broke the old feudal link between social status and the military profession). But if hardware can be imported, software is very different. Culture can be transplanted on to a political body but the graft won't always take. The body's antibodies may reject it. More likely it will be adapted, not adopted, to fit the host.[8]

Thus in Japan the samurai tradition persisted until 1945. The *bushido* ('the way of the samurai') ethos continued to provide the foundations of notions of right and

wrong. So too did the concept of 'face', or reputation, the idea that each citizen should defend his own, his country's and his emperor's. Often the only way to redeem one's reputation was suicide. When all else failed, only in death could one prove one's sincerity, or worth, and defend face without dishonour. This later observation was made by the noted American anthropologist Ruth Benedict in a study commissioned by the US military towards the end of the war.

In fact, suicide is not an uncommon theme in several military cultures. Even in the West in the Jesuit order, which was founded by a soldier born on the Basque border, the son of a fighter, vows of absolute obedience to the order were predicated on the doctrine 'perinde acsi cadaver essent' – literally, to behave as if one were already dead.[9] Jesuitry in the English lexis carries no amiable connotations. It means militancy, fanaticism, terrible self-belief. The *Iniguistas*, as the first followers of Ignatius Loyola were called, were seen as soldiers who were unusual for the time for their puritanical rigour. Loyola called his order a sword in the hand of the head of the church. Its initiates were taught not to embrace death but to defy it – to assert the triumph of the spirit which never perishes over the body which does.

The samurai ethos was very similar. The *Hagakure* (1716) – the gospel of the *bushido* code – produced an idea of courage that required the warrior to accept that his life was already forfeit. 'Concerning martial valour merit lies more in dying for one's master than in striking down the enemy.' In our eyes the *Hagakure* is the product of an alien culture; and so it is. If one reads the book one will find little of Western pragmatism; its appeal is entirely intuitive rather than rational. And one of its prime suppositions is that a warrior can achieve the impossible through an act of will (as we would call it), or act of celebration.

The samurai ethos was a truly demanding one for it required the warrior to accept that he would die in his master's service; all that remained was consummation of the fact. By accepting that he was already dead before he entered battle he would not allow human doubt, or self-questioning, to get in the way of total obedience, even if he suspected his sacrifice might be in vain. The true warrior was expected to act in such a way that he did not bring dishonour upon himself, his family or his lord. In extreme circumstances *seppuku* (ritual suicide) was merely the acceptance of a death which had already been determined even if it had not yet occurred. To die instinctively without calculation, or thought of profit or loss, was not to die but to live more intensely.

Two centuries later the kamikaze shocked Western observers for that very reason. As one American admiral declared at the time, no one could depict with complete clarity their mixed emotions as he and his men watched a man determined to die so that he might destroy them in the process. 'There was a hypnotic fascination to a sight so alien to western philosophy. We watched each plunging kamikaze with the detached horror of one witnessing a terrible spectacle.' But the fascination, he was quick to add, did not derive simply from the courage of the enemy:

> One of the earliest lessons one learns in battle is that courage is a very common human quality . . . But there was a fundamental difference in the heroism of

> the opposing warriors. The Japanese resolutely closed the last avenue of hope and escape, the Americans never did. To the Western mind there must be that slim chance of survival – the feeling that . . . you yourself are going to make it back.[10]

Even though the US Marine Corps has as its motto 'Death before dishonor', no Marine has ever been expected to interpret this literally. Indeed, he is instructed that there is no dishonour in surrendering to an enemy he respects or even an enemy he despises provided he has put up a good fight; he has given of himself and gone the extra distance. Characteristic was the view of the American Marine Chester Biggs, captured by the Japanese early in the war: 'It is all right to die for a cause if the cause is a good one, but to die just for the sake of saying, "We fought to the last man and didn't surrender" is not a very good cause.'[11] The whole point of being a US Marine is to know when to stop, and going a bit further. But suicide is not part of the deal.

Traditionally, Western militaries have only asked soldiers to sacrifice their lives when the sacrifice has some instrumental value. Even in the case of the soldier who throws himself on a grenade to save the lives of his friends, his intention is not to die but to save the lives of others. The act should be seen as instrumental: saving others in the act of offering up his own life. And the fact that such acts of heroism are usually spontaneous and not rehearsed tells us much about the psychic economy of the Western serviceman.

It is ironic, therefore, that the Marines should have been the first Americans to learn that the Japanese military saw sacrifice in existential, not instrumental, terms. In the first offensive ground combat in Guadalcanal (Solomon Islands) the Marines came across their first *banzai* charge (the cry Japanese soldiers raised to celebrate their commitment to die for the Emperor). In many instances, these charges were suicidal, and were seen as such by soldiers long before the much better-known kamikaze pilots appeared on the scene. The *banzai* brigades sent out men with satchel charges and grenades so that they might get close enough to the opposing soldiers, trucks, tanks and jeeps and blow themselves up, taking dozens of Americans with them. A suicide bomber was a cheap and effective weapon. He was a kind of 'smart' shell, writes Victor Davis Hanson, who was able to use his senses and intelligence to zero in on a target with the added advantage of not being wed to a predetermined trajectory.[12] The kamikaze pilots can be brought into our age too if we see them as essentially cruise missiles with a human guidance system.

In one respect, they were very different from the Islamic militants of today. Contrary to the caricature still fostered in the West these mostly student pilots were not volunteers in the classic sense of the word. Instead, new recruits to the air force were either assigned by their superiors or forced to sign up using pressure tactics. No senior officer offered his life for this mission despite his 'samurai' heritage; instead the Volunteer Corps comprised newly enlisted boy-soldiers barely of age and student conscripts from the nation's top universities. They were not in that sense warriors at all: for them death was not freely chosen. They were not even

acting within a Japanese tradition: many of them were forced to turn to European literature and philosophy to rationalise their deaths. They did not in this sense commit suicide; they were handed down death sentences in the military missions they were assigned.

Nevertheless, the Americans were so mystified by the kamikaze attacks that they commissioned Ruth Benedict, one of the most famous anthropologists of the day, to analyse their motivation. Her findings were subsequently published in a book, *The Chrysanthemum and the Sword*, which has never been out of print since. Her thesis was wrong but persuasive: it still influences our thinking today for it provides an anthropological explanation of the kamikaze phenomenon. Stated mostly simply it was that the Japanese came from a pre-modern, or 'shame', culture, compared with the 'guilt' culture that distinguished the West. And although her thesis is much disputed we should take the intent of her study seriously. She was trying to find an anthropological explanation for a contemporary phenomenon, and the key word in her study is 'dignity'.

For Benedict the major sanctions for conduct in a shame culture derive from external, socially based criteria whereas in guilt cultures ethical attitudes are regulated by internalised feelings. Guilt may be absolved by atonement or confession (making public what is private). Shame arises precisely when others become aware of an individual's violation of prescribed norms, or when the individual fears such exposure to social scrutiny. In a shame culture praise and blame are a source of honour and shame. In a shame culture whether one has done certain things such as fight to the end is the criterion of judging everyone including oneself. In a guilt culture it is the individual's intentions that determine judgement of the action. In a shame culture 'the self' is not at the centre of judgement. What is important is to conform to the norms of the group because of either the price of non-conformity or the rewards of conforming to what the community wants.

Benedict's usage of the terms 'guilt'/'shame' is often misunderstood, especially (sometimes gratuitously) in Japan. Its inspiration is not derived from religion but psychology. For Freud, guilt arises from a child's fantasy of having violated taboos as a reaction formation to his own aggressive and sexual feelings against his parents. It is not, therefore, inculcated from outside but rather occasioned by the sense of a 'crime' which, in fact, never took place outside the impulsive desires of the imagination, when wish and enactment are still confused.[13]

Further, Benedict's distinction was heuristic, not mechanical. She explicitly remarked that the Japanese were terribly conscious of what people would think of their behaviour but that 'they are also overcome by guilt when other people know nothing of their misstep'. And she was also acutely aware of how even in her native United States the guilt heritage of Puritanism was on the wane, while shame was playing an increasingly forceful role in the judgements of conduct. It is shame, after all, not guilt that fuels the confess-all television shows of Oprah Winfrey and Jerry Springer. The real value of Benedict's work is that she succeeded in avoiding facile Western judgements of Japanese behaviour. She applied an anthropologist's critical eye to a culture that was – and remains – distinctly different from any other society, even in Asia.

The kamikaze were willing to sacrifice their own life in the hope of testifying to the value of a way of life many felt was about to be denied to them for ever. A dignified death offered the last chance of dignity. The kamikaze phenomenon tapped into two specific Japanese belief systems: the first was *seppuku*, the second the samurai code of honour. Both had little instrumental purpose, though precisely for that reason they had immense normative appeal. Both required them to atone for failure, to redeem their own honour and that of their family in the eyes of those they had failed. It was the means by which they were able to win back something of their reputation. A samurai was expected to fulfil the last demands of heroism even when the gods had departed the field. He expected his heroism to be futile; he did not expect it to be falsely construed. It was not even (in that sense) suicidal. As Gavin Fairbairn writes, what is of primary importance in *seppuku* is not the achievement of death so much as the re-enactment of a ritual act of atonement. It is the existential act of one who aims to do what he ought to do which is to enact the ritual required of him by custom, tradition and honour in order to retain his dignity.[14]

Thus we find in the *Hagakure* the following injunction:

> The Way of the Samurai is found in death. When it comes to either/or, there is only the quick choice of death. It is not particularly difficult. Be determined and advance. To say that dying without reaching one's aim is to die a dog's death is the frivolous way of sophisticates. When pressed with the choice of life or death, it is not necessary to gain one's aim . . . to die without gaining one's aim *is* a dog's death and fanaticism. But there is no shame in this. This is the substance of the Way of the Samurai. If by setting one's heart right every morning and evening, one is able to live as though his body were already dead, he gains freedom in the Way. His whole life will be without blame, and he will succeed in his calling.[15]

The novelist Mishima, who took his own life in 1970 in protest at what he considered the betrayal of his country's historic way of life, wrote a commentary to the book in which he still insisted that utility is not the measure of everything. Honour is the ultimate measure of a society's worth, for without it a society has no soul.

> We tend to suffer from the illusion that we are capable of dying for a belief or a theory. What *Hagakure* is insisting is that even a merciless death, a futile death that knows neither fruit nor flower, has dignity as the death of a human being. If we value so highly the dignity of life how can we not value the dignity of death?[16]

Dignity – a vital word though it is little mentioned in the study of international security. It is a particularly elusive concept but the urge to assert, or win it back, becomes more acute when a society begins to ask itself profound questions about its survival. It becomes particularly acute when it tries to find in adversity the

creative answers by which its life is guided and which gives it its characteristic stamp. Dignity was central to Japan's determination to fight on after 1944 when the war was clearly lost. The honour of the officer class would permit no surrender.

A society like a person fights to retain faith in itself. It is only in our aggressively secular societies that we have banished honour (as we have glory) from the battlefield – if not quite yet the honour code of the warriors we still send into battle. Elsewhere honour is as important as it was in the world of Homer's heroes. The *Iliad* is a poem about the personal and public honour of two men – Menelaus, who has been dishonoured by Helen's 'abduction', and Achilles, who sulks in his tent in the ninth year of the war because one of his prizes, a priestess called Briseis, has been claimed by his kinsman Agamemnon. In the heroic code such public damage to the dignity of the hero must be avenged and it can only be undone through purposive violence. The creation, loss and recovery of honour may be said to be the fundamental motivational theme of Homer's poem.

What Homer shows us is a society not entirely remote from early-twentieth-century Japan, but very remote – psychologically and emotionally – from the post-heroic West. All *expressive* violence whatever its cultural origins is ritualised, conducted in a prescribed, formalised and often theatrical fashion. And there is immense shame in being unable to perform an act of ritualised violence in the usual way. Take the hunter who fails to observe the rules, or code of hunting; the man who refuses to give satisfaction in a duel; the football hooligan who uses 'unmanly' violence; the bullfighter who acts without taking risks and thus invites the ridicule of the spectators.

The Japanese too felt dishonoured as the war progressed because they were unable to discharge what the *bushido* ethos demanded, especially in the face of the instrumental manner in which the Americans fought the war: the flame-throwers, the B47s and ultimately the atomic bomb. The Americans won the war by applying overwhelming firepower. In the campaign in the Pacific they faced Japanese troops with the prospect of either surrender or annihilation by combined aerial, ground and naval bombardment. The kamikaze attacks were the Japanese response and the Americans, though initially nonplussed, soon found an answer to them too. They bombed distant kamikaze bases, coordinated well-trained anti-aircraft batteries at sea and sent out superior Hellcats with better pilots miles from the fleet to shoot down outclassed Zeros. Ask why the samurai tradition disappeared from Japan after 1945 and we need mention only Hiroshima and Nagasaki. It was rendered ridiculous by the atomic bomb: the act of atonement was useless in an atomic age. Honour now had to be defended in the factory, where it has been promoted ever since. The *bushido* ethos is now to be found in the workplace, not the battlefield – the Japanese too have become post-heroic.

It is important to recognise that the kamikaze were not unmodern, for they placed great emphasis on the critical importance of human agency in life. Modernity encourages us, after all, to acknowledge that we are agents rather than instruments of our own fate. The language of the kamikaze was of 'regeneration' and 'reawakening' and 'rebirth'. It was the vernacular of hope, faith and redemption. Where they were unmodern was in rejecting the ideology of modernity

– modernism – for they believed in the possibility of bridging the gap between the transcendental and the mundane by an act of will. Indeed, through an act of will – in this case suicide – they thought that they could escape the inexorable workings of natural law, that they could defy the rational or material circumstances of life such as America's overwhelming industrial might, which is why, of course, they never had a chance of succeeding.

Into the Brave New World

Sixty years later we find that the United States has reached the other extreme. In its obsession with technology it has instrumentalised war almost entirely. Scientists have helped soldiers to amplify the mechanical possibilities of their bodies. With their body armour, camera in helmet, radio taped to their ears, night-vision visors, spotlight on their guns, and spray-on skin and adrenalin injections for first aid, post-modern soldiers already look very different from anything we have seen before. They are evidence of how the past no longer haunts the present as it once did or, more to the point, perhaps, of how the present is already beginning to haunt the future.

The aim of military planners is to take the warrior far beyond this through integrating technology on to the human body and reprogramming emotions chemically. Even today research is near completion on a pill that will cure soldiers of trauma, that leftover lifetime that so many soldiers have to face on returning home. What the scientists are attempting is new – 'chemical castration' that goes way beyond the Hobbesian castration that we have discussed at some length. It is dangerous not because it threatens to make soldiers automata, unthinking creations of medical science, but because if the scientists succeed in their ambitions they will create warriors who bear little relation to those of the past with whom they still commune. So much for the common genetic make-up that linked Achilles and Audie Murphy, the common genealogy, if you like, that links those who over the centuries have pushed their bodies, and minds, and often spirits beyond the usual limits of human endurance. Science is a tool of knowledge but it underpins *techne*, a tool for changing the world including those who live in it. Many (including myself) fear that scientists may well be on the way to eradicating the last vestiges of the romantic world view from which the warrior myth still continues to draw its popular appeal.

At the very heart of this desire is the wish to take out of the equation such existential elements as courage, fear, cruelty and remorse – the traditional attributes which have made war such an intensely 'human' activity. War, we must remember, has only been rendered 'humane' even at its most bloody because of the human values, capacities and emotions which still infuse it.

Go back to the days of Achilles and we find that the Greeks, like most other pre-modern peoples, thought that courage and stamina pertained to excellence; you were born with it. It was part of the aristocratic creed. It inhered in a man's true nature. Later in the modern age we thought it pertained to a vocation: you could be pulled as well as pushed: everyone irrespective of class could have a vocation;

everyone could hear the voice calling them to duty. Today we tend to think that warriors can be programmed; and from there it is not a great leap of faith to believe that they can be re-engineered as well.

One of the first writers to glimpse the new age was the novelist, and later popular religious thinker, Aldous Huxley. In a preface to his novel *Brave New World*, which he was invited to write shortly after Hiroshima and Nagasaki, he asked himself why it had contained no reference to nuclear fission, especially as the possibilities of atomic energy had been such a popular topic of conversation for some years before the novel was completed. His old friend Robert Nichols had even written a successful play about the subject and he himself had casually mentioned it in a novel published in the 1920s. So it seemed odd that the rockets and helicopters that appeared in his vision of the future should not have been powered by atomic reactors, and that there should have been no reference to the possibility of nuclear war. But the oversight could be explained, Huxley insisted, by his interest in the human senses. He was interested not so much in technology as he was in the retooling of humanity. He was fascinated by how advances in the biological sciences would enable society, if it wanted, to reprogramme human beings.[17]

The theme of Huxley's book was not the advancement of science as such but the advancement of science as it affected human behaviour. The scientific advances specifically described in the novel are those involving the application to human behaviour of future breakthroughs in biology, physiology and psychology. If physics promised to change the world or in the case of the atom bomb to destroy it, biology promises to change humanity. Molecular biology in general and genetics in particular offer us a chance not so much to embody technology in the body as to reprogramme mental states, as well as enhance physical abilities.

Huxley was especially prescient in recognising that the real evolution was not to be achieved through socialist utopias as characterised in other popular books of the time such as Zamiatan's *We* or Orwell's much later book *1984*. In Orwell's novel there is virtually no technology, and Pavlovian conditioning and brain-washing are alien to a metaphysic which depends on free will. Loving Big Brother is not a matter of drug-induced conformity but of free will. Huxley by contrast was ahead of his time in grasping that the most radical changes in future would not be in politics so much as the souls and the flesh of human beings. As he wrote in a letter to Orwell, thanking him for a copy of *1984*, in the future the world's rulers would probably discover that 'infant conditioning and narco-hypnosis are more efficient as instruments of government than clubs and prisons'.

In Huxley's new world it is not religion but the industrial process that drives progress. Even the chronology of history has been recalibrated to meet the demands of market-driven changes in social life. Humanity measures time not in the old Christian terms of BC or AD but BF (before Ford) and AF (after Ford), a reference to Henry Ford and his mass production assembly lines. If the novel came in for a good deal of criticism when it was first published the reviewers agreed at least on this: that this particular idea was an ingenious one. It struck a chord with many reviewers who had begun to grasp that they were living in an age which like Henry Ford, the inventor of the first assembly plant, believed that history would be best

served when human beings were placed at the disposal of their technologies and techniques. Ford borrowed some of his ideas from the work of Frederick Winslow Taylor, especially his book *The Principles of Scientific Management* (1911), which introduced the belief that the primary (if not only) goal of human labour and thought was efficiency; that technical calculation in all respects was superior to human judgement; and that human subjectivity in general was an obstacle to clear thinking. Technique, in short, was everything.

Before Ford, businessmen had been interested in inventing machinery which would make their workforce more productive and efficient. That people's lives might be changed by machinery was taken for granted, as was another more controversial idea, that from time to time the workforce might be treated as machinery. 'It is easy for me to imagine', wrote the great American thinker Wendell Berry, 'that the next great division of the world will be between people who wish to live as creatures and people who wish to live as machines.' The latter state was considered by many to be the price of progress. With Ford this idea became a philosophy of life. Life now had to find its meaning in machinery and the techniques to operate it more efficiently.[18]

For weren't human beings really machines? Wasn't it best to integrate them into a 'cybernetic system', to interpret concepts such as excellence in terms of the way in which they 'managed' their relationship with machinery? Civilisation, the Savage is told in Huxley's novel, has no need of nobility and heroism. 'In a properly organised society like ours, nobody has any opportunity for being noble or heroic.'[19]

Huxley never lost his interest in the human body as a machine. In the lectures he gave at Santa Barbara almost twenty-five years later he dismissed as absurd the attempt of Western philosophers since Plato to give humanity a soul – modern psychology had revealed that we are only the product of a 'bundle of symbiotic complexes'. It was not the soul but the body that was the determining factor in human behaviour: change that and you change everything. Writing in 1959 Huxley found particularly persuasive the peculiar psychology of William H. Sheldon, who categorised men according to their 'body peculiarities': the fat, soft endomorphs enclosed in their layers of flesh; the thin-skinned ectomorphs who spent most of their time thinking; and the warrior types – the heavy-boned mesomorphs who had a marked taste for aggression. 'What to do with the extreme mesomorphs', he noted, had been the problem of Christianity since the beginning. It had once been possible to send them on crusades to defend 'a cerebrotonic view of life'. In a non-religious age the task of absorbing them into social life was becoming more urgent than ever.[20]

There is no need to quote the musings of Californian gurus of the 1950s. The all too down-to-earth scientists had their theories too. As cultures have become more and more technological so it is becoming difficult for tradition, myth and ritual to escape the influence of technology. We are being incorporated increasingly into a cybernetic world. Norbert Wiener, the man who coined the term 'cybernetics', was of the strong belief that the human body functioned as a machine and therefore that it was best to avoid such question-begging epithets as 'life',

'soul' or 'vitalism'.[21] Radical technologies tend to change old terms, and the process takes place without our always being fully conscious of it. Old words such as 'intelligence' and 'information' may still be employed but they don't mean the same. Bombs, after all, can now be 'smart'. Machines will soon be 'intelligent' (some people think they already are). A machine can now have 'situational awareness' as much as a person.

One of the implications of this is loss of confidence in human judgement, which would tend to confirm Martin Heidegger in his suspicion (articulated as early as 1967) that the rising crest of information would submerge human thought almost entirely.

> Maybe history and tradition will fit smoothly into the information retrieval systems which will serve as a resource for the inevitable planning needs of a cybernetically organised mankind. The question is whether thinking, too, will end in the business of information processing.[22]

Do warriors have souls?

Is this a necessity rather than choice? Is this the only way that advanced Western societies can remain 'structurally fit' for war? Is war becoming too complicated and complex for human agency? Will our tendency to delegate tasks to more sophisticated machines eventually reach a point at which the decisions necessary to keep the system working are so complex that human beings will be incapable of remaining in control? As their roles become more demanding, specialised and far removed from their own inborn predispositions, will warriors require ever more years of 'programming'? Will this, in turn, bring them even fewer real emotional rewards?

Is the increasing interlink between man and machine evidence of what Stephen Milgram calls 'agentic shift', the process by which human beings transfer responsibility for outcomes from themselves to more abstract agents, formerly Providence or God, now machines? Is this the result of a technological demand? As George Dyson candidly asks, have we ourselves become problematic 'bottlenecks' in the circulation and processing of information? Will we all be programmed by computer technology, asks George Lindberg, so that we are better equipped with the 'trained perception' required to locate truth? The phenomenology of human–machine interaction is changing as computers become more interactive and sophisticated. Is the task to make us more machine-friendly? Will the warrior one day be asked to see war from the computer's point of view?

If many do not pursue these thoughts that is probably because they are not much troubled by them. But these thoughts should be entertained because in the case of the warrior they go to the heart of what defines his humanity. The military already tends to see soldiers as machines, their bodies hardware, their minds software, both inherently defective because they are fragile. There is increasing interest in the performative rather than functional future of the soldier. The Pentagon is already addressing what its former Director of Force Transformation

calls 'the Super-empowerment of the War Fighter'. The Director of the Defense Advanced Research Projects Agency (DARPA) elaborated one variant of this vision in 2002:

> Think about our military commanders years from now. Envision them commanding warfighters who can then do things merely by thinking about them; who remain in action and effective for seven days and nights without sleep; who, if injured, can self-administer rapid-healing medications that enable them to stay in the fight, and who, if *seriously* injured, could be placed in temporary hibernation to prolong their lives until they can be evacuated to a hospital.[23]

DARPA's vision is informed not so much by the wish to develop autonomous machines as by the belief that it is possible and desirable to '*blend the best traits of man and machine*'.[24] Technology will not enhance the warrior's reach but be incorporated into his body – and the implants will range from artificial sensory systems (built-in zoom lenses) to communications devices embedded under the skin, and perhaps even to computational systems which will enhance memory and language skills. Within thirty years the warrior's biometric personality may have changed irrevocably.

Even more striking might be changes in his social status. Wired into a system that permits continuous communication with others of his own kind, groups could become more intelligent than individuals. A passage from General Franks's account of the war in Iraq (2003) illustrates how far integration of distributed forces into what resembles, in effect, one giant networked weapons system has already occurred, and how far it has enhanced the combat efficiency of the individual soldier:

> An SOF trooper hidden in a farmer's house could transmit the co-ordinates of a concealed Iraqi artillery battery, and moments later witness a barrage of MLRS rockets burst above the enemy. A 3rd sergeant in a Bradley controlled more firepower than a Desert Storm armoured battalion. Predator UAVs cruising deep in the enemy's rear could transmit GPS points for precision JDAM strikes.[25]

And then there is the dream of replacing men with machines, with fearless, enduring, unmanned systems, a vision that Hollywood has propagated in the Terminator films. 'They don't get hungry. They're not afraid. They don't forget their orders. They don't care if the guy next to them has just been shot. Will they do a better job than humans? Yes.'[26] There we have it from Gordon Johnson of the Joint Forces Command in the Pentagon, predicting that robots will be a major fighting force in the American military in less than a decade, in hunting down and taking out enemies in close combat. For the moment robots have taken to the skies. Thus in Operation Iraqi Freedom pilots of the US Air Force's 15th and 17th Expeditionary Reconnaissance squadrons operating Predator Unmanned Aerial

Vehicles (UAVs) from a low-slung command centre in the Nevada desert successfully took out a broadcast tower for Saddam Hussein's propaganda machine. In later operations they were called upon to blow up a truck after its occupants fired on American troops in Fallujah; they even acted as lookouts when special forces raided an insurgent safe house. They are the nation's first remote-control airmen, launching attacks at the click of a button or a computer mouse.

The new Myrmidons

Let me begin by discussing the first of these visions. The US is planning to invest $127 billion in rebuilding itself as a twenty-first-century fighting force, and robots will be a major part of the investment. By 2035, the Pentagon tells us, the US will be fielding robots that look, think and fight like today's soldiers. At the moment the US already deploys autonomous systems (drones) that can take out combat troops. Nearly half of the air force's future long-range bombers will be unmanned, as will be a third of the army's combat ground vehicles. Controlled by a soldier with a laptop, bomb disposal robots are already capable of firing 1,000 rounds a minute. Within the next twenty years robots will take over dull, dirty and dangerous tasks from humans.

The long-range vision, one official writes:

> is that the President will wake up some day and decide he doesn't like the cut of someone's jib and send thither infinite numbers of Myrmidons – robotic warriors – and that we could wage a war in which we wouldn't put at risk our precious skins.[27]

Achilles' henchmen are on their way back into history, but this time in a very different, mechanised form.

The immediate objective, the scientists insist, is not to replace the soldier with robots, but to make a 'more adept human warfighter who uses micro-electronics to achieve machine-like precision'. Human fallibility is to be programmed out even if this means increasingly reducing the scope of human responsibility. In its plans for Unmanned Combat Air Vehicles (UCAVs) DARPA's vision is clearly stated:

> There is always a person-in-the-loop to provide the timeless qualities of human judgment and insight to supervise the unmanned systems and manage the battle. Operators will be assisted by decision aids that allow them to focus on the operational art of war, leaving the implementation details to this synergistic blend of man and machine intelligence.[28]

Despite its assurances, however, the Pentagon envisages that the DX-45, a UAV currently under development, will be able to attack targets independently. 'If the aircraft sees a target that matches its memory', claims the DX-45's former

programme director, 'it hits it and tells the humans about it later.'[29] All this may sound sci-fi, but it is not; it is real; it's only just round the corner. In a recent test sortie two of these aircraft operated 'autonomously' as a formation. Between them they 'decided' which aircraft was best placed to carry out a simulated attack.

The ambition is to increase efficiency. Human pilots are fallible. The body requires sleep and food, and is prone to fatigue. Unmanned machines can perform at higher rates of efficiency, in part because they have no fear. And they have no fear because they do not risk personal injury. Of course they are reliant on software, programming, refuelling and rearming. In other words they are not truly 'autonomous' since they rely on human support. But their human operators too are largely – often entirely – out of harm's way. For them the enemy is remote, beyond the horizon.

The most immediate challenge, then, is not that the warrior will be replaced by a machine but that increasingly embedded in a cybernetic world of machines he will be increasingly detached from the mayhem around him. No longer at risk himself, he will no longer be required to exhibit courage. This will be a major change. Every warrior from the time of Achilles has had to be aware of the poignancy of an early death, of never living out his life to the full, of dying an incomplete being. Every act of bravery, every sacrifice, every risk the warrior takes is informed by the knowledge that he may not survive the engagement. Every warrior takes risks knowing that he may be uprooted from his community and family, knowing that he may never see the future, that the present moment may be the space in which his future is forged only as memory of himself and the deed. If in future warriors will be asked to face a diminishing number of existential dangers, will they be able to empathise with their enemies, men like themselves who live in a similar finite world?

Not that distance always leads to detachment. Occasionally, it can elicit a curiously detached but doubtless real sense of sympathy for the adversary. Take one servicewoman who operated a Predator reconnaissance drone over Afghanistan from hundreds of miles away in Pakistan using only a control stick, a computer keyboard and several television monitors. Using the same satellite links that ran the drone and relayed its video imagery she was able to call in a manned navy fighter jet and direct it to a hut near where some al-Qaeda members were milling around a vehicle. Later she told the *Wall Street Journal* of her thoughts as she watched them die: 'You almost wanted to scream: "Run, get out of the way! You're going to be killed."'[30]

Other accounts, nonetheless, suggest that emotionally and psychologically soldiers will continue to become increasingly detached from the enemy. Virtual reality tends to produce detachment in the user's sense of the world. Of all the senses, seeing is the least intimate to our organic life because we can see at a distance – most recently an image on a screen. Again seeing can enhance empathy – this is the basis of humanitarianism. The moment we walked on two feet and lost our sense of smell we had to develop other senses: we had to see further to survive: sight gave rise to insight. But insight derives a lot from education, from cultural conditioning, from engaging with the world.

In our increasingly visual game culture cognitive dissociation is likely to be the experience of many, if not most, remote control operators. A soldier who witnessed the fighting in Fallujah in late 2004 described how he and his fellow Marines watched footage of a Predator drone as it photographed a house full of insurgents before destroying both it and them in real time:

> Word had spread to the off-duty crew and over two dozen Marines had squeezed into the small op center, murmuring back and forth.
>
> 'I like dogs. Get out of there dogs.'
>
> 'Stay in there, muj. You're almost in paradise. Don't leave now.
>
> Don't move.'
>
> The courtyard door opened, and a man walked to the truck and slowly drove away. 'Boot muj sent out to get the Coke. Luckiest bastard on the planet'.
>
> Both video screens suddenly flashed bright white, as if a fuse had blown. There was a collective *Damn!* from the watching Marines. The centre of the roof was now a huge black hole.
>
> 'That's a shack,' Neumann said. 'Now that's what I call a shack!'
>
> 'I felt sorry for the dogs', someone shouted.
>
> 'Great job, Watchdogs,' Neumann said. 'Great job'.[31]

This is not only the argot of soldiers physically removed from the fighting; it is the language of an entire generation brought up on video games and computers who have grown up trusting machines so much that they have begun to see the world from the machine's point of view.

Cybernetic warriors

When US pilots flew over the skies of Afghanistan in 2002 in the first campaign in the war on terror, many had spent hours beforehand training for the mission in virtual flight routes over the rugged mountain terrain. Seated at computer consoles running on Silicon Graphics Onyx processors they could visualise flying from ground level up to 1,200 metres at a speed of 2,250 kilometres per hour. The detailed rendering which showed roads, buildings and even vehicles helped them to plot the best approach, scout landmarks and identify designated targets.

Computer simulations are only the latest way by which the military now programmes its personnel. Computer games and virtual reality systems are radically altering the way that the military trains for war but they are consistent with the wish to instrumentalise it even more, and thereby ensure that it conforms 'to the rules', that it can be made predictable. Over the past three decades sophisticated computer modelling and graphics, faster processor speeds, and advances in artificial intelligence have produced a simulated technology that can create a reality that stops just short of war. Soon, of course, it may take reality beyond it.

Indeed, as computer simulations achieve greater realism, military operations themselves may become more computer-driven. From the view point of a Predator pilot, a real combat mission must feel very much like a simulated one. The more

a game seems like war (or the increasingly realistic simulations often seem like the closest thing to being in combat) so war itself may come to resemble a game.

Modern military simulations have existed since the Second World War when projected films of planes were used to train gunners to identify aircraft and mocked-up cockpits were physically rocked from side to side to replicate the feeling of a dogfight. The Department of Defense has been a primary proponent of simulation since the 1950s, although simulation stems from a more recent collaboration between the military and the entertainment industry. The Marine Corps led the way when in the 1980s it rewrote the code for the popular commercial game *Doom II*. Instead of employing fantasy weapons (lasers) to hunt down fantasy characters in a medieval castle, real-world images were scanned into the game's graphics engine together with images of weapons such as the M16A1 rifle, the M-249 Squad Automatic Weapon and the M-67 fragmentation grenade. The game was even modified from its original version to incorporate foxholes, bunkers and friendly fire. What made the programme unique was that the military could configure the simulation for a specific mission prior to an engagement. Tasked, for example, with rescuing a group of Americans held hostage in an overseas embassy, they were able to rehearse in a virtual building constructed from the actual floor plan of the structure.

For the past few years the military has been entertaining the idea that video games, even those played on a commercial system like Microsoft's Xbox, can be an effective way to train soldiers. In fact, the army is now one of the industry's most innovative creators, hiring high-end programmers and designers from Hollywood and Silicon Valley to define and revise its games. An army-sponsored group of Hollywood special effects experts and researchers at the University of Southern California are working on the next generation of military trainers – immersive virtual reality environments similar to the *Star Trek* holodeck in which real soldiers interact with synthetic, yet lifelike, actors.

Now, it is frequently argued that far from making them trigger-happy, likely to fire at everything that moves (the alarmist vision), far from training the military to see war as a video game and persuading soldiers to kill more readily, much of the army's research with computer game technology involves teaching soldiers how to avoid conflict whenever possible, to recognise danger and find a route around it, to hold their fire on particularly complex missions. As more and more training involves peacekeeping operations in which platoon commanders have to learn interpersonal skills (what the military calls 'emotional intelligence') they are learning to interact with synthespians (synthetic actors) programmed increasingly to mimic complex human behaviour. Fired by the peacekeeping missions of the 1990s, companies working for the military have been trying to build characters (enemies, bystanders, crowds) with some kind of emotional content. The idea is to humanise the external environment as much as possible.[32]

But this is only the beginning. Within ten years soldiers may find themselves inhabiting alternative worlds (perhaps a simulated Afghanistan) for weeks, if not months, at a time. In Orson Scott Card's novel *Ender's Game*, one of the most popular texts now taught at the Marine Corps University at Quantico, a virtual

training system becomes the actual means of waging war. The novel tells the story of a group of young space cadets battling aliens in a video game. Eventually they emerge victorious only to discover that they were not playing a game at all, but engaging with real aliens in real time. Without knowing it the virtual has merged into the real.

Indeed, tomorrow's generation of game players may have a tough time telling the difference. The relationship between the young and technology is fundamentally different already from that between previous generations and the tools they once used. It is estimated that over 90 per cent of children in American households have access to a personal computer. Computers are not old-fashioned tools. Quite the contrary, they don't shape the external world in which we live; for many of us they constitute external reality. They allow us to create whatever reality we want. Shape changing, gender bending, flight, magical powers and even reshaping of the terrain itself are all available in the virtual world which many of us now inhabit. The computer has the potential to transform human will into a sort of reality if we so desire it.

All this is very different from the relationship we used to have with the tools we made. In the past communication between the tool and the user was minimal. Man and machine existed in separate, even alien, worlds often in a form of uneasy coexistence. This is no longer true. The computer incorporates the tool into the human body. This is especially apparent in a video game such as *Rez* which by linking the play experience in with the soundtrack recreates the actual experience of being at a rave. Players are not simply playing the game – they are the game. Studies of another type of immersive game, the Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Game (MMORPG), indicate that most players often view their avatars as extensions of themselves.

These games lock their players into a virtual, not real world – for the moment. But what is real is the emergence of horizontal networks of players, or clans. An excellent example is the MMORPG game *World of Warcraft*. From the beginning its designers made a conscious decision to encourage group play. Indeed many of the challenges in the game require large groups of 40–60 people, virtual 'clans' like Achilles' Myrmidons, or decentralised networks that come together to mount 'raids' on the opposition. Players hash out strategies for particular encounters ahead of time in a forum and then meet at a pre-chosen place and time to conduct their operations. Clan discipline comes from a familiarity with other users; cowardice or poor judgement is discouraged by lengthy and extensive interaction among players, and the desire not to let down one's comrades. Indeed while it would seem that a system based on text, where no one meets face to face, is not conducive to tight bonds this is not the case. MMORPG players crave respect and a sense of community, especially within the context of a clan. 'Nothing about a real friendship depends on actually seeing the friend', writes one expert. 'Actions and language are the basis of friendship. Someone says a kind word to you. Someone helps you . . . You don't need a body for that.'[33]

Clan networks thrive in games that promise their players the 'reality' of an alternative world. The most popular on the market, a Korean game called *Lineage*,

has more than 2 million subscribers. Recently game manufacturers have witnessed the rise of a new social norm: excellence which attaches in the eyes of fellow gamers to the esteem in which they are held. In other words, success brings social status in the virtual world, as it does in real life, though in this case status adheres to those with the highest technical skills. In a computer game status is easily established, readily comparable and, most important of all, quantifiable. Every game ends with a winner, or a loser, something alas which is not always true either of war or of life.[34]

Interestingly, the web of relationships between players also seems to stimulate the most basic kind of pack behaviour. Esteem is won in a highly competitive environment. These group dynamics are seen in the vast network of self-organised combat clans that now vie for dominance on the internet. No games company ever encouraged such packs to emerge. They emerged spontaneously as the game culture evolved. The smallest tend to have five members or fewer; the largest, hundreds. They are essentially tribal. Each has a name, and its own logo, sometimes with military connotations: 'the Dangerous Armed Warfare Guild', 'Desk Storm Troopers' and 'the Army of Twelve Monkeys'. The great majority of such clan networks are fiercely competitive and have no centralised authority, like the warrior clans that besieged Troy.[35]

Some experts in the entertainment industry expect that alternative worlds will become an accepted cultural norm. So far most are fantasy-bound; most are unconnected with present realities. Most don't provide a method for persistent asynchronies or real-time input and output between virtuality and reality. But as virtual worlds conform more and more to the real at what point will the real world come to conform to the virtual? The more that synthetic virtual worlds come to conform to the rules of our own, the more immersed we are likely to find ourselves in them and also, of course, the more likely warriors are to be removed from that inter-subjective relationship with the enemy that used to make the battlefield a common community of fate.

Re-engineering warriors

The sci-fi dreams of Hollywood are often tomorrow's reality. Science fiction after all is explicitly concerned with change – social, technological and even cultural – and it is now the only fiction left that provides us with our myths and dreams. For that reason, though not as strange as truth, it is often far more arresting. Science fiction does not really predict the future, of course. It extrapolates from the present – it taps into the dynamic of present trends and reads them forward to their logical conclusion. If the predictions don't always come true that is because the present is full of cul-de-sacs, paths that lead nowhere, evolutionary dead ends.

By some unexplained alchemy, however, Hollywood can transform an emotionally sterile present into a future nightmare. Take Roland Emmerich's 1992 film *Universal Soldier*, which extrapolates from today's genetic research into a future that some in the military are actively working towards – those who think that technology is the future, that special effects in war are everything, that the

human factor is secondary, unimportant and even possibly distracting, unless, that is, human beings too can become 'special effects'. For in Emmerich's film the protagonists are Vietnam soldiers who have been cybernetically hollowed out and reprogrammed; they are part flesh, part machine: genetically re-engineered cyborgs, an elite force of warriors specially 'designed' to deal with terrorists. In between missions they are suspended in flotation chambers where their bodies, pumped full of muscle-enhancing steroids, are maintained at a constant temperature of 60 degrees below zero. Told by one of the doctors who maintains him that one of his fellow soldiers doesn't know that he is alive, the hero replies: 'He's not; he's dead like me.' There is pride in his defiance. He is an immortal, as near to Achilles as it gets, a man who like the hero of Homer's tale has a biological advantage over those he meets in battle by virtue of his mother's genes.

As a species we are biologically predestined to inhabit a social world, which is why it is the social world that for us is the dominant reality. Peter Berger cites the example of the soldier who is persuaded to cheat the biological impulse to run away in the face of death through training. The true warrior is asked to confront head on the struggle between his 'higher' and 'lower' life, which are equated respectively with his social identity and pre-social animality. In overcoming his instinctive fear of death he asserts the social over the pre-social. Today biotechnology offers the military a chance to programme fearlessness; it offers the military an opportunity to break the dialectic between social identity and biological need or – to use Berger's terms – the struggle between a soldier's 'higher' and 'lower' self.[36]

For years some in the military have yearned to escape the social world, to situate tomorrow's warriors in a purely biological space in which heroism will become more and more abstract, the product not of a social but of a genetic code, or in which the man-machine warrior's strength will become the measure not of the man he is but the machine he has become.

History has to start somewhere; small steps lead inevitably to larger ventures. For twenty years the military has sought to amplify the physical strength of its soldiers by dietary means – by increasing, for example, a soldier's intake of carbohydrates and protein. Specialised high-performance meals are already used in the military particularly for multi-day missions. But what is planned goes well beyond energy bars and energy-rich glucose optimised drinks (ERGOs). In a bid to produce a hunger-less soldier, DARPA has developed a programme to decrease a soldier's need for food for up to five days. It is called the 'Peak Soldier Performance Program' and what is envisaged is the intake of 'nutraceuticals' (major vitamin boosts) to lower body temperature and raise levels of endurance. Scientists also expect to be able to supercharge the body's mitochondria at the microscopic level, which would increase energy levels even more significantly.[37]

Artificial stimulants which accomplish the same thing are more controversial. In April 2002 two US pilots accidentally killed four Canadian soldiers in Afghanistan and blamed the air force for coercing them to take dexamphetamine (an amphetamine stimulant, also known as a 'go pill'). Amphetamines increase the body's natural heart rate and keep soldiers awake. Modafinial is another

experimental stimulant used particularly with narcoleptics. Studies conducted by the US Air Force and the University of Pennsylvania Division of Sleep and Chronobiology show that the drug looks particularly promising.

Another of DARPA's experimental endeavours is the 'Persistence in Combat Program'. Some of the innovations under review include a painkiller that soldiers can take before getting hurt, a sensor that scans the eye for internal trauma, and a bandage that stimulates skin repair with electrical impulses. Some of these new products are actually nearing implementation with human trials either underway or planned in the near future. Prior-ingested painkillers such as R1624 employ an antibody to keep in check a neuropeptide that helps transmit pain sensations from the tissues to the nerves. In the event of injury, other painkillers may need to be taken in conjunction with R1624 but in smaller doses than before. The purpose of the drug is to enable soldiers to maintain full mental capacity, which is not the case at present with morphine-related drugs, which commonly impair mathematic and motor skills. The only constraint on these programmes is concerns about side-effects such as brain damage, cancers, catastrophic immune responses, and heart attacks (from electronic signals triggering arrhythmias).[38]

Every enhancement has its own dynamics. As Evan Derenzo and Richard Szafranski write, DARPA has already claimed in an unclassified report (2003) that 'humans are becoming the weakest link'.[39] Judging from its directed research it is clear that its intention is to reduce a soldier's common fallibilities to a minimum. In military competition winning is necessary to reduce or avoid loss of life. The stakes are high, for soldiers may use whatever means come to hand to give them a comparative advantage over the enemy even if this means putting their bodies at greater risk than before. Drug abuse, after all, is now common in sport. Performance-enhancing drugs are readily available on the black market. They will soon be available for soldiers too.

All this is consistent with the way society approaches health issues. Once we saw overly active children as merely troublesome; we now see the problem as a disorder (attention deficit disorder) that can be treated with prescription drugs. The same goes for alcoholism. Once seen purely as a flaw in a person's character it is now commonly understood to be a genetically inherited trait. Performance enhancers for soldiers could be viewed in a similar light. If the human factor is 'the weakest link' then one answer would be to adjust a soldier's biological cycles in an attempt to enhance performance in the field.

The battle has been long joined between philosophers, sociologists and psychologists over neuroscientific descriptions of human nature. A new school of neurophilosophy has emerged whose adherents are dismissive of traditional views of human responsibility. Their predisposition to ignore the complex interaction between our genetic make-up and environmental influences explains their particular zeal to downplay moral agency.

It looks as if Freud was right when he claimed that biology was destiny. The biological explanation for human life is becoming increasingly prevalent. For some time we have suspected that unusual courage may have a genetic explanation. Warriors may be very special persons but their excellence may derive from

biological factors as well as culture. Some people because of their genetic make-up may not feel pain as much as others, which could explain why they can 'ignore' their wounds in the heat of battle. Others may benefit from abnormally high quantities of adrenalin in the bloodstream, which may give them a 'rush' on the battlefield.

In fact, an increasingly large array of human feelings and emotions are being explained with reference to DNA. Even in the case of suicide scientists are exploring clues to anatomical and chemical differences in the brain. In the hope of detecting those most at risk they are looking at the prefrontal cortex (the seat of the so-called internal sensor that prevents us from acting on potentially dangerous impulses), as well as the brain's serotonin system. Researchers have found that even where depression has a root cause – such as child abuse – the cause triggers off a biological clock.[40] Extremely adverse early life experiences can throw off balance the hypothalamic pituitary adrenal axis (in which serotonin is only one molecule), literally leaving a biochemical imprint on the brain that makes a subject vulnerable to depression when stressed out later on. Not so long ago the Canadian neurologist Michael Persinger even pinned down the experience of God 'to an electrical instability in the brain's temporal lobe' and published his findings in a book entitled *The Neuro Psychological Basis for the God Belief* (1987). The same 'medical materialism', as William James famously called it, that explains away St Paul as an epileptic and Joan of Arc as a cross-dressing schizophrenic threatens to purge the warrior ethos altogether of its poetry (or what Patton would have called its 'soul').

But then we are living in a completely different world from Patton's. Evolution is no longer blind; it's 'participatory'. For the first time we can shape our own future as a species. Knowing the ultimate molecular constituents of life we may be able to transform our lives for good, and even perhaps transform the face of battle. In that sense, the cracking of the DNA code may mark a far more radical event in the evolution of war than the invention of nuclear weapons which so dominated military thinking throughout the Cold War. Huxley may well have been right: even in the 1920s the future lay with the DNA chip, not the atom.

Of course, history rarely changes overnight. Not much happened after Crick and Watson discovered DNA. Until the 1970s neuroscience was still in its infancy. The rapid expansion of new brain science since then has had far-reaching cultural and social consequences. Propelled by remarkable breakthroughs in genetics, cell biology, computer modelling and non-invasive scanning techniques it has been possible for researchers to explore the brain and central nervous system without destroying what they probe. Brain research has increased exponentially as a result. It may soon allow us to programme out fear.

If they should succeed this would indeed mark a radical break with the Great Tradition. It would make a nonsense of the anxiety of influence for a start. Fear is a universal experience that transcends cultural boundaries. It especially affects one's sense of self; if fearful we often consider ourselves useless, or worthless, a burden to others. One way to deal with it in the past was through alcohol, which was frequently given to soldiers just before combat. In Vietnam drugs were used

extensively for the first time, though alcohol abuse was the greater problem in the field. Now we know about the neural pathways of fear we are able to envisage for the first time in history ways to overcome it. Once we know how personality traits are formed biochemically we may be able to screen military personnel for genetic defects (such as excessive anxiety) or for 'positive' genetic predispositions such as the willingness to take risks. Genetic information stored at birth may enable the military to choose those whose genetic profiles match their own requirements, or those whose genetic predispositions might be tapped in terms of courage, bravado or even the willingness to flirt with death. At the Ponce School of Medicine in Puerto Rico scientists are more ambitious still, for they are trying to help the brain unlearn fear. At Harvard they are experimenting with propranolol pills as a means to nip the effects of trauma in the bud. At the Irvine Campus of the University of California they have already succeeded in inhibiting hormonal reactions to fear in rats, softening the formation of memories and the emotions they evoke. What next? A pill-popping soldier?[41] A new drug, propranolol, offers to help people deal with PTSD by erasing memories of traumatic events. At the moment it can't be given to soldiers because it would curb their survival instincts but it could be administered behind the lines so that they could be sent back into battle.

All of this, of course, would raise important ethical questions and conundrums which are at the heart of the 'warrior ethos', for the possibilities of re-engineering the human body as well as the human mind should inspire deep-seated anxieties about what being 'human' or an 'individual' might mean in the years to come. Some see in the prospect of the biotech soldier a form of technological embodiment that bodes ill for individual self-realisation. They tend to paint a bleak picture of a world in which technology alienates the warrior not only from others (the enemy) but also from his own humanity. For though moral actions can be scientifically explained, once they are they are no longer anything that conforms to what we consider 'moral'. If goodness is merely the altruism gene which gives us an advantage over other animals, if compassion is merely externalised fear, if generosity is merely an investment in 'feedback', and if sacrifice is merely a collaborative strategy, then to be truly selfless we are not moral beings. To be truly selfless sacrifice must be beyond explanation. It must be 'beyond the call of duty'. In that sense, writes Felipe Fernandez-Armesto, genetics may not change our humanity but it may well change our lives. Like life, war involves a mixture of heroism and cowardice, sorrow and misery, exultation as well as pain. In cauterising unhappiness, in removing grief and pain from the equation, we would be danger of making it 'soulless'.

So although no one questions that neuroscience has a place in life, taken on its own it misses a whole dimension of the real quiddity, or 'whatness', of mental states including extraordinary acts of heroism (irrational as many are) which have enriched the warrior experience and have inspired some of the great epics of the past.[42] The fact that epic poetry has died, of course, does not mean that the abstract qualities it praised have died with it. The heroic has actually survived the demise of the epic even in our post-heroic times. It has survived largely because it has been seen as the triumph of culture over our biological drive to survive.

Let me go back to my discussion of fear and our attempts to programme it out of future soldiers. The natural warrior is not a man who is unfamiliar with fear. Achilles may not know it but in real life warriors certainly do. As Socrates insists, the warrior is a man who overcomes his fear. He can cope, in short, with a larger amount of fear than everyone else. In his autobiographical story *About Face*, one of the most highely decorated US soldiers, David Hackworth, writes:

> Over time I concluded that a man is like a bottle. On the battlefield fear is what fills him up and fuels him to perform. But some bottles are smaller than others. When a guy becomes unglued during a fire fight it's just that his bottle has filled up and over flowed; it's time for him to get away and let the fear drain out. But even when he does, there's a catch: from that moment on the man is like a spent cartridge and no amount of gunpowder will ever make him a real fighter again.[43]

Hackworth rightly encourages us to distinguish between a warrior and a soldier in terms of the greater capacity of the former to deal with fear, to absorb it or, to use his own metaphor, to keep the lid on the bottle longer than anyone else.

Instrumentalising away emotions via drugs, including fear, would change everything. For fear, like pain, is not only an indication that there is something wrong; it is a necessary response to it. A soldier who is without fear is foolhardy, a danger to himself (and others). As Hobbes would say, it is an educational problem, not an engineering one. Not to succumb to fear is what makes the warrior so important in every army. To eradicate fear altogether would be to treat it as something shameful or – to use today's language – something 'dysfunctional'.

And what is fear if not fear of death, the 'reality principle' as Freud called it? As William Broyles describes in his article 'Why men love war', for many veterans the sacred aspect of the warrior's experience stems from a powerful encounter with death: 'The presence of death and danger has a strange way of bringing you fully awake. It makes things vivid. When you're afraid, really afraid, you see things you never saw before, you pay attention to the world.'[44] The depth of emotional contact to which he alludes is what makes war such an intensely human experience. The presence of death on the battlefield can actually make one feel more alive. But to feel more alive we must be aware of the body's limits and our ability through a sheer act of will to transcend them. We must respect the determining rather than the determined nature of embodiment, or the universal bodily basis of meaning. Like Foucault we should see the body as 'the inscribed surface of events'. We are most real when our bodies live events, when we confront danger, when the body itself is most at risk.

In short, the weakness of the body is not something to be 'overcome' but something to be respected. Likewise inner states of mind such as fear are not there to be got rid of but to be controlled, or directed, or channelled to more creative purposes through training and education, neither of which is the same as 'programming'. Yet programming is precisely what many in the US military want to pursue in the name of even greater efficiency. It is a further example

of our one-dimensional thinking about war, our assault on its 'poetic' element, the 'warrior soul'.

So, what role is there for Achilles on tomorrow's battlefield? The new Myrmidons may be robots or chemically programmed human fighters, or remote-controlled operators cybernetically embedded in a battle space, men and women who are possibly group rather than individually intelligent. Achilles may be chemically 'castrated', by which I do not mean he will be neutered or unmanned and certainly not disarmed. What I mean to suggest is that human nature, not merely human behaviour, may be directed as the outside world sees fit. Warriors of the future may be programmed and pre-managed, and even their courage artificially enhanced. Courage, in a word, may no longer be what Hemingway famously called it: 'grace under pressure'. To all intents and purposes the warrior may be spiritually eviscerated. If Swofford found Achilles absent from the battlefield in Iraq he may well be absent from the hearts – as well as minds – of tomorrow's warrior class, who may no longer be able to refer back to the past. Achilles will be dead in their hearts. For that reason, of course, they may, at last, die happy.

Are warriors ever happy?

'Where is your data? Give me something I can put in the computer. Don't give me your poetry', explained Robert McNamara upon being told by a White House aide that the Vietnam War was doomed to failure.[45] In *Brave New World* the Savage confronts the Controller: 'But I don't want comfort. I want God, I want poetry. I want real danger, I want freedom, I want goodness, I want sin.' 'In fact', replies the Controller, 'you're claiming the right to be unhappy.'

Are sociopaths or psychopaths unhappy? Apparently not, for they have no soul in the metaphysical sense of the word. They live in a one-dimensional world of utility (their own advantage). They have no idea that suffering can in any way be redemptive, so they have no concept of sacrifice, giving of themselves for anyone else, even a close family member. Ultimately they are content because for them there is no inner conflict between what they desire and what society allows. A sociopath is not 'social' because he doesn't lead a social life. He doesn't confront any conflict between what he wants and what society allows. He is not 'conflicted' for that reason. He is entirely self-willed. Because he is the ultimate narcissist, he is not unhappy.

Unfortunately, the genetic revolution is nudging us towards an instrumental idea of humanity. As Francis Crick, the man who discovered DNA, once claimed, 'all aspects of life are engineered at the molecular level'. If so, what then of ethics, which is a product of individual responsibility for one's own actions? According to Crick, 'the soul has vanished with most metaphysics'. So human life is increasingly reduced to materialistic terms in which there is really no existential reality. His last book was entitled *The Astonishing Hypothesis*. At the insistence of his editor, he added a subtitle: 'The scientific search for the soul'. Yet the book's opening paragraph informed the reader that his/her joys, sorrows, memories,

ambitions, free will and even sense of identity were no more than the behaviour of a vast assembly of nerve cells and their associate molecules. Instead of trying to find the soul Crick spent most of his life attempting to eliminate the possibility that there was one. He was quite open in his desire to replace the mysterious essence of life by something rigorously and totally understood, in this case the DNA code, which is about as mysterious as a computer program.[46]

Of course, no one doubts that the discovery of DNA has changed the way we look at ourselves. It has been the major scientific breakthrough in the way we understand human consciousness of the past fifty years. But a world which has surrendered to such radically reductionist approaches threatens to be deeply limiting because it concentrates on our characteristics rather than our lives. In Crick's world there was no place for Patton's 'warrior soul' or the belief that he is a free agent because his actions are freely chosen. In fact, Crick sought to wield a double blow to the world of Patton's youth, this time with its belief in vitalism, the belief (or perhaps hope) that the mystery of the mind could not be explained away entirely by science, that life stems from a mysterious essence or force that could not be reduced to a physical process. Patton was something of a vitalist by nature, yet the discovery of DNA has gone far towards eradicating vitalism as a belief. If science can really unravel all the secrets of the soul then it should be possible to mould the individual soldier.

Of course, history may prove him right but I don't believe that most of us are ready to accept that the soul is just a chemical trick of the brain. On the contrary, what drives us restlessly forward as a species and has done from the beginning is our quest for the intangible and indefinable. It is still possible to believe in a mysterious but far from illusory spiritual realm that warriors, like the rest of us, spend their life exploring, if in ways peculiar to themselves.

Steeped though he was in the technical side of things, Patton was rightly concerned about the esteem in which the machine was held. 'Samson's jawbone', he called it. In an essay on mechanised forces written in 1933, he observed: 'today machines hold the place formerly occupied by the jawbone, the elephant, armour, the long bow, gunpowder and latterly the submarine. They too shall pass.' He concluded: 'it is the spirit of the fighting men who follow and the man who leads that gains the victory'.[47] To believe that we need a great leap of faith: perhaps, a leap too far? Or is faith precisely what is needed if we are to believe in the warrior soul because without it there is not much else left to believe in? Whatever else a cyborg soldier might be he would not be familiar to the warriors of the past who went in search of their true self. What constitutes a warrior's true worth is not the truth he possesses but the sincerity of the effort he makes to seek it.

6 Warrior ethos

The future I have sketched in the previous chapter is a good twenty to thirty years off. The immediate future is likely to be very different. Denied much of a role in the Cold War, warriors are coming into their own in the war against terror, a conflict that will probably dominate international politics for years to come, which is why it is foolish to predict, as many do, that we will have no need of warriors.

In the Long War (as the war on terror has been rechristened), holding ground will still be necessary. As one US general observes, 'We believe it is all about the last 400 meters.'[1] Special forces are being given a leading role in the war against terror. While speedy operations will continue to be conducted by autonomous, remote-controlled weapons systems and networked troops, continuous suppression of the enemy will still require soldiers to go to ground and remain in the field for lengthy periods, patiently awaiting their targets. 'America's irregular enemies in the C21st', adds Colin Gray, 'will be taught the error of their ways by handfuls of professional, elite, regular warriors who will behave as unconventionally as circumstances require, the terms of engagement permit and the laws of war, probably somewhat stretched, will permit.'[2]

Yet I wish to conclude on a different note. For whether warriors will still be deployed is only one part of the equation. The warrior ethos is important too. It must continue to inspire servicemen who would make no claim themselves to being warriors. Whether as my Barbican theatre questioner suggested we like warriors too much, we should continue to anchor our military practices to their code of honour for fear of what would happen if we did not.

Warrior ethos

Indeed, so concerned is the US military about the need to imbue its instrumentalised soldiers with the warrior spirit that it has introduced a new programme called 'Warrior Ethos' across the force from basic training to the Army War College. Officially described as the foundation of a soldier's total commitment to victory, it encourages the soldier to put the mission first and refuse to admit defeat. It is designed to equip soldiers with courage and to remind all servicemen (and, today, many servicewomen) what is expected of them and what they should expect of each other. Instead of technical skills the emphasis is on actions in the field, such

as conducting a vehicle convoy under fire, reacting to a roadside ambush, making emergency repairs to battle-damaged vehicles, spotting mines and booby traps and fighting 'combatives' (engaging in hand-to-hand combat). This is 'down and dirty' stuff, not high-tech, and it is distinctly 'old-fashioned'. There is no cybernetic battle space here.

Warrior Ethos has been introduced because army leaders have come to recognise that the battlefields of the war on terror are likely to be asymmetrical, violent, unpredictable and multidimensional – in short, unforgiving environments in which every soldier may need to be a warrior at some point or another in his or her career. 'Each and every one of my soldiers is more than simply a logistician, a computer systems analyst or a mechanic', claimed one commanding officer in a letter to the Army Chief of Staff.[3] Every soldier must have the potential to act like a warrior if only once in their life, whether they are support personnel who face the danger of improvised explosive devices as they move supplies in the ground, or tired and cold soldiers standing watch on observation posts, or cooks or mechanics huddling in shelters as mortars explode around them.

Whether or not warriors are an endangered species, unappreciated by many of us, increasingly out of sorts with their own profession, the US military is right to insist that the ethos which defines their profession is still essential, for without it we cannot expect a military unit to have that moral purchase which the Long War demands. Hence the army's somewhat belated interest in reaffirming warrior values. In June 2006 all 150,000 coalition troops in Iraq were ordered to undergo a crash course in battlefield morals, values and ethics, to repair its image after the suspected killing of twenty-four civilians in Al-Haditha by a group of US Marines who had gone on a shooting spree in the Western Iraqi town after one of their own men was killed by a roadside bomb in November. In the light of Al-Haditha the military announced that commanders had been directed 'to conduct core warrior values training, highlighting the importance of adhering to legal, moral and ethical standards on the battlefield'.[4]

But what is an ethos? Unless we understand its nature we won't fully grasp how important it is in war. In the US military its principal features differ from service to service. Thus the US army tends to stress the concepts of 'duty' and 'country', while the Marine Corps prefers to focus on 'honour', 'courage' and 'commitment'.[5] Both translate into a complex set of values encompassing morality, trust and integrity. The challenge for every unit is to translate those values into behaviour. This in turn allows soldiers to be more sculpturedly heroic than is possible in a shallower moral landscape. For the American warrior ethos goes well beyond commitment, or courage. It strikes at the heart of the ideal: what General MacArthur famously called 'a sacred trust'.

Social capital

Most members of a common community usually share common interests and bonds, and make claims and entertain expectations of each other. And they do so not in relation to outsiders, but to themselves. Most are bounded by a code.

Membership is not only a matter of rights and obligations but involves identifying with the community: seeing it as one's own, accepting responsibility for it and promoting its well-being. Furthermore such a community does not exist merely in the present: it has a future in which its current members have a vital stake. It is also a product of countless small and large sacrifices made by past generations. Being a member means seeing oneself as part of an ongoing historical community. For those and other reasons a military unit requires a common sense of belonging, a shared collective identity and a degree of mutual attachment. Such a commitment establishes one's good faith. This involves learning its language, understanding its rules of civility and norms of behaviour and familiarising oneself with its traditions and habits of thought. Over time a soldier is likely to internalise these and make them part of his social and even personal identity. Not all will master the complex cultural grammar of the community to which they belong, but unless they make a sincere effort to acquire a modicum of cultural competence they will show a lack of respect for the unit, at which point their commitment is likely to be questioned; at worst, they will forfeit the trust of their fellows.

Once we think of the warrior ethos in terms of trust we will recognise that every military unit is an inherently ethical community. Let me quote Francis Fukuyama:

> The group has to adopt common norms as a whole before trust can become generalised among its members. In other words social capital cannot be acquired simply by individuals acting on their own. It is based on the prevalence of social rather than individual virtues. The proclivity for sociability is much harder to acquire than other forms of human capital. Because it is based on ethical habits it is also harder to modify or destroy.[6]

Social capital is at a premium in the military because of what the military does. Soldiers put their lives on the line for each other; there are even times when they are asked to go beyond the call of duty, to sacrifice themselves for the greater good. Soldiers have to trust each other to stand in line, rather than cut and run, to fight side by side and overcome personal fears, to go the extra distance. A soldier is expected to fight on even when all is lost rather than dishonour himself in front of his comrades.

Let me cite one particular example: Britain's Special Air Service Regiment (SAS), which produced a superior performance over another, America's Delta Force, in a series of multinational counter-terrorist exercises a few years ago. In one drill to rescue hostages from a terrorist group the two units were required to abseil from helicopters on to the roof of a building. The SAS got there first every time. The explanation? Whereas Delta Force members waited until the ropes hit the roof of the building SAS members descended immediately the ropes were dropped, saving precious seconds in the process. The SAS approach was clearly dangerous. This was not the result of courage or recklessness though it might seem so to an outsider. The SAS demanded that its members trust their helicopter pilots. The regimental ethos requires each member to do his job, and for every member to implicitly trust the other. 'There's a lot of trust involved in fast-roping',

commented one SAS member: 'it is important not to worry about whether the pilot has it wrong and is hovering too high off the ground for the rope to reach. We trusted him to do his job properly.' The result was 'we were on the ground and had blown the first door before the Delta guys had even let go their ropes'.[7]

What makes a force like the SAS 'special' is not that it is better than any other unit in terms of individual audacity, or that it is more professional than others by virtue of greater innate ability. Excellence is the product of training and drill but above all trust built up over the years. Through drill soldiers instinctively know they can rely on one another. Trust becomes deeply ingrained in a unit's collective consciousness. Each man keeps faith with his comrades. The key phrase here is 'keeping faith'. To remain 'semper fidelis' – faithful to one's unit – is to understand what faithfulness actually means. It has many synonyms in our society, such as piety, or honouring the memory of a fallen comrade. None of these are the product of laws. They are the product of tradition, training and experience.

As Fukuyama admits, it is perfectly possible, of course, to form a successful group in the absence of trust. It's possible to use a variety of formal coordination mechanisms such as contracts. But the importance of informal norms is that they greatly reduce what economists call 'the transaction costs' – the costs of monitoring and enforcing formal agreements. Social norms shared among members of the group allow them to cooperate with one another on the basis of trust. Fukuyama lays great emphasis on norms, which he defines as rules (formal or informal) governing social interaction. These, he adds, are specially compelling in small groups – as opposed to large organisations – where faces can be associated with reputation and where status counts more when it is confirmed by action (for actions count more than words). Individuals worry about their reputation. One of the problems that the US army confronted in Vietnam was that soldiers were processed through different units in the field, often for only a few months at a time, so that they never got to know each other.

Covenants, not contracts

It is at this point that we come to ethics. For a soldier's covenant is not restricted to his friends or to the service. In a democratic society he has a covenant with those he serves – the rest of us. To be sealed off from the civilian world is to be estranged from it. To be estranged (even worse, to celebrate that estrangement) is to betray what MacArthur called the 'sacred trust' which is at the very heart of the warrior ethos. These two words, 'sacred' and 'sacrifice', are etymologically important as I have already explained. Sacrifice is derived from the sacred. Sacrificing oneself for the 'weak and unarmed', MacArthur added, was 'the very essence and reason of a warrior's being'.[8]

Although Michael Walzer questions the existence of a sacred trust, he does acknowledge that soldiers have a responsibility to others. Their moral agency makes them responsible to all those people whose lives their activities affect. If a soldier is to be a moral agent then morality inheres in taking responsibility for his or her actions. In a word, the soldier's sense of agency or freedom is embedded in

a code of honour. It is manifest when he spares another on the battlefield not only because the state demands he act in accordance with the laws of war but also because it is in his nature, a nature that is mediated into the profession for which he works. As Emmanuel Levinas writes, 'the small kindness from one person to his fellow man is lost and deformed as soon as it opts for a doctrine, a theology, a state', or, as we might now add, a legal convention.[9] We can never deny the right to kindness as a gift which derives from the intrinsic factors of training and tradition. As the poet Yeats once wrote, innocence and beauty are born 'in custom and ceremony', a remark which displayed a deep affection for an aristocratic principle. But aristocratic or not, good behaviour is born in custom and ceremony too, not just in law courts or legal conventions.

Unfortunately, in instrumentalising war as much as we have we have paid a high price. In rejecting natural law in favour of nineteenth-century legal positivism we have grounded good behaviour towards prisoners of war almost entirely on the Geneva Conventions or on domestic legislation such as the 1996 US War Crimes Act. Under the influence of modern liberalism the rights of POWs are seen as contractual obligations patrolled by the victorious state rather than as duties each soldier owes his profession, his conscience and his creed. The duties we now owe others have become more a matter of legal sanction than moral responsibility. The two are very different. Following a moral impulse means assuming a responsibility for the fate of an adversary because both live in the same community of fate.

The problem with legal conventions is that they are contractual. What makes the warrior's honour different is that it is a covenant, and covenants differ from contracts in several critical respects. First, they are not limited to specific conditions and circumstances; secondly, they tend to be open-ended and long-lasting; and, thirdly, they rarely involve individual advantage. As Philip Selznick writes:

> Every genuine covenant restates and reaffirms the basic features of morality: deference to a source of judgment beyond autonomous wills; constructive self-regard; concern for the well-being of others. At the same time, it establishes the principles of a *particular* way of life . . . It's not an abstract morality.[10]

Covenants are only possible when a society or person is allowed to be itself or himself. They exist because we are different and we seek to preserve those differences. Covenants are relational, not ontological. Each institution in a civil society has something to give of itself. Each has a distinctive contribution to make to society as a whole.

As Zygmunt Bauman insists, we must distinguish contractually defined behaviour (i.e. legal) from moral behaviour in at least two critical respects. First, we tend to observe contracts only for as long as others do. We scrutinise their behaviour for that reason. Our enemies must deserve or earn the fulfilment of our obligations to them. We don't have to act well if they are undeserving. The fact that we sometimes do, as the Americans did with the Japanese in the Second World War, is merely a matter of choice. And though the harsh treatment of Allied POWs

was not widely known at the time – it emerged after the POW camps were liberated – Americans chose to apply the old codes of behaviour rather than suspend them. Secondly, legal contracts obtain only as long as they are enforceable. We observe them for fear of what might happen if we were to break them. What we fear is not so much immediate sanctions: you can't be taken to court while you are fighting a war; what we fear is how our enemies will act the next time we meet them in battle if we do not honour them now.[11]

Moral covenants are different. We adhere to rules because of conscience. We obey the dictates of our hearts. We don't wish to dishonour ourselves in the eyes of our moral equals – our friends – and thereby dishonour the unit, the flag or the great tradition. We are trained to be moral. It's a form of social conditioning, and when we do dishonour the flag, as Lieutenant Calley did in Vietnam, it is usually the consequence of not being trained well enough. It is a failure of education. Calley's offence was to bring his unit into disrepute. He was not responsive enough to the tradition. He did his duty readily enough. He obeyed orders and acted in the spirit of the times but he failed in his responsibilities. He failed the warrior ethos because of very low self-esteem.

Self-regulation by comparison, or what Emerson called 'self-trust', fosters self-respect. The warrior code encourages us to remain true to certain conceptions of humanity and of ourselves. Ethics, adds one writer, 'consists of knowing that one is of the spirit and, therefore, is obliged absolutely. Noblesse oblige. There's nothing more to ethics than one's sense of one's own dignity.'[12] Noblesse oblige is the spirit of an aristocratic class, but all warriors even in a meritocratic society are aristocratic by definition by virtue of being part of a distinct (and distinctive) minority.

In a world of honour the individual discovers his true identity in his roles and to turn away from the roles is to turn away from oneself. The warrior is a supremely ethical being for that reason. Take courage and the gloss put on it by its foremost theorist, Aristotle. Like many philosophers, Aristotle changed his mind more than once in the course of his lifetime. He could never quite decide whether courage entailed the suppression of fear or its management. He took as axiomatic the fact that the soldier's first duty was to stand firm under attack, not to break ranks and run away, thereby betraying his commander's trust or leaving his comrades behind and betraying their faith in him. At one time he wrote that the fearless soldier is the most courageous, at another that the courageous man 'endures and fears' and no man 'endures what is terrifying more steadfastly' than he. Courage involves us not in denying we are afraid but persisting in the face of it. But whether a soldier's courage is fearlessness or the ability to overcome it, it is the product of ethical training, i.e. what it means to be a good man or to lead a worthwhile life. Or to quote an American general, James Glover:

> A man of character is a man of courage in war. As Aristotle taught character is a habit, the daily choice of right and wrong . . . the conflict between morality and necessity is eternal. But at the end of the day the soldier's moral dilemma is resolved only if he remains true to himself.[13]

Is life, Socrates asks Crito, worth living when we are corrupted by our actions, when our unjust actions harm us? No, replies Crito, as have many others the world over. The soldier who flees often cannot live with himself.

A person appeals to morality when he appeals to the overlapping shared part of himself, those beliefs and desires which permit him to say '*We* don't do this.' Morality, as Wilfred Sellars says, is a matter of 'we-intentions'.[14] Thus most moral dilemmas are reflections of the fact that most of us identify with a number of different communities. We are usually unwilling to marginalise ourselves in relation to any of them. This diversity of identification increases with education. It is one of the most pervasive sanctions of conduct, and we ignore it at our peril by overpatrolling communities, by subjecting them to rules or universal laws, or a civilian set of norms that are simply inappropriate or misapplied. Laws can reaffirm the warrior ethos; they cannot replace it.

Duty

Let me conclude with Émile Durkheim's reflections on duty. For Durkheim took issue with Kant's belief that the moral idea is part of our nature, that it is engraved deeply in our conscience and that to discover good conduct we need only look into ourselves. Instead, he insisted we can only find it in ourselves (in our natures) if we know what to look for. We must have an idea of what is moral. In the end, we are moral because we are social animals. Because human beings construct roles and associate rules of conduct with moral conduct we learn these rules in society but most pervasively in the different societies that constitute society itself (in the professions for which we work). From this insight he derived another which is especially pertinent to the theme of this chapter. Duty does not exhaust the concept of the moral. We act well because duty requires us. 'Remember you are a Marine; Marines don't act like this' is a familiar reproach to a member of the Corps who is about to act badly.[15] For us to be true moral agents it is necessary to go beyond instinctual duty. We must find that the act is true to ourselves. It is authentic because it echoes in our hearts.

A soldier is most likely to desire to act well if one comes to soldiering through a vocational call. Durkheim famously concluded that 'morality begins at the same point at which disinterest and innocent devotion also begin'. Disinterestedness is what military education promotes. A soldier has extreme individuality drilled out of him on the barrack square. He doesn't renounce his individuality, of course, but it is no longer so self-regarding. He lives for – and through – other people, principally his friends. In extreme situations he may even be asked to go 'beyond the call of duty' and sacrifice himself for them. And he will do this not because he desires it but because it is in his nature, a nature revealed through military education.

Unlike Kant, who was adamantly against feelings of sympathy on the basis of morality, Durkheim insisted on them. There was no room in his universe for Kantian morality but there was for the concept of duty. For him, the moral character is attributed 'to feelings of sympathies between individuals for the acts they

inspire'. One cannot see one's fellows suffering without suffering oneself. Durkheim's concept of duty – the more one studies it – seems to me to go to the very heart of the warrior ethos. The rules a soldier learns do not cancel out human conscience; they amplify it. Instead of denying individuality, his concept calls for a higher form: it is the social morality which allows individual morality full expression. When a soldier refuses to obey an order his best defence in a court martial is not only that he found no echo of it in his heart but that he also found no echo of it in the history or experience of his unit; Marines, after all, 'don't do that'.

What makes Durkheim's work so important is not that he kept to an empirically based notion of duty (obedience to the law or contract) but that he surrounded it with an aura of sacredness that includes respect, the desire to be ethical fostered by a code. And what is the code other than an ideal? For Durkheim this was the basis that gave duty the ballast it needed. 'The good is morally conceived as something pleasing, something that attracts our will, provoking our desire spontaneously . . . It is a magnificent ideal.'[16] It is one that many, perhaps most, will find difficult to live up to but they will be inspired by the warriors who keep faith with the code.

The warrior's honour

The warrior ethos extends of course further than this – it also encompasses the duties we owe our enemies: it provides for the possibility of an ethically conceived life; it makes the soldier aware that he lives in a state of moral consequence.

When soldiers act badly they implicate everyone else, even the society in whose name they act. Just after 0700 on 19 November 2005 a US Marine Humvee was blown up by a road-side bomb in Al-Haditha, a town north-east of Baghdad. The driver of the vehicle was killed, as indeed had some twenty Marines been in a separate incident in the town three months previously. What followed has been described as 'a total breakdown' in morality and leadership in which some twenty-four civilians including women and children were killed, allegedly in cold blood. Al-Haditha was one of three separate investigations into soldiers' conduct in Iraq ordered by the US high command at the time the final draft of this book was completed.

In its wake there were allegations that the US military had succumbed to a culture of casual violence and that revenge and racial prejudice had made the killing of Iraqi civilians a common occurrence. From the moment US forces crossed the border into Iraq three years earlier – from the shooting of civilians by the Third Infantry Division on the outskirts of Baghdad during the so-called 'Thunder Run' into the city – the same pattern had reasserted itself, it was claimed. Indeed, within weeks of the fall of Saddam's regime it expressed itself in the moment many now see as the starting point of the insurgency: when members of the 82nd Airborne Division fired into a noisy demonstration in Fallujah.

All of this raises an important question: can warriors ever respect each other when cultures differ so much? Can we even act well towards non-belligerents when societies differ so markedly? This is a seminal question now that insurgency is the

norm, that most enemies are not in uniform and that the people we engage in firefights are considered 'unlawful combatants', a category specific to the war on terror. Central to the warrior myth is the respect which Homer tells us each side showed each other. In fact there isn't a single line in the *Iliad*, unlike most Greek literature, in which the word 'barbarian' appears used as either a substantive or an adjective even though the Trojans are not Achaeans. Achilles kills those he fights who happen to be Trojan but he doesn't despise them, still less hate them, save for a moment after his friend's death when he acts out of character. He doesn't dismiss the Trojans as by nature 'savage' or by custom undisciplined. The problem with war in the modern world is that we are almost encouraged to see our enemies as barbaric. In such circumstances it is difficult to show our enemies the slightest respect and what follows logically from this: that we accept, even when trying to take them out, that we live in the same community of risk and moral consequence.

Can different cultures respect each other?

One of the most frequent questions I am asked by my students, many of whom seem to be impressed by the single-mindedness of terrorists and suicide bombers, is whether they can be called warriors. Many certainly see themselves in that light. In an al-Qaeda document released in 2002 the author glorifies the 'daring combat skills of the mujahideen', those 'noble warriors . . . fight[ing] for the welfare of the downtrodden Islamic nation'. Another document suggests that it is necessary to train Muslim fighters as if they were entering a classic military campaign.[17] And the mujahidin were classic fighters. The Arab-Afghans as they came to be called arrived in Afghanistan to fight a jihad against the Russians, and when it was over found themselves at a loss. They had grown used to war; they craved another battlefield. They found it in Bosnia, courtesy of the CIA. And when that campaign ended and they had no other enemy to fight they turned on their paymasters: they declared war on the United States.

They do not much admire their new enemy. In a third document, a training manual captured during a special forces raid on the Al-Farook training camp, the American soldiers immediately recognised the tactics described from the many interrogations they had carried out. If captured, the manual instructed its readers, they should trick the Americans into using excessive violence so that they could show their bruises or scars to the International Red Cross. The American aversion to using torture was presented as a weakness – American soldiers were usually not cruel 'because they are not warriors'.[18] In this looking-glass world each side finds reflected back what it despises most about the other.

Those who have seen the Islamic jihadists in action are not always impressed by their fighting skills. Opinions vary regarding their effectiveness. In Afghanistan Westerners who worked with them in the 1980s reported that they rarely launched coordinated attacks; they quickly abandoned support positions in order to join the glory of the assault. Nate Fick was told at a military briefing just prior to going into Afghanistan in 2002 that the mujahidin were fearless fighters:

'Death before dishonor.'

'Say again?' Patrick looked up. I hadn't realized I had spoken out aloud.

'Death before dishonor. Marines tattoo it on their forearms, but these fuckers *live* it.'[19]

In Bosnia, where mujahidin soldiers were redeployed from Afghanistan, the local commanders were more sceptical. General Jovan Divjak, the deputy chief of staff of the Bosnian army, believed their fighting skills were meagre: 'As a soldier I know they only make noise.' He was especially dismissive of their passion for self-publicity, especially their penchant for video-taping their own exploits, and framing their actions in the light of what he called 'directed scenarios'.[20] But others were impressed with their undoubted zeal even though in their suicidal enthusiasm they often incurred high casualties for minor gains. The Arab-Afghans were a good striking force, but indifferent defenders, observed a French army major when interviewed in 1996.[21]

Indifferent or not, they have become a fixed feature of the political environment. In Iraq they have shown audacity and determination and they are on a steep learning curve, finessing their skills all the time. So whether we conclude they are warriors or not, we must take my students' question seriously.

To begin though at the beginning. Can warriors from different cultures ever respect each other? It should not surprise us that warriors differ so much from culture to culture. Reality differs because there is no human nature. We cannot write a history of humanity, only the history of different cultures/civilisations in which human nature is forged. Our nature is inseparable from culture. Civilisation is the translation of ideas and practices common to all humanity for there are many ways of saying the same thing, and many things that can be said in the same way. There must exist, of course, a common medium – in this case, war.

When comparing different warrior cultures the best we can achieve is to recognise what is analogous, especially what the warrior fights for. Take for example the *te* of the Chinese, the *arête* of the Greeks, the *virtus* of the Romans, the *yugen* of the Japanese. They are not the same, but they are analogous. Every culture has a different name to define a different reality, and therefore confers on it a different meaning. It is impossible to translate the central terms of one culture into another. Because they are analogous, however, we can say that they are the common preoccupation of all warriors, as they are of all societies. The moment we stop to think about this we should recognise that we are confronted not with different realities, but with different meanings of the same term: the warrior ethos.

The very term allows us to translate the virtues of one society into our own. At the US Naval Academy the values of a variety of cultures are explored in a course called 'The Code of the Warrior'. Warriors can certainly learn from each other. At the Academy the cadets leant about many different codes, including those of the Greeks, the Zulus, the Chinese warrior monks and the samurai of feudal Japan. Observing a decline in their own ethos some years ago the US Marine Corps decided to implement compulsory martial arts training. In between chokeholds the instructors tell stories not only of Medal of Honor winners but also of Zulu and

Apache warriors. The Marines are continuously reminded of their 'American samurai heritage' by being required to wear their *obi* (martial arts belt) underneath their camouflage uniforms. Other special force units such as the Rangers and Navy SEALs also receive martial arts training.

Yet identifying with others can only go so far. With their highly developed codes of honour Western warriors have found it difficult to admire warrior *peoples* who appear to have none. Clausewitz despised the Cossack warriors he saw at first hand when he served with the Russian army in the 1812 campaign. He disliked them for selling their French prisoners to the peasants, when they were not stripping the clothes from their backs and leaving them to perish in sub-arctic conditions. Yet Tolstoy claimed to admire them and captured their raw energy in his novel *The Cossacks*. A hundred years later Isaac Babel, while serving with a Cossack unit in the Russian Civil War, described them as 'wild beasts with principles', yet this in no way diminished his admiration for them.[22] The Russian government is now re-employing them in its own war against terror. The more removed we are from our own past the less we tend to appreciate other societies' code of honour which shows changes in our sensibility, not theirs. We can look the Cossacks in the face but not without a sense of unease. To us their world appears terrifyingly murderous in its brutality. Yet two great writers, spanning two centuries, Tolstoy and Babel, are able to hold it up as a mirror to our own humanity which we ignore at our cost.

In short, what we understand by the warrior ethos is largely a product of culture. It is generally true to say that it only means something in context, in this case on the battlefield where the warrior's resolve and courage are put to the test. Frequently warriors have shown each other little respect; respect is more often imagined after the fact, rather than at the time, or in the heat of battle. We remember the wars we experience, not at the time but after the fact in a nostalgic retrospective. But the respect one warrior shows another is central to the myths warriors weave about themselves; it is part of the narrative of war, that all-embracing story that warriors fashion for themselves and which has been fashioned for them by poets such as Homer. We diminish ourselves, after all, if we devalue those we fight; we wish to be esteemed; we thirst for admiration. We are, writes Nietzsche, 'value-esteemers'; this is what distinguishes us as a species. Our enemies must be worthy of us; little honour can be derived from victory over an opponent we despise.

Yet this is precisely the world of contemporary warfare. In Ridley Scott's epic film *Black Hawk Down*, there is a particularly memorable scene in which a Somali warlord converses with a wounded American helicopter pilot captured during the 1993 fighting in the streets of Mogadishu. When the American declines the Somali's offer of a cigarette his captor replies: 'That's right. None of you Americans smoke any more. You all live long, dull and uninteresting lives.' The Somali goes on to add that the two men are distanced from each other not just culturally but emotionally. Somalia is a country in which everyone lives on the edge; it is a society in which killing is taken for granted. 'There will always be killing', concludes the warlord; 'that is the way things are in our world.' But that is his point: it is his world, not the West's. Scott's film captures one of the depressing realities of war today. In our post-heroic times those who take up arms on both

sides no longer seem to show the other the respect that was once part of the warrior code. Our enemies frequently fail to recognise much heroism in the men and women they find themselves fighting.

How far away this world seems from that of even twenty years ago when it was still possible for warriors on both sides to earn respect in each other's eyes. David Hackworth, the most highly decorated living veteran from the Vietnam War, recalls meeting a hard-core Vietcong reconnaissance company commander who was taken prisoner in the field. No one could get anything out of him despite days of interrogation. Hackworth succeeded by invoking a common bond of honour, even though he initially found him:

> as defiant as I'd been warned and even more banged up. The worst of his many battle scars was a leg that had a depression in it almost as deep and wide as my fist. A huge chunk of flesh had been blown out and never sewn up. It would have been a bad, bad wound even if medical attention *had* been available. Still, it had healed and the guy had gone back to duty. This was one hardcore stud.
>
> He didn't want to talk to me, so I pointed to the old wound in his leg and through an interpreter asked if he had been hit. He said he had.
>
> 'No hospital?' I asked. The prisoner shook his head almost scornfully.
>
> Then I showed him some of my wounds which provoked the first bit of interest from the guy. He asked if they were from Vietnam. 'No, no,' I replied. 'Before. Korea. But this one', I continued showing him my leg wound, 'this one came from the VC here in the Delta.' The wound was still red and raw, with big vicious-looking stitch marks.
>
> 'May be I did it,' said the VC lieutenant, and he roared with a huge belly laugh.
>
> 'Yeah, maybe you did,' I replied.
>
> The warrior to warrior exchange broke the ice. It was a common bond that transcended patriotism or nationalism or causes. We laid down our flags and allowed ourselves to be friends.[23]

Can one imagine the same respect being accorded an al-Qaeda activist today? We seem to be living in a very different era. Hackworth's world could indeed transcend (his own word) the cause for which the Americans were fighting in Indo-China. Are civilisational and religious differences more profound than political and ideological ones?

Hackworth's rapport with his VC interlocutor was the personal regard one courageous man shows another. It is part of the great tradition even though there have been many times in history when respect has been withheld, or has taken the form of suspended disbelief. If we have greater difficulty today respecting our enemies that is because we feel they have not escaped the state of nature. They live in a world in which violence is constitutive of what it is to be human. Violence is addictive because unending; it can only end in the unconditional elimination of the other. This really is a Hobbesian 'war of all against all' (*bellum omnium contra omnes*).

Yet this does not absolve us from treating our enemies as we would treat any soldier in uniform in a conventional war. At the head of one of the chapters of Philip Caputo's troubled, soul-searching meditation on the nature of war, 'about the things men do in war and the things war does to them', we find the most famous passage of all from Hobbes's *Leviathan*. For Caputo, Vietnam offered not a field of battle – a *champ d'honneur* – but Hobbes's 'war of all against all'. 'Everything rotted and corroded quickly over there: bodies, boot leather, metal, morals. In the field, the humanity of the soldiers rubbed off them as the protection bluing rubbed off the barrels of their rifles.' Caputo's comrades-in-arms found themselves fighting in the most cruel of conflicts, the most brutish and nasty, a people's war waged in an unforgiving environment:

> A war in which the enemy soldier fights for his own life and the lives of the men beside him, not caring who he killed in that personal cause, or how many, or in what manner, and feeling only contempt for those who sought to impose on his savage struggle the *mincing distinctions* of civilized warfare – that code of battlefield ethics that attempted to humanize essentially inhuman war.[24]

What distinguished the Vietnam War from other American conflicts was its absolute savagery. In this wilderness there were none of the reference points which soldiers usually find familiar: no churches, no police, no laws, none of the restraining influences on conduct that men need. 'It was the dawn of creation in the Indo-China bush. Out there, lacking restraints, sanctioned to kill, confronted by a hostile country and a relentless enemy, we sank into a brutish state.'[25]

This is the familiar conception of the Hobbesian state of nature. Caputo takes it as a warning of what happens to even the most modern of us when confronted with intolerable circumstances. When a man is stripped of all his socially acquired appetites and left in a moral vacuum he returns to his primeval state. His book is replete with familiar tropes – of men as semi-brutes, a law unto themselves who have no moral compass, who make their own laws, who are haunted by their own savagery when they re-enter civilised life, who are pursued by the ghosts of the past even when they escape the state of nature.

And this applies to even the most courageous soldier. Courage enables a person to dominate his fear on the battlefield. It is instinctive. But it cannot eliminate the stress that lives on. To survive battle is to have to live with oneself, and live with the memory of one's own actions. Sometimes as with many of the cases of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) in Vietnam they never quite recover.

This moral responsibility cannot be transferred to governments, for the warrior has the primary responsibility for ensuring that war remains a moral activity. Many ordinary soldiers will lack the true moral sense or be overwhelmed by anger in battle, or seek revenge for the loss of their comrades, or give way to blood lust in the heat of the moment. Even the most disciplined soldiers can succumb to primal urges. But a true warrior does not need discipline alone to master his feelings for he is the ultimate arbiter of what is honourable and dishonourable in battle. He has

his own unique moral vocabulary. For that reason he remains in Nietzsche's words a 'free man'.

We treat our enemies ethically, not because we are nice, and certainly not because we admire them. Enemies are rarely noble or endearing although there have been many wars, of course, in which the enemy has acted honourably, with due regard to the codes of chivalry to which both sides officially subscribed. The historian John Lukacs recounts the story of Lieutenant Etienne d'Orves, a young French Marine officer, one of the first heroes of the French resistance. Despite being captured out of uniform – in a guerrilla not a conventional war – the German military tribunal treated him with the respect deserving of a fellow officer. While condemning him to death it also officially recorded that 'the accused is a person of great merit, of great strength of character who acted for love of his country'. On the day of his execution he embraced the commanding officer of the execution squad and remarked: 'Monsieur, you are a German officer. I am a French officer. Both of us have done our duty.' Yet on the same day, 29 August 1941, 3,000 Jewish men, women and children were machine-gunned by SS units in the suburbs of Minsk and Mogilev as the German military looked on.[26]

For some time now, wrote Joseph Brodsky, one of the twentieth century's great essayists, we have been encouraged to see evil as no longer an ethical category so much as a 'physical phenomenon no longer measured in particles but mapped geographically'.[27] But, of course, evil lies within all of us, and can break out at any time. And especially given the nature of his profession a soldier must be aware of it more than anyone else. This is why the warrior's honour is still important, that code of conduct which represents a moral contract with the enemy he is asked to kill or disarm.

The chivalry that the Wehrmacht showed the young Etienne d'Orves was that of a freemasonry. In the end it was a gift. The endearments and sentiments were personal. The respect they chose to show him at his death was freely chosen. Soldiers behave in this fashion to redeem themselves, not the enemy. If they don't behave honourably they risk, like Caputo's comrades-in-arms, becoming the enemy they are fighting. In the end they risk becoming estranged from themselves. Nietzsche's warning in *Beyond Good and Evil* has become a hackneyed phrase, but it bears repeating, for it is addressed to our age as much as his. Whoever fights monsters 'should see to it that in the process he does not become a monster; when you look into the abyss, the abyss looks into you'.

Anthropologists tell us this fear can be traced to our pre-historic origins. It is really a case of blood pollution. In many hunter-gatherer societies returning warriors would be forcibly segregated from everyone else. They were quarantined from the community for days until their blood lust had abated; they were isolated from the rest of the tribe so that their vengeful spirits would not pollute everyone else. In some tribes warriors even embraced their dying or dead enemies on the battlefield so that their blood lust would pass out of their own body into that of another where it could do no harm, where it would not infect anyone else. In our own day victory parades are a modern equivalent – they allow the victorious soldiers to be reintegrated into civilian life. For what the absence of such

ceremonies can mean we need only look back to the Vietnam era when the veterans were shunned by their fellow countrymen. Instead of being welcomed back they were denounced as 'baby killers'.

We should recognise that morality is embedded in a social context. Ethical codes are not arrived at by universal agreement any more than they are discovered by universal reason. In our fragmented world, writes Alasdair MacIntyre, we cannot achieve a moral consensus. We rely much more than we are willing to admit when going to war on those internalised value systems we call codes of behaviour, which is why attempting to legalise them is so dangerous. What matters, adds MacIntyre, is the construction of local forms of community such as a military unit within which civility and moral life can be sustained 'through the new dark Ages which are already upon us'.[28]

In this period how we act will have importance for any society claiming to hold the high ground in the Long War. We cannot expect to win the argument against al-Qaeda or any of the radical jihadist groups that will emerge in the future by argument alone. We will only prevail by the force of example – by showing that our moral codes are superior to theirs. Ultimately we must hope that, like a parasite that kills off its host, radical Islamism will perish by alienating its own supporters. But much will depend on how we fight the fight; much will depend on whether we do not alienate others from the common cause.

In the Long War, which is likely to be more political than most, the 'warrior's honour' still matters. We need warriors precisely because the state cannot always be trusted to act in accordance with its own honour. Let me conclude with the question I asked at the beginning of the third chapter of this book. Is the warrior a product of nature or nurture? Plato had the answer to that question too. What makes us human, he tells us, is not nature or nurture but our capacity to rise above both.

Conclusion

The last thing one settles in writing a book, Pascal observed, is what one should put in first. So having come to the end of this work, selected a title and two epigrams, let me go back to where I started with my evening encounter at the Barbican theatre. Do warriors like war too much? No one should have any illusions about war's brutality, its wasted lives and broken spirits, but despite all this wars will continue to be fought. The present century is likely to be no less bloody than the last, even if we find ourselves fighting for different ends. No one reading this book has seen the end of war.

My main purpose in writing it was to show how the warrior ethos has been increasingly hollowed out in recent years and why this matters, or should matter, to the rest of us in whose name warriors fight. War may long ago have been stripped of its 'glory'. It is a murderous, unforgiving trade. Unlike George Patton, no general today dare confess to loving it. But if a horrific practice it is still a necessary one. We have not yet found a way to ban it; possibly we never will. All we can aim for is to make it less inhumane, which is why we still rely on the warrior ethos.

As I was completing the first draft of the manuscript I came across another exchange between a speaker and a member of his audience. It involved a paralysed ex-Marine lieutenant who in an address to an audience on Long Island tried to depict the war in Vietnam as it was experienced by the soldiers themselves:

> This woman stands up and says, 'I object to your use of obscenity.' I said, 'What did I say?' A guy said: 'You used the word bullshit.' I said: 'You know, it's amazing. I'm talking to you about the obscenity of war, about wholesale atrocities as a matter of policy, and what you relate to as an obscenity is the word, bullshit. What would you do if I said: 'Fuck you?' This was in a full auditorium . . . It was total pandemonium.[29]

He had a point. As Norman Mailer once remarked, we use the world 'shit' precisely so that we can use the word 'noble'. There may be little glory in war but there is nobility, and the warrior, both idealised and real, tends to exemplify it.

The warrior ethos which has emerged in the Western world over the centuries has been made even more important since the appearance of a new class of soldiers, fighting not for the state but for non-state or sub-state entities ranging from criminal cartels to terrorist groups, and extreme nationalist or jihadist movements, who all promise to increase war's inhumanity still further. The suicide bomber is only the latest, and certainly not the last, incarnation of the foot soldier. His emergence does not absolve the Western warrior of his honour and the responsibilities that are part of his code. Instead, they make the code more central than ever.

And we should not be too squeamish about what warriors do best: killing. War, John Keegan famously pronounced when challenged to produce a definition, is 'collective killing for a purpose'.[30] We kill, as do our enemies. It is the obvious tonal contrast, however, between the respective humanity of the Western warrior and the inhumanity of his opponents that explains why we are so reluctant to think of the suicide bomber as a warrior and we are right not to. Nevertheless, we are wrong to imagine that our own democratic, liberal, post-modern beliefs will ever be sufficient guarantee that we will engage our opponents in a way that is consistent with our own first principles, as we must if terrorists are to be cut off from their popular base. Whether or not we think that warriors like war too much, we need them more than ever.

Notes

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10 The Spartans are a good illustration of this. Although they didn't prevent the Persians from marching on to take Athens, in the short term their action became the paradigmatic example of heroic resistance in the face of oppression and may well have helped the Greek cause more generally by encouraging others to make more worthwhile sacrifices. Diodorus Siculus certainly thought so: 'what man of later times might not emulate the valor of those warriors who, finding themselves in the grip of an overwhelming situation, though their bodies were subdued, were not conquered in spirit? . . . one would be justified in thinking that it was these men who were more responsible for the common freedom of the Greeks than those who were victorious at a later time in the battles against Xerxes; for when the deeds of these men were called to mind, the Persians were dismayed whereas the Greeks were incited to perform similar courageous exploits'. Hobbs, *Plato and the Hero*, op. cit., p. 94.
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Index