Commentary on the *Iliad*, 24.1-21

In the wake of Patroclus’ funeral games, lines 1-21 of book 24 turn to the continued grief of Achilles. In literal language, this passage describes his thoughts and actions during that restless night and the following day: mourning, tossing and turning, and (in the end) dragging the dead body of Hector behind a chariot to disfigure it. Yet the rawness of the language does not detract from the effect of the narration: rather, it contributes to a sense of repetition bordering on obsession.

1. **λῦτο δ᾽ ἀγών:** The men have been gathered for funeral games in honor of Patroclus.

2-3. “bT [‘bT scholia,” ancient commentaries] comment on how the poet uses the respite of the games to suggest the abatement of Akhilleus’ sorrow, and then dramatically returns to this leading theme, when Akhilleus is again left on his own” (Richardson 1993, 274).

2. **ἐσκίδναντι:** from σκίδνημι, ‘scatter.’ The separation of the men allows Achilles’ physical (as well as emotional) isolation in the lines to come.

3. **ταρπήμεναι:** epexegetical infinitive (Leaf 1900, n.p.)

5. **ήρει:** imperfect of αἴρέω

**πανδαμάτωρ:** epithet for sleep. Although it is not clear whether this usage is intentionally ironic, this is a possibility: “It is paradoxical and virtually concessive, as if to suggest that Akhilleus’ grief was so intense as to overcome even all-mastering sleep” (Richardson 1993, 274).

**ἐστρέφετ ἐνθα καὶ ἐνθα:** This phrase may be translated “turned here and there,” or more familiarly, “tossed and turned”; however, either rendition misses the perfect repetition involved in the original Greek phrase (which suggests a repeated motion rather than a series of complementary motions).

6. **Πατρόκλου:** The placement of his name at the beginning of the line indicates Patroclus’ prominence in Achilles’ mind.

**ποθέων:** from ποθέω, ‘yearn’ (not to be confused with πάσχω)

7-8. “The rare synizesis of ἀλγεῖα may indicate that the phrase is actually borrowed without correction from Od. 13.263, where ‘ἀλγεῖα’ is [dactylic]; but we can of course adopt the old variant ‘ἔργα’. The allusion to the hardships of the sea evidently belongs to the Od.” (Leaf 1900, n.p.)
The presentation of these lines may support Leaf’s conclusion (they are framed, in a way, by various forms of repetition [see notes for lines 9 and 10-11]); yet this explanation is perhaps a bit too dismissive. Although the *Iliad* certainly has less to do with the sea than the *Odyssey*, the sea is clearly a significant part of the *Iliad*’s backstory as well as its sequel. See also the note on “ἅλος, ἅλα” in lines 12-13.

7 **τολύπευσε:** from τολυπεύω, literally ‘wind off (wool) into a clew’; here metaphorical, ‘wind off, achieve, accomplish’

8 **πείρων:** “It looks as if there is some association here between the senses of πειράω (‘try’, ‘experience’) and πείρω (‘pierce’, ‘cut through’)” (Richardson 1993, 275). The usage of this particular word may be intended not only to convey an idea of pain, but also to ease into the transition back to the present narrative: the reader is reminded that these are past experiences and trials which Achilles is remembering (and from which he is thus removed).

9 **μιμνησκόμενος:** repetition of the verb μιμνήσκω (also seen in line 4); the two occurrences of the verb frame Homer’s description of what, exactly, Achilles is remembering, and shift the narration from Achilles’ thoughts back to his actions.

10-11 **ἄλλοτε ἐπὶ πλευράς κατακείμενος, ἄλλοτε δ’ αὖτε / ὑπτιος, ἄλλοτε δὲ πρηνής:** Here ἄλλοτε is used as a correlative in describing three different positions of Achilles during his restless night: on his ribs, on his back, and with his face down. Although the difference in positions is clear in this case, the triple occurrence of ἄλλοτε acts much like the phrase ἐνθα καὶ ἐνθα in line 5: it suggests the repetition of the turning motion. The combination of ἐνθα καὶ ἐνθα and ἄλλοτε … ἄλλοτε … ἄλλοτε also frames the description of Achilles’ thoughts in much the same way as the double appearance of the verb μιμνήσκω.

12 **δινεύεσκ:** from δινεύω, ‘whirl’ or ‘spin’; here, Achilles is making turns on the seashore. Compare to ἐστρέφετ’ in line 5.

**ἄλλων:** from ἄλλο, ‘wander in mind’ or ‘be restless’. This is the last of a series of words (within the space of six lines) which begin with the same first syllable; the others are ἄλγεα, ‘pains’ (line 7), ἄλεγενα, ‘pain-causing’ (line 8), and the triple ἄλλοτε, linked to Achilles’ turning motion (lines 10-11). (I will consider ἅλος and ἅλα, in lines 12-13, separately.) This repetition of the initial syllable would seem to correlate all of these meanings, further strengthening the links between pain, restlessness and turning in this passage. It also conveys a sense of echoing, or even timelessness (an idea which appears again in the image of a circle, the shape most evidently related to *turning*).
12-13 οὖδὲ μὴν ἡδὲς / φανομένη λήθεσκεν ὑπείρ ἀλὰ τ’ ἡμῶνας τε: The appearance of dawn, as the division between night and day, would logically seem to indicate a separation between Achilles’ nighttime activities (mourning) and daytime. In a sense this is true: Achilles, recognizing the change in time, takes up a more active role. Yet the division between night and day is mitigated by the metrical position of dawn’s appearance: it starts in the middle of line 12, making the change of topic less pronounced than it might have been if it had started where a structural break already existed (i.e., at the beginning of line 13).

Leaf describes further complexities of time in the passage as they relate to this point, although he sees them as a “weakness” (perhaps in the same vein as the irreconcilability of ages in the work):

“Up to this point the description of Achilles’ grief would seem to refer to a particular night. The five iterative verbs in -“σκω” within six lines show that it really belongs to a period of several days; and this agrees with the twelve days of 31, cf. 107. This is evidently awkward; it cannot however be remedied without great violence, and must be reckoned among the weaknesses of the whole opening passage.” (Leaf 1900, n.p.)

ἀλάς, ἄλα: These two instances of the word for ‘sea’ were excluded from the list of first-syllable repetitive verbs, on account of their rough breathing; however, they are otherwise eligible for inclusion. If they are interpreted as part of the same phenomenon, they might reference again the “hardships of the sea” which Leaf claimed to be more pertinent to the Odyssey.

13 λήθεσκεν: from λανθάνω

14 ἐξεύξειεν ὑπ’ ἀρμασιν ὑκέας ἰπποὺς: ζεύξειεν is in the optative, but acts as if in the indicative mood: ‘he yoked the swift horses to the chariot’

15 ἐλκεσθαι: This dragging would have been done by the heels: therefore, this incident has been related to the phrase “Achilles’ heel” (Leaf 1900, n.p.).

δησάσκετο: from δέω, ‘bind’

16 τρῖς δ’ ἐρύσας περὶ σήμα Μενοιτίάδω θανόντος: In 23.13-14, the Argives drove three times around the grave of Patroclus in reverence; here Achilles performs a version of the same act in order to simultaneously honor his friend and dishonor his enemy. The balance, even parallel, between the two dead men is notable, as is the circular nature of the motion.

18-21 τοίῳ δ’ Ἀπόλλων πᾶσαν ἀεικείνην ἀπεχε χροὶ φῶτ’ ἐλεάερον καὶ τεθηνότα περ: περὶ δ’ αἰγίδι πάντα κάλυπτε χρυσείη, ἵνα μὴ μὴν ἁποδρύφοι
Somewhat surprisingly, Apollo does not stop Achilles outright, but rather protects the body of Hector from harm. The god’s intervention leads into a description of debate among the gods over how to deal with Hector.

18 **προπρηνέα**: ‘prone’; compare to πρηνής (line 11)

20 **καὶ τεθνηότα περ**: ‘although he was dead’: this phrase is mostly notable in that it emphasizes that Hector is, like Patroclus, dead; the fact that Apollo continues to pity Hector even after death may be suggestive of the Greek understanding of honor.

**αἰγίδι**: the same Aegis, presumably, with which Athena adorns Achilles in 18.203-204. This has provoked some controversy:

“Aristarchus (Arn/A) athetized 20-1, and the scholia offer various objections: (a) the verses are unnecessary; (b) the divine aegis should not be polluted by death; (c) it belongs to Zeus, not Apollo; (d) the verses disagree with the account in book 23. These are poor arguments” (Richardson 1993, 275).
Bibliography


