

Chris Yates

ORCID: 0009-0006-8089-5749
Anatolia College, Thessaloniki Greece

‘Once Inside the Hut, No-one is Going to Kill You’; From Ilion to Iraq, Battle-space to Peace-space

„Gdy już jesteś pod dachem, nikt cię nie zabije”; Od Ilionu po Irak, od pola bitwy do przestrzeni pokoju

Abstract

This paper seeks to establish links between the final book of Homer’s *Iliad* and methods of peace negotiation, with the interaction of Priam and Achilles providing a template for how enemies might meet within a delineated “peace-space” and thereby achieve a degree of reconciliation, transformation and agreement. The *Iliad* (and *Odyssey*) was treated as a repository of wisdom by Ancient Greeks and subsequent civilisations, and as such is worth reading today as not merely a narrative but an instruction manual. The paper draws on contemporary war studies to describe the concept of a “battle-space” and psychological and sociological aspects of what is termed “Will to Fight”. It concludes by stating that the compulsions and desires which prompt men to fight may also be the means by which they make peace: that it is within the transformative peace-space, not the battlespace, that these aspirations can be answered and fulfilled.

Keywords: peace, war, negotiation, enemies, reconciliation literature, *Iliad*, Homer.

Abstrakt

Niniejszy artykuł ma na celu wskazanie powiązań między ostatnią księgą *Iliady* Homera a metodami prowadzenia negocjacji pokojowych. Interakcja między Priamem a Achillesem stanowi wzór tego, w jaki sposób wrogowie mogą spotkać się w wyznaczonej „przestrzeni pokoju”, a tym samym osiągnąć pewien stopień pojednania, przemiany i porozumienia. *Iliada* (podobnie jak *Odyseja*) była traktowana przez starożytnych Greków i późniejsze cywilizacje jako skarbnica mądrości i jako taka jest warta przeczytania również dzisiaj – nie tylko jako opowieść, ale także jako podręcznik. Artykuł odwołuje się do współczesnych badań nad wojną, aby przedstawić koncepcję „przestrzeni walki” oraz przeanalizować psychologiczne i socjologiczne aspekty zjawiska określanego mianem „woli walki”. W podsumowaniu wskazano, że impulsy i pragnienia, skłaniające ludzi do walki, mogą być również środkami prowadzącymi do zawarcia pokoju. To właśnie w transformacyjnej przestrzeni pokoju, a nie w przestrzeni walki, aspiracje te mogą być zrealizowane i spełnione.

Słowa kluczowe: pokój, wojna, negocjacje, wrogowie, pojednanie, literatura, *Iliada*, Homer.

Introduction

“Once inside the hut, no-one is going to kill you”¹ – these words are a solemn promise, and they are kept. They occur at the end of Homer’s *Iliad*, after Achilles has slain Hector, the hero of Troy and son of King Priam. Achilles not only refuses to bury the corpse but persists in desecrating it. This displeases the gods and Priam is told by Iris, their messenger, to go to Achilles’s hut and negotiate for the return of his son’s body. Initially terrified, Priam is reassured by hearing these words. They underpin the creation of a peace-space and as such bring the *Iliad* to its conclusion, practically and thematically – ending the wrath of Achilles in a space delineated, transformed and set apart from both battlespace and civilian space. The peace-space is temporarily successful, and the funeral of Hector concludes the epic.

This paper will deal with three related spatial concepts and their transformations into one another. They are the battle-space, the civilian space and the peace-space, and I will address them using methodologies

1 Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. E. V. Rieu (London: Penguin, 1988), 442: “αὐτὰρ ἐπὶν ἀγάγησιν ἔσω κλισίην Ἀχιλλεύος, / οὐτ’ αὐτὸς κτενέει ἀπὸ τ’ ἄλλους πάντας ἐρύξει” XXIV, ll. 184/5. The Greek text is taken from A. T. Murray’s edition: Homer, *The Iliad*, trans. A. T. Murray (London: Heinemann, 1976).

of war studies, forensic architecture, social anthropology, and literary criticism, as well as my own experience of combat in Iraq in 2004, when I was a troop leader and tank commander in the British Army. A fourth, adjacent space will be proposed, which is the literature of war itself, which can facilitate or hinder the transformation of the others. The conclusion of this paper is that the great literature of war, especially classics like the *Iliad*, can act as a template and even a catalyst for the creation of real-world peace-spaces.

The Civilian-Space

The first space I would like to define is the civilian space, which we are in and know. It is a space of conventional relations. We walk along streets and enter buildings through doors. Those buildings are for living in and giving lectures. Outside, fields are for planting crops, grazing livestock; the sky is for lounging under, the earth is for burying the dead. It is a world of families, commerce, and newspapers. It is a space we take for granted and are unaware of, though it is not as innocent as it seems: combatant writers often describe it in terms of complacency, prejudice, and sentimental nationalism. "England looked strange to us returned soldiers," writes Robert Graves.² "We could not understand the war-madness that ran wild everywhere, looking for a pseudomilitary outlet. The civilians talked a foreign language, and it was newspaper language."³

The Battlespace, or Space Perverted

The battlespace is very different. It is a place of wrong or consciously irrational relations between all elements, where the usual understanding of space is reversed or rendered orthogonal - or must be treated as such, should those in it want to not die, and even to win. In the battlespace, one learns to act as unnaturally as possible. A patrol should avoid paths and stick to difficult or non-existent routes where ambushes are less likely. One quickly becomes suspicious of normality, or the apparent: this is particularly true of counter-insurgency operations, where the battlespace is overlaid upon an apparent civilian space. An ostensibly innocent object, such as a cardboard box by the road or the carcass of a donkey,

2 Robert Graves, *Goodbye to All That* (London: Penguin, 1981), 188.

3 *Ibidem*.

may hide an Improvised Explosive Device or roadside bomb. Insurgent groups from the IRA to the Taliban would often plant a second bomb, where the subsequent first aid or command post would be set up to deal with the casualties from the first, or simply in the direction that survivors would naturally move. In 2004, whenever my patrol stopped, our mantra was to “check fives and twenties”: a reminder to examine what is five metres from you and what is twenty, creating a hyper-awareness of space. Although accelerated by modernity, we should not imagine this new relation to space is a particularly modern phenomenon. The soldier’s necessary habituation to the irrationality of the battlespace is insisted on from around 1816 by von Clausewitz:

The young soldier cannot reach any of these different strata of danger without feeling that the light of reason does not move here in the same medium, that it is not refracted in the same manner as in speculative contemplation.⁴

The most illustrative examples come from MOUT, Military Operations on Urbanised Terrain, or street-fighting. In this complex space of roofs, sewers, windows and basements, threats and targets present themselves from below, above, and sides. The thought-leaders in this area are probably the Israeli Defence Forces, which have adopted remarkable intellectual tools (including reading post-structuralist philosophers such as Deleuze and Guattari) to analyse the urban battlespace. These methods have been studied in depth by forensic architect Eyal Weizman. Here, Weizman quotes an IDF officer explaining his approach:

We interpreted the alley as a place forbidden to walk through, and the door as a place forbidden to pass through, and the window as a place forbidden to look through, because a weapon awaits us in the alley, and a booby trap awaits us behind the doors. This is because the enemy interprets space in a traditional, classical manner, and I do not want to obey this interpretation and fall into his traps. Not only do I not want to fall into his traps, I want to surprise him! This is the essence of war. I need to win. I need to emerge from an unexpected place. And this is what we tried to do.⁵

4 Carl von Clausewitz, *On War*, trans. Michael Howard and Peter Paret (London: Everyman, 1993), 133.

5 Eyal Weizman, “Walking Through Walls,” in *The Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Nicholas Mirzoeff, 3rd ed. (Abingdon: Routledge, 2013), 576.

Although this conception of the battlespace confers a tactical advantage, it is traumatic for soldiers who must live, or try to stay alive, within it. The literature of war is often filled with this sense of disorientation and reversal, a nauseated sea-sickness where space becomes hostile or inimical, such as Wilfred Owen's 1918 poem "Spring Offensive":

And instantly the whole sky burned
 With fury against them; and soft sudden cups
 Opened in thousands for their blood; and the green slopes
 Chasmed and steepened sheer to infinite space.⁶

Moving between Spaces, and the Will to Fight

It should be no surprise that when individuals leave the battlespace and return to civilian space, they struggle to regain a sense of right relations. Indeed, combat-derived PTSD (Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder) can be understood as a latent suspicion about all spaces. This is a response that is wise and appropriate in the battlespace but catastrophic in civilian space. As such, peace-spaces must reorder and re-educate both inhabitants of battle-spaces and civilian-spaces. At this point we should move on the characteristics of the successful peace-space, regarding which I will draw on work by Scott Atran, specifically his analysis of what in war studies is termed "Will To Fight" – the sociological, psychological and spiritual phenomena that prompt men to go to war and keep on fighting in the direst situations. The components informing "Will To Fight" have a deep connection to the creation or transformation of the battlespace into its solution, the peace-space.

Atran uses⁷ the terms sacred values, spiritual formidability, and ontological significance. Firstly, an effective military force is motivated and sustained by shared sacred values, to which individuals hold fast (formidability), and which underpin their members' sense of ontological significance. Secondly, the experience of war bonds people, men especially, like nothing else can. Atran calls this "identity fusion," which we might also call the profound sense of being a "happy few," a "band of

6 Wilfred Owen, *The Collected Poems of Wilfred Owen*, eds. Cecil Day-Lewis and Edward Blunden (New York: New Directions Publishing Company, 1965), 52.

7 Á. Gómez, A. Vázquez, and S. Atran, "Transcultural Pathways to the Will to Fight," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, 120/24 (2023).

brothers,”⁸ no longer alone and miserable in our atomised, civilian individuality. Thirdly, trust. Combatants seek and discover a deep sense of trust in each other, where one is sure that one’s fellow battle-buddy will instinctively honour and fulfil a promise, and one’s word does not even need to be given.

At this point, many readers might agree that these are all profoundly life-affirming aspirations, and that rather than militaries attempting to instil them in order to win, would-be combatants may well seek the experience of war in order to discover them, supposing war to be the only place where they can be found. William James wrote as much:

War and adventure assuredly keep all who engage in them from treating themselves too tenderly. They demand such incredible efforts, depth beyond depth of exertion, both in degree and duration, that the whole scale of motivation alters [...] ranges of new energy are set free, and life seems cast upon a higher plane of power ... war is a school of strenuous life and heroism.⁹

And yet, continues James, war very soon reveals itself as a kind of grotesque exploitative parody of real spiritual values. Nonetheless, the aspirations remain, and a successful peace-space must therefore address these needs and strive to bestow sacred values and ontological significance on all those within it, as well as offering the possibility of identity fusion within an atmosphere of trust. By answering these aspirations, ex-combatants can leave the peace-space with those boxes ticked, as it were, with much less reason to go on fighting.

But the obstacles to creating such a peace-space are considerable, and most objections, perhaps surprisingly, come from the civilian space. The discourse of grieving civilians, politicians, and mass media is liable to inhibit or contest all of the above, at least with regard to the enemy, even to call the consideration of them treacherous. *We* have sacred values, identity fusion and trust; *they* do not. Actual combatants, meanwhile, would contest this. In battle, they often come to see the courage of their opponents and even to respect their spiritual formidability. Combatants also recognise their own complicity in killing and therefore are less likely to see the enemy as a monster, and more as a mirror. The literature combatants create usually reflects this - and as such, can itself become

8 William Shakespeare, *Henry V*, IV, iii, 60, in *The Riverside Shakespeare* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 1004.

9 William James, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (New York: Barnes and Noble Classics, 2004), 318–319.

an adjacent, fourth space. Within poetry or fiction, the enemy can be presented as having ontological significance. Examples are too numerous to mention but we can start with Homer (obviously), Thucydides, Aeschylus's *The Persians* (472 BC), Euripides's *The Trojan Women* (415 BC), Tacitus's speech of Calgacus, through antiquity to the medieval period, and even colonial literature – Rudyard Kipling's poems celebrating the Sudanese ("We 'eld our bloomin' own, the papers say, / But man for man the Fuzzy knocked us 'oller"¹⁰) and the young Winston Churchill's admiration of the Pathans. However, this paper is concerned with the first work of all of Western literature, the *Iliad*, from which peace-makers could extract the following ten points.

Ten Characteristics of the Homeric Peace-Space

Firstly, we should note that the desecration of Hector's body is itself a battlespace reversal. Instead of being cremated or buried, as is right, it is kept above ground and mutilated and abused. This displeases Zeus, who wishes for some restoration of right order. As such, we see the personified cosmos – God – as opposed to the battle-space, and endorsing the peace-space.

Secondly, as with movement towards all peace-spaces, Priam is faced with a vulnerable, terrifying, and humiliating journey, which must be undertaken humbly, even secretly – alone, without an entourage. The peace-space cannot be approached in pomp and circumstance. It should also be for those who have personally suffered and been grieved; not by ambassadors or delegates.

Thirdly, we see that the peace-space is opposed by Priam's civilian space, in the words of his womenfolk in particular. As his wife Hecuba says, on learning of his plans:

How can you think of going by yourself to the Achaean ships, into the presence of a man who has killed so many gallant sons of yours? You must have a heart of iron (σιδήρειόν νύ τοι ἦτορ).¹¹

She goes on to describe Achilles as a "a monster whose very heart I would devour if I could get my teeth into it (ἐγὼ δ' ἐλεεινότερός περ,

10 Rudyard Kipling, "Fuzzy-Wuzzy," in *The Complete Verse* (London: Kyle Cathie Limited, 1990), 323.

11 Homer, *The Iliad*, 442 / XXIV, ll. 205.

ἔτλην δ' οἱ οὐ πῶ τις ἐπιχθόνιος βροτὸς ἄλλος, ἀνδρὸς παιδοφόνιοι ποτὶ στόμα χεῖρ' ὀρέγεσθαι).¹² Sassoon and others have depicted these calls for retribution by bereaved and intransigent wives and mothers as a civilian response which inhibits and disrupts the potential for peace-spaces. Some grieving voices must be ignored or forcefully excluded.

Shortly after setting out, Priam encounters the god Hermes in disguise as Achilles's squire, who tells him how impressed they were with Hector's prowess: "I saw him hurl back the Argives on their ships and mow them down with his bronze, while we stood by and marvelled."¹³ In Priam's eyes, the Greeks have recognised Hector's martial skill, and in a strange way, the fourth aspect is presented. A form of identity fusion with the enemy is already under way.

Fifthly, as Priam enters the hut of Achilles, the peace-space, it becomes necessary to show some kind of greeting and even affection to the individual that by rights should be the most hateful in the world. The peace-space demands a rejection of one's ego, a putting aside all sense of justice in order to achieve something more important, on behalf of one's people and more generally. Priam does so in the most demonstrative, heart-breaking way imaginable:

He entered the hut, grasped his knees and kissed his hands, the terrible, man-killing hands (χεῖρας δεινὰς ἀνδροφόνους) that had slaughtered so many of his sons.¹⁴

Then he says:

I have brought myself to do a thing that no one else on earth has – I have raised to my lips the hand of the man who has killed my son.¹⁵

It should perhaps make us reflect on our day and age, when non-combatant civilian leaders cannot bring themselves to shake hands with another non-combatant civilian leader. But how does Achilles respond? As a warrior and a father himself, he knows what Priam's gesture means, and with immediate, shattering understanding, gently puts Priam aside to end the humiliation. The enormity of Priam's sacrifice breaks through Achilles' blinding rage and self-absorbed grief, and he is transformed and

12 *Ibidem*, 504–506.

13 *Ibidem*, 393–394.

14 Homer, *The Iliad*, 450 / XXIV, ll. 479–480.

15 *Ibidem*, 505–506.

humanised. Fascinatingly, he uses exactly the same phrase as Hecuba: "How could you dare to come by yourself to the Achaean ships, into the presence of a man who has killed so many of your gallant sons? You must have a heart of iron (σιδήρειόν νύ τοι ἦτορ)."¹⁶ But the tone here is surely admiring of Priam's spiritual formidability and is sympathetic. By now the two men are weeping together, and Achilles makes his great statement of the shared human condition:

We men are wretched things (ζῶειν ἀχνυμένους), and the gods, who have no cares themselves, have woven sorrow into the very pattern of our lives.¹⁷

Sixthly: here is identity fusion through shared grief, and mutual recognition of each other's ontological significance. Thus, Achilles agrees to Priam's terms pretty much straight away. And so on to the seventh aspect: Priam, the peace-proposer, in his self-abnegation, gets what he wants. He leads the narrative and commands the space.

Eighthly, we see an insistence on conventional hospitality, the shared meal. Achilles and Priam enjoy food and wine together. The symbolic resonance of sitting down to sup with your enemy needs no emphasis. This is followed by a scene of mutual re-recognition, as if they are seeing each other for the first time:

Their hunger and thirst satisfied, Dardanian Priam let his eyes dwell with admiration on Achilles and saw how big and beautiful he was, the very image of a god. And Achilles noted with equal admiration the noble looks and utterance of Dardanian Priam. It gave them pleasure to look each other over.¹⁸

Combatants affirm and achieve, within the peace-space, precisely those things that they sought on the battlespace – all of which turns out to be most meaningful when bestowed by one's enemy. Once again, the enemy appears as the one whose approval we most crave, the one that can best help us to know and find the truth about ourselves. Within the peace-space, the Greeks and Trojans find that they quite like each other. As Simone Weil writes of this scene:

¹⁶ *Ibidem*, 514.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*, 524–526.

¹⁸ Homer, *The Iliad*, 454 / XXIV, ll. 628–632.

But the purest triumph of love, the crowning grace of war, is the friendship that floods the hearts of mortal enemies. Before it a murdered son or a murdered friend no longer cries out for vengeance. Before it – even more miraculous – the distance between benefactor and suppliant, between victor and vanquished, shrinks to nothing.¹⁹

Ninthly: although the peace is temporary, the negotiation is successful. Trust is established. Achilles promises no Trojans will be attacked outside the walls of Troy while they gather wood for Hector's pyre, and the truce will last until the funeral rituals are complete. The solemnities mark a partial return to civilian space. Priam trusts Achilles and the Greeks, and solemn memorialisation is possible now that enemies have recognised each other's sacred values and ontological significance.

Tenthly. But even then, at the funeral, there are startling lines by Andromache, Hector's widow. Unlike Sassoon's mothers, she notes how many Greeks her husband killed, and how understandably they would be pleased at his death: "When he met Hector's hands, many an Achaean bit the dust of this wide world; [he] was by no means kindly in the heat of battle."²⁰ Andromache is not one of the sentimental, furious, peace-inhibiting women, but a worthy wife for a warrior, and thereby underscores her greatness. Both Greeks and Trojans know this truce is temporary, and the characters acknowledge the coming massacre and annihilation that will eventually occur. However, this does not diminish the potential of the peace space: if anything, it underscores it as a tragic missed opportunity.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I have briefly covered the inversions and distortions of the battlespace, the blindness and prejudice of propagandised civilian space, and the counter-intuitive demands of the peace-space. At the time of writing, peace negotiations in the Middle East seem to be showing signs of progress, with some mutual recognition of each other's sacred values and ontological significance. Meanwhile, perhaps we can hope for the creation of that fourth adjacent transformative space, "real"

19 Simone Weil, "The Triumph of Force," in *Politics*, trans. Mary McCarthy, November 1945, 329. Accessed June 10, 2026. [https://files.libcom.org/files/politics%20\(November%201945\).pdf](https://files.libcom.org/files/politics%20(November%201945).pdf)

20 Homer, *The Iliad*, 457 / XXIV, ll. 738–739.

combatant literature, which recognises an enemy may have very similar values and aspirations to our own. Such literature may prepare the civilian-space to accept and demand actual peace-spaces. Even if not, we should take our cue from noble Dardanian Priam, who, despite his status as a bereaved victim, proves it is the bravest who go to that peace-space first – or, as it was phrased by another: blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God.²¹

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