

Jonathan Shay. **Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming.** Foreword by Senators John McCain and Max Cleland. New York: Scribner, 2002. 329pp. \$25.00 cloth.

Reviewed by Dennis Patrick Slattery

I am always a little skittish about a book that promises to use literature to shed light on “real life” situations in a methodology that often goes no deeper than a matching this with that. Jonathan Shay’s new book, following 8 years after the publication of his **Achilles in Vietnam: Combat Trauma and the Undoing of Character** (1994), does a fair bit of the latter; but it redeems itself with his knowledge of the psychology of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD) among Vietnam veterans and his “unashamed moralist” stance towards the ethical use of power. He makes no bones about what he believes is done badly by the military establishment in producing men and women who do not know how to readjust to civilian life.

Having said the above, I am pleased with any new work that retrieves the wisdom of classical epics, or ancient literature in any form, in order to reveal the sustaining power and vision of the original poet’s understanding of the human soul. This is Shay’s second, and I believe, successful attempt to bridge what is often perceived to be a wide chasm between drama and trauma.

He divides his study into three parts: 1. “Unhealed Wounds,” which takes us through the litany of episodes Odysseus and his crew experience as

they attempt to reach home after ten years of combat at Troy; 2.

“Restoration” combines Homer and the works of Aristotle with personal stories of vets, damaged, isolated and misunderstood, returning home to a hostile temper. This section contains the most poignant part of the study, from my perspective: a description of visits to the Vietnam Wall in D.C.; 3.

“Prevention” launches into how the deep and lasting psychological and moral injury to service men and women could be lessened if the metaphor that shapes military doctrine and the treatment of those in the services would change from one of a mechanism with interchangeable parts, to one more organic and holistic. Shay points out repeatedly that more money is not the issue; rather, it is the shallow understanding of what trauma is and does to people who serve in times of conflict; these same people often remain conflicted on many levels.

Finally, the study contains three important Appendices: 1. a summary of the 24 books of Homer’s **Odyssey** for those not familiar with the story; 2. Information Resources for Vets and Their Families; 3. Some Proposals. Study these last closely. They gather up, in a couple of pages, where Shay’s entire study has been headed. Lastly, his bibliography is superb, combining readings in psychology, ancient philosophy, literary criticism on the classics, and personal diaries and accounts by patients he has worked with.

As I suggested above, the weakest part of the book is the matching of incidents in the epic with actual incidents, situations and descriptions of vets in Vietnam and then after they return. At the same time, Shay's own observation should be noted when he responds to those who may accuse him of portraying a stereotype of the crazed Vietnam vet coming home ready to continue in war mode: "*Absolutely nothing* I have to say here is distinctive to the Vietnam War. War itself does this. War itself creates situations that can wreck the mind" (31). His thesis is then two-pronged: to improve the conditions for service personnel **in** any war, and to improve them psychologically and emotionally when they **return** home so they do not do irreparable harm to themselves and others. What saves this section for me is that the Homeric descriptions evoke in Shay a series of analogies, of likenesses and correspondences he witnesses daily in the Veterans Improvement Program (VIP) he manages.

Shay's strength rests in his ability to allow the traumatic situations of Odysseus and his men to resonate across millennia. It is in the resonance, not the matching, that this section sheds light on the conditions of trauma that do not age. The weakness can also multiply by taking incidents out of their organic context.

Asking if Odysseus may have had PTSD as defined by the APA or *DSM IV* pulls Shay and us off track, as Odysseus and his men were. But revealing that the Greek word for Ulysses—“Oulixes”—is etymologically connected to the word for scar—“oule”—lets us see into Odysseus’ anger, wounding and behavior at Troy and after.

Parts 2 and 3, “Restoration” and “Prevention,” are strongest in that they allow the author to expose the flaws he sees endemic to current military methodology. From exploring Homer’s epic, Shay suggests that what is missing in today’s paradigm of combat is the build up of TRUST, which can be improved by changing the metaphor that the military uses in keeping troops in check. Social cohesion, keeping units together instead of rotating out single members that often breaks down cohesion and trust, insisting on “competence as an ethical imperative” (223), and demanding a high and sustained ethic in the military leadership will reduce the trauma in combat and the terrors of returning home.

He ends his study by poignantly calling for a national ritual of purification for all those who fought; this ritual should originate and be carried out not by the government but by churches, community leaders, so that a national cleansing is overt, conscious and communally shared.

Of course, his last observation is one with which many could agree, namely: “ending the social practice of war is the struggle of this century”(251). When I teach Homer’s **Odyssey** to my graduate students this year, Shay’s book will appear prominently on the reading list.