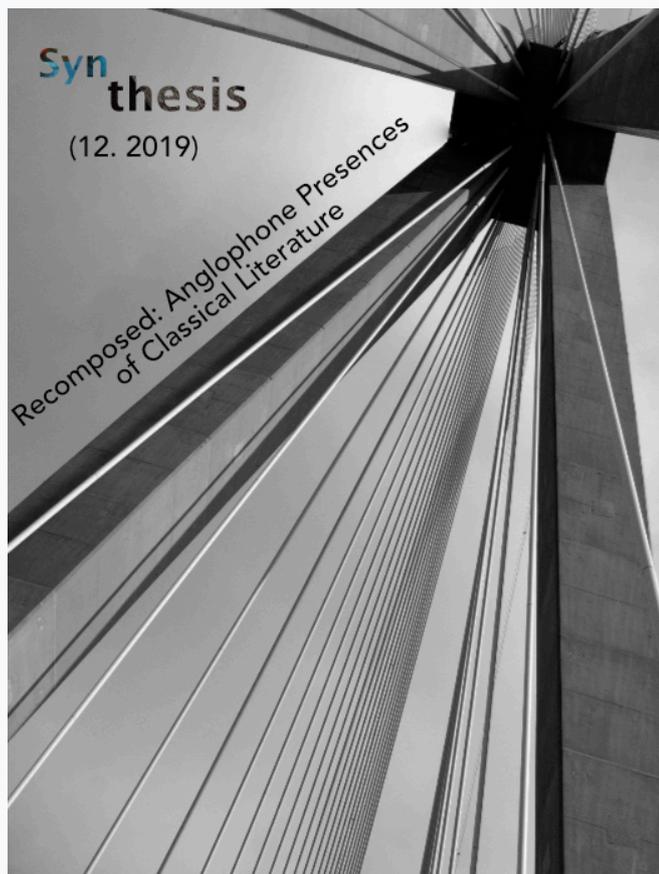


Synthesis: an Anglophone Journal of Comparative Literary Studies

No 12 (2019)

Recomposed: Anglophone Presences of Classical Literature



On Rereading Homer's Iliad in the Twenty-first Century

Susan Bassnett

doi: [10.12681/syn.25259](https://doi.org/10.12681/syn.25259)

Copyright © 2020, Susan Bassnett



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

On Rereading Homer's *Iliad* in the Twenty-first Century

Susan Bassnett

I have been rereading the *Iliad*. It is a work I have read many times and in many different translations, for since I do not know Ancient Greek I am reliant on translations. I studied Latin for nine years, but Ancient Greek for only one year, and I have regretted that gap in my knowledge all my life. Still, reading a work in translation makes one aware of the different pathways that individual translators follow as they endeavour to do what Ezra Pound saw as an impossibility. In his *ABC of Reading* he declared that there were “no satisfactory English translations” (Pound 58) of Ancient Greek, because he had never read even half a page of Homer without finding what he called melodic invention. Rendering that melodic invention in another language is therefore impossible, but Pound says that a reader without Ancient Greek can at least have access to the storyline of the *Iliad*, the epic poem that has had such a huge impact on Western literature and culture. Moreover, there are many translations that do have powerful melodic invention, albeit not the same as Homer's. Who can deny that Christopher Logue's *War Music*, for example, has a rhythm and a melody all of its own?

Translations, editions and commentaries abound in all European languages and interest in Homer shows no signs of waning, despite the decline of Ancient Greek in schools. Simon Pulleyn, in the Introduction to his translation and commentary of Book I of the *Iliad* suggests that the perennial appeal of the poem is “its ability to focus so sharply on what it is to be human” (1). That Homer should continue to be such a vital source of inspiration for so many contemporary poets shows the extent to which writing from the ancient world continues to exercise its power. Many contemporary writers turn to Homer for inspiration, drawing his work into their own in innovative and exciting ways. As the Northern Irish poet Michael Longley puts it, Homer enabled him to write belated lamentations for his parents, and also empowered him to comment on the civil strife in his homeland during the 1970s: in a beautiful essay entitled “Lapsed Classicist,” Longley's opening statement declares bluntly “I have been Homer-haunted for fifty years,” (97) before moving on to recount how he came to write “Ceasefire,” the sonnet that symbolises the beginning of the Northern Irish Peace Process. Published in 1994, on the day after the declaration of a ceasefire by the IRA, Longley explains how he had been reading Book 24 of the *Iliad*, where old king Priam goes to Achilles' tent to ask for the body of his dead son, Hector:

Power shifts from the mighty general to the old king who reminds Achilles of his own father, and awakens in him suppressed emotions of tenderness. Psychologically it feels pretty modern. I wanted to compress this scene's two hundred lines into a short lyric...I got started by tinkering with the sequence of events. Priam kisses Achilles' hand at the beginning of their encounter. I put this at the end of my poem and inadvertently created a rhyming couplet. Three quatrains followed. (Longley 2009: 104)

Spoken by Priam, the couplet brings to the fore the horror and the pity of war:

I get down on my knees and do what must be done
And kiss Achilles' hand, the killer of my son. (Longley 1994, 8)

My first encounter with the *Iliad* was at the age of eleven, at school in Rome. Our set text in Italian literature lessons in the *scuola media* was *I Poemi di Omero*, a collection of extracts from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, edited by Cesare Bione and Giovanni Randone and first published just after the war, in 1947. I still have my copy, with the illustrations by Luigi Epifanio that echo the figures on ancient vases. There is a brief essay by Epifanio explaining his choices, and pointing out that illustrations are just as much a commentary on a text as are notes. That opinion is borne out by the fact that I can remember those illustrations more clearly than I can the actual words. My edition has notes on every page, and a summary of those sections of each book that the editors have not provided. When I leaf through the battered old paperback, I can see from marks in the margin where I must have been asked to memorise a section of the poem and comment on it in class. The spread of Discord in Book 11 is one such passage, as is the description of Achilles' new shield in Book 18, the depiction of the river Scamander overflowing in Book 21, the exchange between the dying Hector and Achilles in Book 22.

What impressed me when I went back to that old school edition was the skill with which the extracts had been assembled and edited by Bione and Randone so as to make the texts accessible to eleven-year olds. I looked the editors up, and discovered that there is a street in Palermo named after Cesare Bione, an important classical scholar who also produced a Latin dictionary for use in schools. But I then discovered that in the edition which they put together they used great Italian classic translations by Vincenzo Monti and Ippolito Pindemonte. Monti's version of the *Iliad* appeared in 1810, Pindemonte's *Odyssey* in 1822. We pupils were being prepared for the next stage of our education, the *liceo classico* by reading Romantic translations of Homer. No wonder we often found the language difficult and the notes essential. But thanks to the illustrations and the notes certain images have stayed with me for over 50 years –Thetis comforting Achilles in Book 1, Hector's farewell to Andromache in Book 6, Hera beautifying herself in Book 14 so as to deceive Zeus, Priam going to Achilles' tent in Book 24, and perhaps more surprisingly, the battle between the eagle and the snake in Book 12.

However, the edition of the *Iliad* that I have been rereading this time is not my old school version, nor any of the many versions in prose and in verse that sit on

the bookshelves. I went back to the translation by Richmond Lattimore, published in 1951. This is the version I have used for many years now, the edition that my son took with him to university when he was studying Classical Civilisation, because it is a copy of an edition that has a very special significance, more even than my childhood Bione and Randone. It was sent to me years ago by a bookseller I had met once in Cambridge, and it arrived with a note explaining that he was sending the book to me as a gift, though he knew that he could probably sell it for a lot of money. For inside the book, on the first page is the name of the person to whom the book had belonged, someone who has acquired international fame and status since her untimely death in 1963: Sylvia Plath. There in the dark navy blue ink that we all used to use in our fountain pens she has written "Syl Plath-1954" in bold lettering. The bookseller's note explained that he felt it would be 'ghoulish' to profit from this copy and since I had written a book about Plath which he had enjoyed, he thought he would send me the book 'for safe keeping.' I thanked him and have, indeed, kept it safe.

Rereading is an immensely important activity, and one that is under-emphasised in literary studies. Children learn to read through rereading favourite books, and those of us who teach literature know that we need to keep rereading texts that we think we know well every time we meet students in a seminar, because there will always be something we have forgotten or some way of looking anew at a familiar work. Each time we reread a text, we carry forward traces of our previous readings, but we also approach that text through difference, because we are reading in another moment in time, perhaps in another language and certainly at another point in our personal lives. My *Iliads* are not Ancient Greek (alas!) they are Italian and English, and when I reread my Lattimore edition I pause, not for the first time, when I come to passages marked carefully by its previous owner, in that same navy blue ink. The first underlining comes in Book 2, lines 67-68:

but the leader of all was Diomedes of the great war cry.
Following along with these were eighty black ships.

Another passage concerning Diomedes is underlined later in the poem. At the beginning of Book 6 another six lines are marked, beginning with "Diomedes of the great war cry cut down Axylos." But other references to Diomedes, who plays an important role in the poem before Achilles returns to the fighting are not marked. In Book 11, lines 449-455, the brutal boasting of Odysseus who has just killed Sokos by stabbing him in the back with a spear is highlighted, as is the boasting of Achilles after he kills Iphition, son of Otrynteus in Book 20, lines 387-393. In Book 12, two lines are underlined:

Everywhere the battlements and the bastions were awash
with men's blood shed from both sides, Achaian and Trojan (lines 430-431)

Earlier in the poem, in Book 5, lines 703-708 are marked, beginning with the terrible question: "Who then was the first and who the last that they slaughtered?"

It is impossible not to be moved by these annotations, just as it impossible not to be moved by the poem as a whole. The story recounted by Homer is indeed a terrible one, and this time, as I reread a work I thought I knew well, I found myself compelled to dwell on the detailed, gruesome descriptions of the multiple killings, the accounts of spears piercing eyes, swords smashing teeth and bones, brains spilling onto the ground, men clutching their entrails as they fall. This is war unembellished, and the men who kill mock their defeated enemies, strip them of their armour and their dignity, try whenever they can to throw their dead bodies to be eaten by dogs. In previous readings I had tended to skip over these violent descriptive passages and to focus more on the emotional parts of the poem, but this time, perhaps because I live in an age when there seems to be endless, brutal war on the television news every night, the sheer callousness of Bronze Age warfare struck me as unbearably contemporary. We may have electricity, the internet and rockets that can land men on the moon, but human beings are as cruel and callous in war as Homer described them in the eighth century BC.

In previous readings, ever since I was eleven years old, I have been a supporter of the Trojans. Homer shows us their domestic lives, and we, the readers, grieve to know that the city is doomed and that even those gods who love them are going to have to give in and accept the destruction of Troy in the end. The Bione and Randone edition aids this kind of reading, focusing on the one-to-one encounters and providing summary accounts of the fighting and killing. Also, in the spirit of the age of Romanticism, some of the most memorable passages in Monti's translation are laments, notably the laments after the death of Hector. In this way, we are drawn to the Trojans rather than to the Greeks, despite their sufferings and despite the towering figure of Achilles.

In Book 24 the gods argue about Hector's body. For twelve days Achilles has dragged the dead Trojan's body behind his chariot, but Apollo intervenes to restore the body to a state in which Hector can be buried and appeals to his fellow gods to allow him to have a proper burial. In my edition of the Lattimore translation, Plath has highlighted lines 50-52:

But this man, now he has torn the heart of life from great Hektor,
ties him to his horses and drags him around his beloved companion's
tomb; and nothing is gained thereof for his good, or his honour.

Nothing indeed is gained, and by now even Achilles appears to accept that he will not live much longer than the man he has killed. The gods concede to Apollo's request, and so Priam sets off to reclaim his son's body from Achilles. The lines marked in navy blue ink later in Book 24 are the same lines that caught the imagination of Michael Longley:

Tall Priam

Came in unseen by the other men and stood close beside him
and caught the knees of Achilles in his arms, and kissed the hands
that were dangerous and man slaughtering and had killed so many
of his sons. (lines 475-480)

And a few lines further on:

I put my lips to the hand of the man who has killed my children. (line 506)

Rereading the *Iliad* which another reader has annotated through underlining, I find myself pausing on those particular passages that have been highlighted. Was Plath intrigued by the character of Diomedes, the war hero who became King of Argos and who, along with Ajax is one of the greatest warriors among the Greeks? Unlike Achilles, Diomedes survives and through the poem we see him not only as a skillful fighter but also as a tactician and as someone who continually rallies the Greeks at times of indecision. Possibly, but then most of the scenes featuring Diomedes are not marked at all. Nor are the powerful figurative images which run through the poem, apart from one in Book 13, depicting the death of the Trojan Imbrios, killed by Teukros:

Now the son of Telamon with the long spear stabbed him under
the ear, and wrenched the spear out again, and he dropped like an ash tree
which, on the crest of a mountain glittering far about, cut down
with the bronze axe scatters on the ground its delicate leafage;
so he dropped (lines 177-181).

When one reads a text with someone else's annotations, those annotations enter into the new reading. They cannot be ignored because there are the bold underlinings which force the new reader to pause. I pause at all Plath's underlinings, sometimes because she highlights something I myself would underline, but at other times because I cannot see why that particular passage should have been singled out in such a way, which is, of course, absurd on my part since it is impossible to guess at the intentions and emotions of any other reader. Some images, some scenes strike different readers in different ways. In Book 12 Plath underlined the image of the battlements awash with the blood of dead men from both sides, whereas for me the most striking image in Book 12 is that of the eagle carrying a blood-coloured snake which "had not forgotten its Warcraft," and which bites the eagle forcing it to drop it before it flies back, wounded to its eyrie. Polydamus interprets this as a sign from Zeus that the Trojans should not try to destroy the Greek ships as they would lose too many men, and despite Hector's rebuttal of this interpretation, they do not manage to achieve their aim because the gods intervene.

When I first read the *Iliad*, over fifty years ago, I do not remember thinking much about the role played by the gods in the Trojan wars. I remember the classroom clearly, and the girl who shared a desk with me (we all wore black cotton pinafores with white collars and sat in twos at desks with built-in inkwells). In the back of my book is a list in very tiny handwriting of pop stars of the period Elvis Presley, Pat Boone, Connie Francis, Sarah Vaughan —which shows that concentration must have lapsed. What I took from the classes was a story about

heroes from an ancient world, their jealousy and anger, their grief and passion and humanity. Over time, as I have reread the *Iliad* I have been struck by the behaviour of the gods, by their petty cruelty and bias. The gods intervene in the battles, despite being ordered not to do so, they cause mayhem and Zeus, their overlord, cannot fully control them. The behaviour of the gods leads on to questions that transcend religious faiths, mainly whether divinities exist at all and, if they do, why the world remains such a brutal and unjust place. Shakespeare's famous line in *King Lear*, Act I, scene 2 "as flies to wanton boys, so are we to the gods /They kill us for their sport" might equally have been composed by Homer.

Rereading the *Iliad* today I am struck by the amount of space given to descriptions of killing and to the importance of naming both the killers and the dead. I realise that this was always there, it is just that in previous readings I tended to focus more on the individual characters and their personal relationships rather than on the descriptive passages, yet these are essential for an understanding of the world in which those characters moved. The Greek and Trojan world was one where honour and shame were the fundamental pillars of their societies, where ritual behaviour was fundamental to the codes upon which society was based. Agamemnon's crime is to shame Achilles by taking Briseis away from him publicly, and it is shame that drives Achilles back into the killing fields, only this time he is the author of his own shame, having given Patroklos his armour and so brought about his beloved friend's death.

In 2015 Faber brought out an edition of Christopher Logue's *War Music*, subtitled *An Account of Homer's Iliad*. Logue, who died in 2011 had been working on his version for half a century, had not completed his magnum opus; but after his death, his friend the poet Christopher Reid oversaw the publication of all the completed sections, together with some of the manuscript fragments that would have domed part of books 10-24. In his editor's preface, Reid points out that Logue never sought to make a translation of Homer's epic, but wanted simply to find a way "to understand the nature of war and to find narrative and musical expression for it" (Reid in Logue, ix). This he does magnificently in powerful contemporary English, using Homer as his starting point and riffing on the *Iliad* like an expert musician.

I find *War Music* an amazing book, enormously powerful and full of memorable lines. Logue did not complete his version after Book 19, but the last lines of his version of that book, entitled "Pax" serve as an image of the poem's message about the tragedy and pity of war. At the end of Book 19 Hera enables Achilles' horse Xanthos to speak, and the horse prophesies Achilles' death. In Lattimore's version the last lines are as follows:

but deeply disturbed, Achilleus of the swift feet answered him:
'Xanthos, why do you prophecy my death? This is not for you.
I myself know well it is destined for me to die here
far from my beloved father and mother. But for all that
I will not stop until the Trojans have had enough of my fighting.'
He spoke, and shouting held on in the foremost his single-foot horses. (lines 419-424)

Here is Achilles defiant, the epic hero still in control of his chariot, still bent on destroying the Trojans. But Logue's version gives us a very different image: his Achilles has little to say and just spurs on his horses, but there, in the sand, is a solitary spear, an emblem of loss and the futility of war:

And Achilles, shaken, says:
'I know I will not make old bones'.
And laid his scourge against their racing flanks.
Someone has left a spear stuck in the sand. (Logue, 293)

To my personal hoard of images from the *Iliad*, that started over fifty years ago I now add that spear, stuck forever in the sand, a wordless symbol of everything great Homer was seeking to express.

Works Cited

- Bione, Cesare and Giovanni Randone, eds. *I poemi di Omero*. Palermo: Palumbo, 1954.
- Lattimore, Richmond, trans. *The Iliad of Homer*. Chicago: U of Chicago P, 1951.
- Longley, Michael. "Lapsed Classicist," in *Living Classics: Greece and Rome in Contemporary Poetry in English*. Ed. Stephen Harrison. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2009: 97-116.
- . "Ceasefire." *The Irish Times* (Weekend supplement), 3 September 1994. 8.
- Logue, Christopher. *War Music: An Account of Homer's Iliad*. Ed. Christopher Reid. London: Faber and Faber, 2015.
- Pound, Ezra. *ABC of Reading*. London: Faber and Faber, 1951.
- Pulleyn, Simon. *Homer Iliad I. Edited with an Introduction, Translation, and Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000.