

# Clash of Cultures

## *A Psychodynamic Analysis of Homer and the Iliad*

Vincenzo Sanguineti

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Timeo Danaos et dona ferentis (Virgil, Aeneidos II, l. 49)

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# Foreword

Donatella Marazziti

After more than two millennia, the *Iliad* continues to be one of the most intriguing poems eliciting debates, discussions and controversies world-wide. With no doubt, we should reflect on what our Western culture might be without it (and without the subsequent *Odyssey*). My feeling is that I would feel orphaned, orphaned of a part of me, not only of my cultural domain, but mostly of my feelings and passions.

Therefore, the crucial question is: why does *Iliad* involve us so much? Why does it scramble us so in depth? Why do we participate in and share the pains, sorrows or joys of its heroes and of more or less visible protagonists?

Throughout the centuries, writers, poets, teachers, philosophers, and sociologists tried to address these and other important questions even regarding the origin and the “hand” who wrote the poem, while offering different explanations and interpretations, that are somehow partial or subjective.

In his book, *Clash of Cultures*, Dr. Vincenzo Sanguineti, with his peculiar background and sensitivity, coupled with, last but not least, classical culture (too often neglected nowadays), first assumes that Homer was the writer of the *Iliad*. As a result, he tried to explore his conscious, subconscious, rational and emotional drives, as well his context and time.

According to Dr. Sanguineti, Homer is a son of his time whose family had to migrate in order to escape from war and destructions. I fully agree with this opinion, as in the *Iliad* it is evident Homer’s longing for a previous way of life: according to me, this is the strongest feeling of the *Iliad*, even stronger than in the *Odyssey*. That’s why, while in the *Odyssey*, the hero fights to go back home and, at the end, he is able to accomplish his scope and desire, the *Iliad* is permeated by the sad awareness that a civilization, that of Homer’s family and where probably he had grown up, is going to an end and will never resurrect, while being destroyed by a new, more aggressive and powerful culture imposing new values and way of life. It is interesting to underline that the word “nostalgia” derives from the two Greek words “νόστος, nostos = return” and “ἄλγος, algos = pain,” so that it literally means “pain of the return.” And Homer perfectly knows there is no possibility of any return to his previous life and world.

This may also explain why his warm attitude and emotional participations is directed towards the defeated Trojans.

I must confess that, when I was a student at the high school and studied the *Iliad* in ancient Greek, the most sticky, emotional and vivid image I had (and still have) in my mind, was the last parting of Hector from Andromache and their little Astyanax, as I “felt” Hector’s awareness of his next death and the sunset of an entire civilization.

With no doubt, the interpretation that Dr. Sanguineti puts forward for the *Iliad*, is not only original, but also comprehensive and modern, as he is the first to underline the relationships between emotions, feelings and cognitions of the writer, Homer, and his historical, contextual background and Zeitgeist.

If it is true that the *Iliad*’s characters derive from inner archetypes, according to Jung’s theory (that Dr. Sanguineti knows well, while being a psychiatrist, a neuroscientist and a psychoanalytically oriented therapist), this probably explains why this poem continues to be so attractive, powerful and so close to us, as they provoke vibrations that are embedded in our human nature and our brains share with all members of our species. However, it is also true that the *Iliad* is a product resulting from the melting of Homer’s sensitivity and subjectivity with his time and cultural values.

I must add that the title of Sanguineti’s book *Clash of Cultures* is also extremely current, so that it unavoidably stimulates me to reflect on the evidence that nowadays the separation and conflicts between Western and Eastern cultures do persist, and may sometimes lead to aggressive deeds, such as terrorism acts. I wonder why after millennia and ferocious wars, it seems so difficult to reach an integration respectful of cultural differences and trying to alleviate the “nostalgia” of those who are forced to migrate from their countries to other distant ones.

For this reason, I consider it an honor and a privilege to introduce *Clash of Cultures* written by my friend and distinguished colleague Dr. Vincenzo Sanguineti, as the impact of his book will be not limited to the interpretation of the *Iliad*, but will promote reflections on unresolved intercultural clashes still present nowadays.

—Dr. Donatella Marazziti

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Map of the Aegean Sea. Created by Kate Otte.

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# Introduction

Between 900 and 700 BC a blind—or so one story goes<sup>1</sup>—Greek bard named Homer collected and/or composed, possibly in a pre-literate, oral form, an epic called the *Iliad*, which eventually was organized in 24 books by the Alexandria Head Librarian Zenodotus of Ephesus, and which was allegedly declaimed at various Courts in the ancient Greek world. A brief synopsis of the 24 books, their content and main characters, is presented in Appendix B.

A current popular assessment of the *Iliad* would probably describe it as an ancient Greek poem, written by a blind Greek poet, about a war in a faraway city called Troy, to rescue the fabulous Helen, “the face (read breasts<sup>2</sup>) who launched a thousand ships”; the great, invulnerable Achilles was its greatest hero; after a quarrel with the Chief Commander Agamemnon, he eventually killed the Trojan prince Hector, and dragged his body attached to his chariot, enraged by the fact that Hector had killed his friend-cousin-lover Patroclus (the assessment may also mention the wooden horse!).

In fact, for over two millennia the *Iliad* has been seen as a powerful description of the tragedies of war, and as a major acclaim to the military supremacy of Greece upon Asia, expressed through the aristeias of several great Greek heroes, as those of Diomedes, Agamemnon, Patroclus, and the prototypical one of Achilles starting in Book XX. The epic was a foreword to the feats against the Persians that, a few centuries later, stunned even the very Greeks, fatally injured Persia’s might and pride, and served as a prelude for the rise and the extraordinary Eastern campaign of Alexander the Great.

Sometime after the *Iliad*—or so the story carries on—Homer put together a second epic, the *Odyssey*: the saga of Odysseus’ return home and his aristeia (he had not received one in the *Iliad*), interspersed with various adventures by sea, recollections of the war, and the fate of its major players.

The details of the ancient oral performance of both epics, and their conversions to the written form, inspire continual debate among scholars.

Whoever composed the *Odyssey* was moved by the figure of Odysseus, whom the author used as the central character to a series of tales. Apart from the first four books (the Telemachy) describing Telemachus’ journey to find his father, one encounters the Apologoi, or the tale that Odysseus told the Phaeacians about his peregrinations since he left the

island of Calypso. It incorporates the Cyclopeia—the adventure against Polyphemus and the wrath of Poseidon—and the Nekuia, or his journey to Hades to find the blind seer Tiresias. The epic culminates with the Mnesterophonia, Odysseus' powerful aristeia and slaying of the suitors of his wife, Penelope. Possibly, these tales were integrated during the Classical period around 300 BC into the single epic, and, by the same Zenodotus, significantly organized also in 24 books, as the *Iliad* was.

The reading of the two works has always generated in me different types of feelings, with the *Odyssey* being much more entertaining and full of captivating adventures, some highly fantastic and filled with magical events and characters,<sup>3</sup> but lacking the depth of tragedy that permeates the *Iliad* where so much is at stake, from the fate of myriads of men to that of entire civilizations. The reader of the *Odyssey* reviews those tragedies, through Odysseus' narrative, against the vivid background of the compelling journey, but from a distance, so to speak. Overall, the *Iliad* appears to be a more complicated epic poem than the *Odyssey*, and this impression has supported the opinion of several scholars that the two works are the products of different authors, although both closely related to the Epic Cycle.

I join the majority of the Homeric scholars in disagreeing; Homer's innate skills as storyteller and in capturing individual personalities diffuse both works. They differ in that the *Iliad* is a tragedy carrying the gravitas of collective themes that involve both human and suprahuman systems, while the *Odyssey* is an adventure-laden allegory of a personal journey to self-actualization, which probably capitalized on the success of the first epic. The difference between the two works may also be reflected in the fact that among the vast body of manuscripts about Homer that have accumulated during the past two millennia, the *Iliad* is constantly favored over the *Odyssey* by 2:1 or better.<sup>4</sup>

The group of works known as the Epic Cycle consisted of several epic poems dealing with material from the Mycenaean Bronze Age culture and related to the story of the Trojan War. Of the several works—the Cypria, the Aethiopis, the Little Iliad, the Iliupersis, the Nostoi, and the Telegony—only fragments and brief summaries have survived. In his Chrestomathia the author, Proclus, mentions that at least another work preceded the Cypria, suggesting a very rich landscape of sagas and compositions coloring that historical era, among which Homer stands as the sole survivor.

The title of my book indicates that it will have a different approach to the *Iliad* than most previous scholarly ones. It will describe the psychodynamic framework of Homer and of his creation. The rationale for this study will gradually emerge with the progression of the analysis. As an introduction, it will suffice to present in general terms the procedure and its main objectives and characteristics. In the words of Dr. Cabaniss, from the Department of Psychiatry at Columbia University, "a psychodynamic

formulation is a hypothesis about the way a person's unconscious thoughts and feelings"<sup>5</sup> may be participating in the person's conscious mental activities. Furthermore, always in the words of Dr. Cabaniss, "using a psychodynamic technique is . . . also about understanding how and why those unconscious thoughts and feelings developed" along the evolving journey of that mind, from early, infantile, primarily affect-laden experiences to their more mature elaborations of adulthood.

The importance of a psychodynamic, rather than a static, understanding of those fifty-one Iliadic summer days, and of the author of the saga will become clear as my research will explore at progressively greater psychological depths the complex unconscious and subconscious, cognitive and affective vicissitudes of Homer and of the Trojan tragedy; and the approach will add a valuable complementary dimension to Homer and the *Iliad*.

A multidimensional methodology, that would include also the dimension of time, is an important requirement in order to achieve a more comprehensive grasp of the most important extant work of literary art that came to us from such an ancient past.

Usually the *Iliad* is approached as a story of what happened, and Homer, the bard who composed that particular story, has been conceptualized by subsequent scholars on the basis and as a reflection of the story's overt content. A psychodynamic formulation, however, offers a hypothesis of why things happened and why a mind came to imagine them the way it did; the focus shifts from the *Iliad* and its content to Homer and his mental landscape. In the words of Dr. Cabaniss, "a psychodynamic formulation is more than a story; it is a narrative that tries to explain how and why people think."<sup>6</sup> It is an attempt to get an idea of what shaped the way to a specific outcome.

Mine is a psychodynamic analysis of the final collection of words that are attributed to Homer, as they were preserved by the Alexandrine librarians—among many others—over two millennia ago, along their journey from oral conception to textual codification.

Its scope is to revisit the main narratives that form the scaffoldings of the *Iliad* and to search for cognitive and affective elements in the same narratives that would offer plausible pointers to their overt and covert dynamic processes, and explain "how and why people think": what inspired and offered meanings to the crucial events and characters of the epic.

The search for meaningful material that may shed light on hidden, suppressed or truly unconscious information does necessarily require a very detailed, often repetitious, analysis of potential indicators carrying some sort of cathecting coloring that alerts the analyst's attention. This will represent most of the present work: initially collecting the different sets of available data, then looking for a narrative that would connect

them, and eventually formulating a psychodynamic interpretation out of each narrative.

Due to the fact that Homer and the *Iliad* operate at two different but heavily intertwined levels, the human and the divine, the analysis of their psychic organization relies loosely on the structural and topographical Freudian models as well as on the archetypal model of Jung.

Clearly, this is not a scholastic study of Homer and his works, their origins, stylistic values, ownerships, chronologies, and so on. I would not be qualified for such a task, nor able to add anything of significance to the vast body of diverse studies that have been conducted on this figure and his putative works.

The same caveat applies to the material I used. Each narrative required information on its longitudinal development through time, in order to allow for a better understanding of its dynamics. My choice of original sources reflects the limits of my search, as well as my concern to avoid as much as possible any “countertransference” revisionism from subsequent sociocultural basins, possibly affectively too remote from the original events, and even dystonic to their significance. While ancient reports carry already their own revisionism—as later memories of past events in the therapeutic encounter often do—their relative proximity and affective linkage to the source may provide better reliability about the dynamics of specific events than the one offered by the reconstructions from minds affectively distant, disconnected from the Homeric Zeitgeist.

## NOTES

1. ...whenever any one of men on the earth, a stranger who has seen and suffered much, comes here and asks of you: “whom think ye, girls, is the sweetest singer that comes here, and in whom do you most delight?” Then answer, each and all, with one voice: “He is a blind man, and dwells in rocky Chios: his lays are evermore supreme.” Homeric Hymn to Delian Apollo, vv 165 ff. (Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric*).

2. Little *Iliad*, 13 (Hesiod, LCL, # 57 p. 519).

3. The magical dimension is practically absent from the *Iliad*, either as actual occurrences or as recollections of magical events. There are some divine interventions that fall within the traditional parameters of what the Gods can do; but nowhere could one find a character in the sustained role of a sorceress and enchantress as Circe, who is a central figure from book X to book XII of the *Odyssey*! Or the magical ships of the Phaeacians (*Odyssey*, Book VIII, ll. 555 ff.), which are a cross between ancient sorcery and super modern high-level, science fictional A.I., in that “the ships themselves understand the thoughts and minds of men, and know the cities...” The sentient computer HAL in the movie “2001: A Space Odyssey” was their modern equivalent!

4. *A New Companion to Homer*, pp. 60-61.

5. *Psychodynamic Formulation*, p. 4.

6. *Ibid.*, p. 6.