

Review of *Clash of Cultures: A Psychodynamic Analysis of Homer and the Iliad* by Vincenzo Sanguineti, MD

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Reviewed by Ashok Bedi, MD

Sanguineti renders a unique, creative exploration of Homer's *Iliad* from a composite lens of the Trojan tragedy and of Homer's orphanhood. He turns the story upside down, proposing that the epic was Homer's Trojan horse offering to the narcissistic, colonizing Greek invaders of the prosperous Trojan kingdom and its neighbors.

What we get is a psychodynamic analysis of Homer's mind as well as of his major epic. One may undertake the analysis of an author or of their creation; each has their unconscious dimension worthy of a separate analysis. However, Sanguineti has embarked on an ambitious task of examining the alchemy of the dance between the unconscious of Homer and the unconscious dimension of the zeitgeist of the Greek and Trojan cultures in the Homeric era. This resonates with C.G. Jung's analysis of Goethe's *Faust* in which Jung differentiates between the personal psychology of Goethe articulated in Part I and the eruption of the visionary dimension of the classic in Part II – a manifestation of the zeitgeist of our times embodied in the Faustian bargain.¹

Sanguineti lays out an analysis of the spirit of the depths at work below the spirit of the times² in Homer's *Iliad*. While on the surface the *Iliad* is an epic about a great war between two cultures, at its core it is about the unconscious of Homer attempting to heal the post traumatic impact of war on his personal psyche and on the collective psyche of the colonized Trojans and their allies. The epic is an account of the serial x-rays of this healing process from trauma, told through several protagonists including Achilles and Hector. It proposes a paradigm to heal from the collective trauma of the war and from the individual trauma of its heroes.

¹ (Jung, 1966b), pages 73-90. Here Jung differentiates between the psychological aspect of the creation as representing the unconscious of the poet versus the visionary aspects of the poetry that channels the collective unconscious of the culture and seizes the poet as its vehicle to manifest its spirit. The poet is seized by the creative instinct and writes despite himself possessed by the autonomous creative complex.

² (Jung & Shamdasani, 2009), page 229. Jung's *Odyssey* begins with balancing engagement with the duality between the contemporary and the timeless dimensions of the human condition. In *The Red Book*, he attends to this split: "I have learned that in addition to the spirit of this time there is still another spirit at work, namely that the depths of everything contemporary."

The dual context of human choices is also emphasized. Once conscious deliberation has reached its limits, the heroes of the *Iliad* call upon the gods to guide them in their discernment (Achilles, starting in Book I, seeks the guidance of Hera and his mother/goddess Thetis). These numinous configurations represent the archetypal level of human discernment – the cornerstone of Jung’s analytical psychology (Jung, 1969). The *Iliad* is an archetypal rendering of a series of tragic stories of orphanhood, betrayal, abandonment, and loss, as manifest in the wounded heroes of this epic including Achilles, Hector, Homer, and others. The clash between human deliberation and archetypal imperative plays out as impiety and leads to strife – the conflict between the personal and archetypal layers of human consciousness as a core of the human condition. In the *Iliad*, this begins with the strife between Agamemnon and Achilles and echoes throughout the book via several protagonists, such as Achilles and Hector.

Throughout his analysis of the epic, Sanguineti masterfully weaves the Janus of the human enterprise and its perpetual context, as Agamemnon and his misogynistic/Senex shadow; Achilles and his anima; and the Oedipal triangle between Agamemnon, Achilles, and Briseis, among others. All human encounters have an archetypal counterpart, like the argument between Agamemnon and Achilles in Book I and Zeus and Ares in Book V. Are humans the mere actors of archetypal directors (“the gods who are forever,” to use Homer’s terminology)? These dilemmas between human consciousness and its archetypal undercurrents, and how to optimally resolve the antagonism, are attended to in Jung’s analytical psychology and are beyond the scope of this present review. In Jungian psychology, each one of us is a demigod like Achilles, with a human and a numinous dimension to our psyche. Jung calls this our Dioscuri nature.³ (In Greek mythology, the Dioscuri were the twin half-brothers Castor and Pollux. Their mother was Leda. Tyndareus, the king of Sparta, was the father of Castor, a mortal, while Zeus was the father of Pollux, a demigod.)

The relationship of Achilles and Patroclus is complex and multifaceted. They are a composite personality, reminiscent of Oscar Wilde’s *The Picture of Dorian Gray* in which the dark hero sells his soul to preserve his youthful beauty while his portrait gets darker and uglier as it records his every misdeed. Patroclus, like the portrait, follows the darker path to his own death. In contrast, Paris gets his Helen like Dorian Gray gets his wish, but the people of Troy are the portrait carrying the wounds of his shadow.

In the end, all human encounters are also a battle between gods. Human consciousness is informed by underlying archetypal themes. The intersubjectivity between humans consists ultimately in an unconscious to unconscious drama between the underlying, conflicting, ceaseless themes that play out between people. Jung amplifies this in his analytical rendering of the *Rosarium Philosophorum* – the medieval alchemic classic – as a prototype to explain the archetypal undertow of human relationships.⁴ When we ignore these prehuman, unalterable dimensions of our behavior and choices, we regress to our reptilian ancestry and to the potential for animalistic behavior, as illustrated in the

³ (Jung, 1969), page 121. According to Jung, Christ himself is perfect symbol of the hidden immortal within the mortal man

⁴ (Jung, 1966a). While the discussion of *Rosarium Philosophorum* is a classic in its entirety, the discussion of the unconscious-to-unconscious communication on pages 220-222 captures the essence of this formulation of ‘participation mystique.’

statement of Achilles to the dying Hector: “I wish that somehow wrath and fury might drive me to carve your flesh and myself eat it raw”⁵ – a cannibalistic reptilian regression.

Sanguineti proposes that Homer was an orphan born out of wedlock near Troy, taken as a hostage at a young age, who, perhaps defensively, may have overtly identified with the Greek invaders. Consequently, he skillfully suggests that, “A complete analysis of the *Iliad* demands therefore that some consideration be given also to the Trojan aspect: to the mental images of Homer as he transports himself inside the walls of Troy; and how they are transmitted into his work.”⁶ Thus, Homer finds a way to give voice to his repressed Trojan soul and the hidden trauma of his oppression. The concluding Book XXIV of the epic is about grief and the celebration of life and the sacrifice of the altruistic Trojan hero Hector over the narcissistic Greek shadow of the rageful Achilles. Sanguineti concludes with the reflection that his findings “illuminate the *Iliad* as a ‘song for Hector,’ an evocative dirge suffusing with poignant and tragic affect the descriptive façade of the ‘song for Achilles.’”⁷

Clash of Cultures is a masterful exploration of the unconscious themes imbedded in this timeless classic. With its telling and retelling of the key aspects of Homer’s epic, interspersed with their psychodynamic analysis, it is a slow read and must be celebrated like a good wine – sipped and cherished rather than gulped down. It is like seeing a movie with symphonic background music amplifying the archetypal themes of the human condition – strife, pride, loss, grief, wrath, life, death, light, shadow, anger, greed, and fate. Ultimately the book is a treat to read. It keeps unfolding like an ancient mystery novel. When all is said and done, the readers emerge with a whole new perspective on the *Iliad* told from the lens of the orphan, the colonized, and the victimized.

Contributor

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⁵ *Iliad*, Book XXII, lines 346 ff.”

⁶ *Clash of Cultures*, p. 93

⁷ *Clash of Cultures*, p. 109