



## HOMER RETOLD

*J.W. Bonner*

*questions the place of Homer in a curious Second World War novel*

Theodor Kallifatides, *The Siege of Troy* (translated by Marlaine Delargy). New York: Other Press 2019. Pp. 203. £12.99. ISBN 9781590519714

**H**omer's great epic, the *Iliad*, set after nine years of fighting between the Trojans and the Achaeans, compresses into an expanse of just a few weeks lessons on anger, love, friendship, hubris, fear and bravery. It abounds in portraits of human nature made all the more explosive or potent because of the intensity of war. It is described as a war poem, but it might better be called a death poem: young and old, courageous and

cowardly descend to the Underworld. Democratic Death never plays favourites.

In scale, the poem focuses on the angry dispute between Agamemnon, leader of the Achaean forces, and Achilles, the Achaeans' greatest warrior. Their spat, and the sense of honour each feels due to him and to him alone, plagues the Achaean army. All subsequent major events in the poem follow with deadly logic from all too human nature.

Debates among scholars and readers about contemporary English translations of Homer's poem fill pages of papers and magazines: there are Lattimore fans, Fitzgerald devotees and supporters of Fagles (I am rather keen on Logue's efforts). Theodor Kallifatides, in his novel, *The Siege of Troy*, tries his hand, but with a somewhat tepid sleight. He returns the poem to its oral tradition by having a school teacher tell its story

to her class of Greek village students in 1945. This frame allows Kallifatides the opportunity to draw readers into engaging with the Homeric text through a rather cursory handling of Greek village life under Nazi occupation.

The school teacher, named Miss or Witch (since the town dogs fall silent in her presence) by the students, beguiles them with her rendering of the Trojan and Achaean conflict. The novel's 15-year-old narrator finds himself in love with Miss. And the novel hints at complications in the loyalties of Miss: a love for the German pilots stationed in the village and a role in the partisan movement to rid the country of its German occupiers. This thread deepens the developing love story between the narrator and a classmate and the fate of the narrator's father, who has been imprisoned by the Germans.

It is the teacher's narrative of Homer's poem to her students that provides most of the novel's material. In addition to the brutal array of deaths she vividly revives (all prose variants of Homer's descriptions) – warriors disembowelled, brains spilled, limbs severed – there are emotional pauses. There is Priam kissing the hands of Achilles to urge the return of Hector's defiled body with the words, 'I have just done what no mortal man has done before: I kissed your hands, the same hands that slew my son' and Priam telling Achilles that the Trojans need 11 days to pay their respects to Hector and adding, 'On the twelfth – if necessary – we can resume the battle'. Homer's poem ends with the Trojans celebrating Hector's life. The reader finishes the poem knowing that the battle will rage on with as much fury and destruction as the poem's opening rage between Agamemnon and Achilles.

The narrator looks back on these events from a distance of 50 years. That expanse of time perhaps adds to the novel's nostalgic glow, one that suffuses even the most tragic events at its swift conclusion.

War is Hell – that's truth. War is an accelerant of human mortality. The Greeks knew it, and Achilles knew he would encounter death at some point in his life, whether in a short burst of glory at Troy or a long and forgotten stretch of years in his homeland. The death of Patroclus at the hands of Hector settles the decision.

Kallifatides, who was born in Greece just before the onset of the Second World War and who has lived in Sweden since 1964, attempts to unsettle the glamour of war, arguing in an Afterword that Homer was attempting to do the same (I tend, from my contemporary vantage point, to agree with Kallifatides; at least, I don't see how readers can read the poem today and not feel the brutal grotesqueness of death in so many of the poem's lines).

There is much to be gained from reading Homer's poem in this way.

The attempt by Kallifatides to sneak into the novel the story of this epic conflict is interesting. It's as if the novel is a Trojan Horse, a ruse by which to bring the tale into the hands of the reader and unleash it on them by surprise. The problem is that the frame is flimsy, the Second-World-War tale little more than a young-adult, coming-of-age novel, though the attention paid to women is interesting.

The pathos of so much death suffuses Homer's poem in its final lines. And that pathos infuses the final pages of Kallifatides' novel. Achilles grants Priam time to pay homage to Hector: days to gather wood for a great pyre and a day to feast in honour of Hector. But on the 12th day, the forces return to battle – to fighting that will end with the death of Achilles, the total destruction of Troy and the murder of Agamemnon when he returns to his wife. War is Hell. So, oftentimes, is Life.



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*A fragmentary mosaic floor showing two heralds leading Briseis away from Achilles who grasps his lyre. Thought to have originated at Antioch in AD 100–300.*