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AN ULSTERMAN NAMED ACHILLES

ABSTRACT. Schade Gerson, An Ulsterman Named Achilles (*Ulsterczyk o imieniu Achilles*).

A new novel by an English-writing author turns out to be a careful reworking of the story of Achilles, as it is told by Homer. The article elucidates how the modern text works and suggests how it may relate to an ‘Irish’ gaze. A new term, *décalage*, is introduced to describe a particular poetic device that belongs to the many ways of establishing intertextuality.

Keywords: Achilles; Homer; Michael Hughes *Country*; intertextuality; ‘Irish’ gaze; *décalage*.

He mounted to the parapet again and gazed out over Dublin bay, his fair oakpale hair stirring slightly.

“God, he said quietly. Isn’t the sea what Algy calls it: a great sweet mother? The snotgreen sea. The scrotumtightening sea. *Epi oinopa ponton*. Ah, Dedalus, the Greeks. I must teach you. You must read them in the original. *Thalatta! Thalatta!* She is our great sweet mother. Come and look.”

Buck Mulligan to Stephen Dedalus¹

Quite recently, in 2018, the London-based publisher John Murray issued Michael Hughes’ second novel.² Its title *Country* does not reveal much and neither does the picture on the dust-jacket. We see a typical country road in the middle of nowhere. A grey, cloudy sky dominates most of the picture. No traffic is to be seen, only a non-descript house, and a traffic-sign, from behind. On the blurb, however, a citation from a review gives a clue: “*Country* pulls *The Iliad* from Ancient Greece and drops it into the Irish borderlands,” we read (from Stuart Neville), i.e. into the border district between Ulster and the Republic of Ireland. Ulster, the most northerly of the four provinces of Ireland, is commonly called Northern Ireland and part of the United Kingdom. For many years a conflict was going on, known as the Troubles. The one the book focusses on started in the late 1960s. Another *paratexte*³ on the inside cover, vis-à-vis the front page,

¹ Joyce 1993: 5; first published 1922.

² M. Hughes, *Country*, London 2018 (later as Hughes 2018).

³ Genette 1982: 9.

states that the action described took place in 1996. The IRA and the British have agreed an uneasy ceasefire. 92 chapters tell the story. They are grouped together, and each of these larger chapters is headed by a person's name. The first is *Crisis* (ch. 1–9), the second *Nellie* (ch. 10–29), the third *Dog* (ch. 30–35), the fourth *Henry* (ch. 36–41), the fifth *Pig* (ch. 42–50), the sixth *Pat* (ch. 51–66), and the seventh and last one *Achill* (ch. 67–92). To make it short – Crisis is Chryses, Nellie is Helen, Dog is Menelaus, Henry is Hector, Pig is Agamemnon, and Pat is Patroclus.

In the following, I try to trace back some of the books' events to Homer's *Iliad*, without intending to be exhaustive. It can be shown that Hughes' novel is a careful reworking of the story of Achilles. In the *Iliad*, we read about him mainly in five books; its first, ninth, sixteenth, nineteenth, and twenty-second book form what has been named *Achilleis*. Hughes' adaptation confirms its narrative strength and intensity. In fact, his Achillean narrative works for a modern narrative, which is structured like Homer's, but not only that. Hughes also includes some of the *Iliad's* purple passages known to many non-Classicists, ones that are easily identifiable. We read, for example, a surprisingly low life version of the Diomedean swap. We meet Helen, identifying the Greek heroes to the enemy's king, in a very intimidating place. And there are Agamemnon's envoys, too. Eventually, the Games for Patroclus are so crudely played out that they make one wonder about the Homeric heroic universe – such a crudeness of thought, feeling, action, and character, so much wanting of amenity, is what may be called the 'Irish' gaze, perhaps.

The Trojan world, too, is represented. Andromache and Hector, for example, take leave from each other in the same intimate household-atmosphere that characterises the scene already in Homer. And which then established such a stark contrast to the so awfully boastful Greeks. We meet also Priamos, a desperate old man who at the end of the *Iliad* begged the scandalously monstrous Greeks for mercy, an end that mirrors the *Iliad's* opening, where another desperate old man tried the same.

Regarding form and style, Hughes' style again imitates Homer's. The speeches are significantly many. There is "excellent dialogue," too, as another reviewer on the blurb puts it (this time, Paul McVeigh), which accompanies these speeches; in other words, we encounter the famous Homeric *agones*, only thinly disguised. Homer's repetitions, the catalogues, and his generic formality are there, too. The similes also return. Rather funnily, during the repeated scenes of communal meals, for example, Hughes does exactly what Homer did. The preparation of the meals is more important than the meal itself. Our fantasy is not stimulated by the elementary food, and there is no oriental spiciness whatsoever. And nobody enjoys the meal much, like nobody does in Homer.⁴ Reading and

⁴Cf. Arend 1933: 70.

admiring this game of copy and paste, we are softly forced to see the *Iliad*'s heroes through Irish lenses, are we not?

To make the point clearer, Homer's *Iliad* hardly offers a second reading of the Troubles. It cannot heighten the IRA in any sense. Rather, the IRA brings down the *Iliad* from a classicist's pedestal. Perhaps it should not be there in the first place, one wonders. Perhaps we were wrong for a long time to consider the *Iliad* as something 'noble'. But before we sort that out let us see how this 'Irish' gaze works, if the word is permitted at all. "All called him Achill," we read at the book's opening.⁵ It is not his real name, since Achill is named after his father, "who came out of Achill Island and bore the name before him" (*ibid.*).⁶ Already this is a subtle allusion to Homer, i.e. his way of introducing Achilles by his father's name, i.e. 'the son of Peleus'. Homer is fond of such *antonomasia*, which sometimes precedes the proper name by dozens of lines. What we read in Hughes, however, is not exactly Homeric. There is a semantic shift, or *décalage*, if we may put it that way. In Homer the so-called patronymic, i.e. Peleides, son of Peleus, is said of Achilles, the son. While in Hughes, the protagonist's nickname, so to speak, was already his father's. And his father was called like that because he came from a place that was named like that.⁷

This *décalage* is typical of the whole text. It is the novel's real theme, and often varied upon. Accordingly, the protagonist's real name, Liam O'Brien, does not play any role further. Right from the start, he is replaced by another name, which is ill-fated, a menetekel of impending disaster. A person called Achill cannot expect to become old. All that follows directs us straight to the horrific Homeric subtext. It was written somewhere.

"Pig and Achill fell out. (...) Bad, bad news,"⁸ indeed. Immediately, this first paraphrase of Homer sets the tone: "The whole wrecking match, that sent so many strong souls roaring down to hell, dogs chewing up the guts ground into the road, birds pecking at the splattered bits of their brains" (*ibid.*), cannot but refer to the *Iliad*'s proem. There it was Achilles' anger that "hurled down to Hades many mighty souls of heroes, making their bodies the prey to dogs and the birds' feasting" (*Iliad* 1. 3–5).⁹ "And this was the will of Zeus," Homer's narrator continues (*Iliad* 1. 5). "The way London wanted it to go," Hughes'

⁵ Hughes 2018: 3.

⁶ The Homeric Achilles is somehow related to the sea, too. His mother, Thetis, for example, is a Nereid, i.e. daughter of the old sea god and the Oceanid Doris, and in the *Iliad*, Achilles fights with Skamander, the river (on which see below). It has been suggested that his name may be related to that of the river Achelous, but this remains a speculation.

⁷ In the history of Greek literature, much younger poets than Homer were extremely fond of geographic *antonomasia*. It became a craze from Hellenistic poetry onwards.

⁸ Hughes 2018: 3.

⁹ I use the translation by Martin Hammond, time and again modifying it slightly; it was first published London 1987.

narrator continues (*ibid.*). Effortlessly, the Homeric so-called double motivation of the heroes' and heroines' actions is taken up. As in Homer, in Hughes' text many actions are carried out only because they are ordered by the British government's secret service. The ensuing closure, however, i.e. "the way it always is" (*ibid.*), is absent from Homer, but perhaps not from Achilles' mind. In Hughes, it becomes a motto.

It returns as the novel's last lines: "The way it always was. / The way it has to be."¹⁰ Although Homer does not theologise, the phrase does suit the tragic facet of his *Achilleis* well, and – why not assume it – his own view of himself. In any case, so fast did we enter the double-layered text that we overlooked the first word of Hughes' novel, which is 'fury', as it is the first word of the *Iliad*, announcing its theme, i.e. Achilles' ungovernable anger.

The scenario that develops is familiar, but only half familiar. Again a *décalage* is typical and characteristic of the whole book. A father, Crisis Cunningham, wants to get back his daughter – just as we hear at the *Iliad's* outset about Chryses, priest of Apollo, who asks Agamemnon to release his daughter Chryseis. However, Crisis wants her back, "for the girl had disgraced him by running away and flinging herself at Pig"¹¹ – which is hardly the case with Chryseis in the *Iliad*, who was taken prisoner and given to Agamemnon as his gift of honour. Crisis brings a bag full of cash for Pig, the keys to his Mercedes, and the promise of a prize bull for the next season.¹² He begs, "weeping and whining, down on his knees in the wet dung of the yard" (*ibid.*). All to no avail – Pig laughs at him, threatens him with a gun, and "away the old man skedaddled."¹³ At home, he immediately calls a family member, asking him for help: "Next thing, the power was off at the farm. (...) / The day after, the water too."¹⁴

In the *Iliad*, Apollo, at Chryses' prayer, sent a plague on the Greek camp, which lasted until Chryseis was returned to her father. Agamemnon compensated himself by taking another girl from Achilles – Briseis is her name. Hughes makes Pig take Brigid from Achill, thus starting the quarrel between them.¹⁵ Before it comes to that, something else happens. Hughes' Achill "couldn't stick it,"¹⁶ i.e. claustrophobic quarantine. He rings a priest, asking him to come as mediator;¹⁷ Cunningham is a Protestant. Pig is much offended.¹⁸ Eventually, he restrains

¹⁰ Hughes 2018: 314, printed separately, as in a poem.

¹¹ Hughes 2018: 3.

¹² Hughes 2018: 4.

¹³ Hughes 2018: 5.

¹⁴ Hughes 2018: 6.

¹⁵ In Homer's *Iliad*, from 1. 11.

¹⁶ Hughes 2018: 7.

¹⁷ Hughes 2018: 9.

¹⁸ Or as he puts it (Hughes 2018: 9sq.): "A fucking Jaffa sending a fucking priest down here to tell me where to point my fucking prick?" He rants on, ending his speech by cursing the Catholic Church, "a blight on the Irish people, worse than the fucking Brits!"

himself, claiming that he was merely letting off steam, only pretending to be angry.

Re-establishing relationships, he sends the daughter back, but asks for another girl: “All looked to Achill. None other dared a word, not even Dog.”¹⁹ Achill reminds him of the fact that he may get women as many as he likes, as soon as the fighting is over. Pig does not listen. Instead he claims Achill’s girl, Brigid. In Homer, Achilles’ slave-concubine Briseis is taken from him by Agamemnon (*Iliad* 1. 391sq.). And as it is in Hughes’ novel,²⁰ she is afterwards restored (*Iliad* 19. 246). But this is still to come. The tone rises. Achill accuses Pig of not being up to the job. Instead, it is Achill who is “the trigger man (...) any decent Irish girl wants to ride.”²¹ “I’m the one getting blood on my hands (...)! I’m the one that’s kept the Brits off these roads this nine long years,” he continues. “And all through them nine long years,” it was Pig who “kept the most of the haul.”²²

Eventually, Achill refuses to continue fighting. The whole operation is “pure personal vendetta,”²³ he says, offering a different narrative. Dog’s wife left him, “she’s been screwing a Brit. Yes, a fucking Brit.” Thus, his brother Pig ordered an attack, flinging “the whole country back into the dark old days, for no other reason than to get back at that there Brit,” as Achill puts it (*ibid.*), who refuses to save the “rotten pride” of the brothers: “I’m ceasing my fire, and decommissioning my weapons. There.”²⁴ In Homer’s *Iliad* we read something similar. We hear Achilles trying to postpone Agamemnon’s wishes: “We Achaians will recompense you three or four times over,” if ever we sack Troy (*Iliad* 1. 127–9). But the “most acquisitive of all men” as Achilles calls him (1. 122) won’t listen. Achilles refuses to continue fighting for the same reason in Homer as in Hughes (*Iliad* 1. 152sq.): “It was not the spearmen of Troy who caused me to come here and fight – I have no quarrel with them.” No, it was “great shameless” Agamemnon, desperately trying “to win requital from the Trojans for Menelaos and for you, dog-face,” as he addresses Agamemnon (*Iliad* 1. 158–60). And as it is in Hughes, so it is in Homer – i.e. Achilles’ “hands bear the brunt of the battle’s fury. But when the division comes,” Agamemnon’s prize is by far the larger (165–8). Both Agamemnon and Pig sneer at their best man, who nearly explodes with anger.

Before we move on, we note a third example of Hughes’ poetic process which we called *décalage*. A word that denotes Agamemnon in the *Iliad* becomes the nickname of his brother ‘Menelaus’ in Hughes’ reworking. Later on, the name Paris provides another example of this poetic process. When Nellie starts

¹⁹ Hughes 2018: 11.

²⁰ Hughes 2018: 256.

²¹ Hughes 2018: 13.

²² Hughes 2018: 14.

²³ Hughes 2018: 15.

²⁴ Hughes 2018: 17.

working for the Brits, “she was assigned a new handler, an army fella. (...) The handler said his name was Alex. (...) She heard one of the other soldiers (...) calling him Paris.”²⁵ Nellie asks him the reason for the name. He tells her that he once worked at the British Embassy in Paris, and that “he overdid the amusing anecdotes about his time (...) over there. They said every time he opened his mouth, it was ‘When I was in Paris’.” The nickname stuck with him.²⁶

Now, at the opening scene, Achill wants to kill Pig, “and for one gorgeous minute he was ready to pick up his short and put a dirty great hole between Pig’s two eyes, and let’s see the face on him then.”²⁷ In the *Iliad*, “anger came over the son of Peleus. His heart in his shaggy breast was torn in thought whether to draw his sharp sword from beside his thigh (...) and kill Agamemnon” (1. 188–91). Suddenly, old Ned interferes: “Seventy-five if he was a day.”²⁸ In the *Iliad*, Nestor is more than two-generations old, i.e. over sixty (1. 250sq.). He is characterised as sweet-spoken and clear-voiced (1. 248). “In all good will he spoke and addressed the assembly”, we read in Homer (1. 253), as Ned does in Hughes. Agamemnon calls him “master of the sons of the Achaians in assembly” (2. 370), alluding to the fact that Nestor surpasses all of them in debate. Pig, however, cannot be persuaded – as neither Agamemnon did give in.

Ned, as well as Nestor, appeals to both as children. In Homer, however, Nestor does so in another speech (*Iliad* 2. 337, again a *décalage*), addressing the Greek assembly, when Achilles has already left it. In Hughes, Ned starts his speech while Achilles is still around:²⁹ “Children! A pair of children squabbling over jubes!” Both Agamemnon and Achilles walk out of the assembly “like scissors cut the string – in between.”³⁰ In Homer, at this point of his narrative, there is no such simile (*Iliad* 1. 304–11). At this point of narrative, two Homeric characteristics come to mind.

First, since Homer is otherwise so fond of similes, he might well have inserted one here, too. But he did not. Thus, as it is already in Homer’s similes, i.e. that everything in their composition and their usage is subject to change,³¹ so it is in Hughes, too.

²⁵ Hughes 2018: 87.

²⁶ Both fall for each other, they enjoy great sex (Hughes 2018: 87): “He was very gentle. (...) Kept asking him if it was okay. She told him she didn’t want the football commentary, she just wanted to screw. (...) God, was that nice” (92). An earlier text by Robert Olen Butler already treated this scene. In his *Intercourse* Helen’s view of both Menelaos’ and Paris’ sexual performance contrasts with her own (20–3). The book was first published in the UK in 2016 (together with his equally ambitious and suggestive *Severance*), but the copyright dates back to 2008; some texts originally appeared in various magazines.

²⁷ Hughes 2018: 18.

²⁸ Hughes 2018: 19.

²⁹ Hughes 2018: 19.

³⁰ Hughes 2018: 22.

³¹ Cf. Fränkel 1921: 107–9.

Second, since all the speeches in Homer follow a certain order, contain well-treated *topoi*, Nestor here might well have said something similar to what he says at another speech opening. Much in Homer's poetry is generic, and many a scheme can be established, according to which the narrative continues, be it arrival or assembly, putting on the armour or how Thetis visits her son.³²

Any reader of the *Iliad* remembers such interchangeable composing.³³ Hughes plays with this generic way of poetry, which he found already practised in Homer. Admitting an exchange of place or function, he goes a step further. This blurring enables him, for example, to turn an epithet used by Achilles to insult Agamemnon (*Iliad* 1. 159) – 'dog-face' – into his brother's nickname – 'dog'. Such a device which we called *décalage*, however, may have been anticipated by James Joyce. At the opening of his *Ulysses*, he established a similar relationship between 'snotgreen' and *epi oinopa ponton*. Both expressions describe the sea, the younger being clearly modelled on the older Homeric one, and at the same time being much less charming. What is common to both Joyce and Hughes, however, is not only the fact that all is rather deflationary, but also that this device is alluded to, or rather spoken of. In Joyce, the speaker refers to this *double-entendre* by pointing out the Greeks *and* by offering a second, drastic, and even more vulgar, epithet. So does Hughes' narrator, by turning Menelaus into a dog, who accompanies his brother, a pig, *and* by pointing to the Greek model, i.e. the Homeric 'dog-face'.

In Hughes, the opening's ending is marked by a direct appeal to the reader: "Wait now till you hear the rest."³⁴ Decidedly, such appealing is absent from Homer, who never crosses this line; he appeals to the Muses only. The fact that Homer's poetry originated orally, however, does add a second layer to Hughes' 'hearing'. Even more so, since Hughes' story "was all kept off the news" (*ibid.*). Instead, it had to be remembered, transmitted orally, and "them that were around that part of the country remember every bit" (*ibid.*).

Hughes' own narrative voice does assume such Homeric status. The all-knowing, cool and distant singer much resembles Hughes' own narrative voice. He also anticipates his heroes' fate, as was Achilles' death anticipated in Homer. The first time, for example, we hear of Patroclus we barely notice it. Agamemnon alludes to a kind of sexual connivance between them, calling them a "pair of fucking queers."³⁵ Of course, Agamemnon would never have said so, and it is Pig who speaks. However, the relationship of Achilles and Patroclus was discussed in antiquity. In any case, Pat plays an important role in Achill's emotional life, as did Patroclus in Achilles'. The next time we hear of Pat in Hughes, the narrator elaborates on this fact: "If Pat was smiling, the sun was out

³² Cf. the time-tables at the end of Arend 1933.

³³ The *Iliad's* various *aristeiai*, where a hero excels in battle (as Diomedes in 5, or Hector in 8, and Agamemnon in 11), show this easy transfer.

³⁴ Hughes 2018: 22.

³⁵ Hughes 2018: 18.

for Achill. And if Pat was in bad form, then you may stay out of Achill's way. That's were the stories started about them, and from them sharing a cell. But the only love between them was one man who needed a big brother, and another man who needed to be one."³⁶

Well put, nothing to add. Aeschylus, however, made them appear as if they were lovers. In a fragment from his tragedy *Myrmidons*, named after the inhabitants of Phthia, led in war by Achilles, he makes Achilles reproach the dead Patroclus for having disobeyed his instructions not to advance too far towards Troy. Achilles addresses Patroclus as the one who "did not respect the sacred honour" of their sexual relationship, being ungrateful "for those thousand kisses rumour" (*Myrmidons* 135). The narrative voice in Hughes may draw on such a rumour. Rumours, however, as suggestive as they may sound, remain disputed. The more so, since "homosexual love is entirely absent from the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, despite attempts to detect it."³⁷ But homosexual love is well there in Aeschylus, who also is – unlike Homer – fond of theologising, and much concerned with themes such as fate and responsibility.

Their interdependence becomes a leitmotif in his *Oresteia*, the first play of which features the killing of a ruthless, stupid, boasting – and guilty – swine, Agamemnon. Or, "a treacherous, backstabbing cunt," as Achill addresses Pig.³⁸ Hughes, however, portrays a Homeric world, "little troubled either by belief in the baleful activity of the dead or in the impurity which infect those guilty of bloodshed."³⁹ As is to be expected from the Homeric model, no one of the Homeric IRA-men cares about the killings they carry out, not in the least. Only Achill does, as did Achilles. It has to do with a goddess – in the *Iliad*, it is his mother Thetis who saves Achilles. In Hughes, it is Theresa Flanagan: "A neighbour of Achill's when he moved first north at the age of fifteen (...). Old enough to be his ma (...)," we read.⁴⁰ It is decidedly Achillean, decent and good, to listen to her, and not to his peer-group.⁴¹ In Homer, Thetis is closely connected to Zeus, speaking to him directly (*Iliad* 1. 538sq.), pleading his son's case, shortly after having miraculously heard Achilles' tears falling, while sitting by the side of her old father "in the depths of the sea" (1. 357sq.). Small wonder then, in Hughes, that after she met Achill for an encounter full

³⁶ Hughes 2018: 24.

³⁷ Griffin 1980: 104 n. 4.

³⁸ Hughes 2018: 12.

³⁹ Lucas 1959: 87.

⁴⁰ Hughes 2018: 25.

⁴¹ In the *Iliad* Achilles is somewhat outside the circle of Greek civilization, being conscious of his emotional state, and of his weakness, i.e. that his anger may overcome his chivalrous pity for Priam (24. 560sqq.). He is often merciful (21. 100sqq.), but in his fury has no respect even for a visible god (22. 15–20). Being conscious of his life's shortness (9. 410sqq. & 19. 408sqq.), he is capable of the most generous sentiments, indeed, as his devoted friendship for Patroclus shows, as does his strong detestation of lying (9. 312) which singles him out among the Homeric Greeks.

of sexual healing, “the minute she was in home, Theresa lifted the phone and called London.”⁴²

In fact, his peer-group does come, Agamemnon’s envoys, just as we expect it to be from the *Iliad*’s book nine:

Sid and Budd and Mannix drove on over to Achill’s place. Black night it was, they found him in the garden with the guitar on his knee, liling a few old rebel songs. The Broad Black Brimmer and The Men Behind the Wire. (...) / He was on his feet the minute he saw them. So was Pat. / (...) He took them in to the good room. Pat got them drinks.⁴³

In the *Iliad* it was quite similar (9. 182–204): the envoys find Achilles singing tales of men’s glory, with Patroclus sitting opposite him in silence; Achilles jumps up in astonishment, and Patroclus likewise stands up; Achilles leads them in, speaking straight to Patroclus that he mix the wine stronger; these are my dearest friends, he says. But he will not listen to them, neither did Achill. Both Achilles and Achill are about to leave their upbringing behind. The male world, the only one in which their lives count.

The deflationary mockery, the dilapidated state of affairs in Hughes, however, continues relentlessly to work on us. Nellie does identify IRA-fighters to a commanding Brit, Lieutenant Colonel Bernard King,⁴⁴ as Helen did identify Achaian fighters to king Priam (*Iliad* 3. 161–244). Both in Homer as in Hughes it is understood that both chiefs know already every face. And then we have the Diomedian swap, too (*Iliad* 6. 119–236), a story told by Dog.⁴⁵ This time, however, the fighters are football fans, one of the Glasgow Rangers, the other of Celtic Glasgow. Dog, the catholic Celtic fan has to kill the other, but he dodges the task, having discovered that both their grandfathers might have witnessed the same historical match between the two teams: “Fifty-seven or fifty-eight, I forget just now. The League Cup final.”⁴⁶ Both grand-children have the top on under their uniform. They exchange the shields of the clubs, attached to these shirts they both wear always under their “kit”.⁴⁷ This clearly echoes the famous exchange of arms between Diomedes and Glaucus. It happened in Homeric times, as somehow did the historical match, too, which might have appeared to the IRA-man and his counterpart as a match of Homeric proportions, indeed, befitting an epic struggle, grand and large-scale.

Now we observe another type of *décalage*, i.e. a semantical shift. ‘Homeric’ does no longer mean only ‘referring to the Homeric text’, in our case the *Iliad*. Moreover, it does mean also that we are unconsciously transported into ‘Homeric

⁴² Hughes 2018: 30.

⁴³ Hughes 2018: 179.

⁴⁴ Hughes 2018: 95–100.

⁴⁵ Hughes 2018: 129–33.

⁴⁶ Hughes 2018: 130.

⁴⁷ Hughes 2018: 133.

times', with all their fairy-tale grandeur, their half-mythic, half-real supermen, be they only drunken proles who happen to attend a football-match. Such mock-heroic atmosphere continues, and irony comes in more and more.

The Brits rarely leave their barracks, which are part of an old castle: "The ruin itself was Castle William, and the base often got called the same."⁴⁸ A sign indicates the name, the origin of which is unknown. "A few years back some lads coming home (...) tried to wreck the sign," feeling annoyed by the fact that the place was now a British garrison,⁴⁹ "but they got no further than pulling down the W,"⁵⁰ we read. "From that day on the sign said Castle Illiam, and the young fellas around the town had started calling the base itself Illiam (...). It kind of caught on for a while there" (*ibid.*). Needless to say that "not a one of the locals had ever been inside" (*ibid.*), as did neither a Greek visit ever Troy. On the other hand, some other reminiscences from the *Iliad* are less funny, though. Patroclus' killing, for example, is carried out in the same Homeric, brutal way.

It needed three in Homer, and it needs three in Hughes. First, Patroclus is hit and numbed by a batten, measuring two inches by four, anonymously: "He couldn't make out the man standing over him. Black coat, black gloves, wee woolly hat."⁵¹ Just so as he is disarmed by Apollo (*Iliad* 16. 789sq.): "Patroclus did not see him moving through the rout. Apollo came against him hidden in thick mist." Phoibos Apollo knocks Patroclus' helmet from his head, in Homer. In Hughes, Pat's "hood tore off him, the head spinning three different ways" (Hughes *l.c.*), "so that his eyes spun round," as is said of Patroclus (Homer *l.c.*). Then, a non-descript fighter wounds him. In Hughes, it is a certain "Forbes, a fearless young buck"; in Homer, it's Euphorbos: "it was the first time he had entered battle" (*Iliad* 16. 811).⁵² Finally, Pat is killed by Henry. He curses him, as Patroclus did Hector in Homer, and Pat is derided for it by him, as is Patroclus in Homer. Hector, the family man, who frightens his son Astyanax (*Iliad* 6. 466–81), as does Henry, the family man, frightens his,⁵³ both fathers leaving for battle, and for their own death. Hector, to whom Zeus gives so much honour in the *Iliad*, is paralleled by London, which is so proud of Henry. "Make your mother proud of you," Henry admonishes

⁴⁸ Hughes 2018: 137.

⁴⁹ Hughes 2018: 138.

⁵⁰ The letter that corresponds phonetically to 'w' in ancient Greek is called Digamma. It was lost at an early stage and does no longer form part of the alphabet. It did exist, however, as some metrical peculiarities in the Homeric text prove. In addition, we read the letter in inscriptions that use an epichoric alphabet, and the etymology of certain words strongly suggests that the sound did exist in ancient Greek. Thus, in a double sense, we read a literal joke, a beautiful *décalage* in its own way. Probably, the Greek word Ilion did not begin by a Digamma. It has been often maintained, though.

⁵¹ Hughes 2018: 229.

⁵² Forbes and Euphorbos are pronounced nearly identically, aside from the additional first syllable of the Trojan fighter's name. It was similar in the case of Crisis and Chryses.

⁵³ Hughes 2018: 155–7.

his infant child, ending his short address.⁵⁴ “May he (...) bring joy to his mother’s heart,” Hector says, ending his short address (*Iliad* 6. 481sq.).

“Achill got his gear together. / He strapped on the new body armour Theresa had brought him (...). The latest thing, straight from the States,” we read in Hughes.⁵⁵ In Homer, Thetis goes to Olympos, “to bring back glorious armour for her son” (*Iliad* 18. 146sq.). He sets out for his revenge: “Back behind the wheel of the car, and he felt so fucking focussed, he could see and hear and taste everything.”⁵⁶ In fact, he does. “And he swore the car itself spoke to him (...). I’ll take you out, it said, and I’ll take you back, but the day is coming soon when I’ll not take you home no more,” we read in Hughes. In Homer, “from under the yoke the flashing-foot horse Xanthos spoke to him (...): ‘Yes, we shall still bring you back safe this time, mighty Achilles. But your day of destruction is near’” (*Iliad* 19. 404–9).

Achilles and Achill excel, killing ruthlessly a much weaker fighter. It’s Lykaon in the *Iliad* (21. 33–135), Sean Barney in Hughes.⁵⁷ Both are met at a river, from which their killer emerges, both were spared at an earlier encounter, both entreat their enemy not to kill them. Then, the river nearly kills Achill, as Skamander nearly did in Homer. Skamander rushed on him, and “he could not stand firm on his feet,” we read in Homer (*Iliad* 21. 241sq.). “Achill stepped, and he skidded. Fuck. He sank under,”⁵⁸ we read in Hughes. Eventually, Achilles takes revenge. As Hector is chased by swift-footed Achilles in Homer (*Iliad* 22. 137–250), so he is in Hughes: “They ran. They ran like the prize was Olympic gold, but the only prize on offer here was Henry’s life.”⁵⁹ In Homer, the two men ran past twin springs, “where the Trojans’ wives and their lovely daughters used to wash their bright clothes, in earlier times, in peace, before the Achaians came” (*Iliad* 22. 153–6). In Hughes, both men pass “over the two streams, the clumps of white suds from the drains of the base, that Achill remembered crawling up round once when they were trying to see if that could be a way in, the steam coming out from the laundry inside” (*ibid.*). Three times they run, in Homer as in Hughes, “like a dog on a deer,” we read in Hughes (*ibid.*), “as when a dog has started the fawn of a deer,” we read in Homer (*Iliad* 22. 189sq.). Finally, Henry’s body is maltreated by Achill as was Hector’s by Achilles:

Achill backed his car up to the body. He popped the boot, and tied the new rope to the tow bar. The other end round the legs. Then he untied it, and turned the body face down, tied it again. (...) He dragged Henry back down the track to the Ships behind his car. The head bounced off the road. A trail of him all the way there, for the dogs and the birds.⁶⁰

⁵⁴ Hughes 2018: 156sq.

⁵⁵ Hughes 2018: 261sq.

⁵⁶ Hughes 2018: 261.

⁵⁷ Hughes 2018: 269–71.

⁵⁸ Hughes 2018: 271.

⁵⁹ Hughes 2018: 279.

⁶⁰ Hughes 2018: 285.

As in a ring-composition, we reach the image by which the *Iliad* began, the one Hughes alluded to at the beginning of his novel. The Achaians lived literally by their ships. The IRA-men live literally in a kind of bar or pub, situated at a wharf, hence called the Ships.⁶¹ Huge games take place in order to honour Pat. A car race is staged, which resembles much the chariot-race in the Games for Patroclus. Again a detail is remembered exactly in both narratives. As did Nestor tell his son Antilochos so does Ned tell his son Anthony: ““You know well how to take a bad corner,”⁶² he begins. “The stone up ahead, the Badger’s Toe, is where you turn. I want you close that you could reach and touch it, but don’t scrape the car or you’ll slow yourself down and do damage. If you can pass on the inside there, nobody’ll catch you.” “Antilochos, there is no great need for me to instruct you,” Nestor began (*Iliad* 23. 308). The turning-post “you must cut in very close as you drive your chariot and pair round the post, (...) but be careful not to hit the stone, or you will damage your horses and smash the chariot, and that would delight the others and bring shame on you,”⁶³ he continued. It turns out that Hughes’ ‘Homeric’ IRA is a shame-culture, if there ever was one. This, however, is the reverse of Homer.

In Homer, it is the Trojans who speak of shame, i.e. the Brits in Illiam. Hector, for example, leaving his wife and his parents, refers in identical lines to his fear of shame and disgrace, a fear that makes him go to his own death. In Homer, among the Greeks, it is Achilles who feels guilty for the death of his best friend, who died while he was away and could not help him. It is this guilt that makes him so sad, and which singles him out, puts him at the margin of the group to which he belongs.

At the end of Hughes’ novel, Bernard King, the commanding Brit to whom Nellie confessed, gets Henry’s corpse back. So did Priamos, at the end of Homer’s *Iliad*. Both do not want to sit down. They just want the corpse and leave with it. Both are threatened: “Do not provoke me more, old man,” says Achilles scowling (*Iliad* 24. 569). “A few wee spits of the old fury now, dancing in Achill’s eyes. / ‘Listen here. Don’t piss me off, old man’,”⁶⁴ we hear from Achill in Hughes. “Henry’s funeral was long,” Hughes begins his last chapter. “Such was the burial they gave to Hektor”, the *Iliad* ends (24. 804). Bernard King sleeps under the same roof as the killer of his best man. So does king Priam lie down under the same roof with the killer of his son. Bernard “woke in a hot sweat.”⁶⁵ Standing above Priam, Hermes warns him, “and the old man

⁶¹ Again we may note the playful *décalage* Hughes is so much fond of: this time an appellative noun ‘becomes’ a proper noun, a common noun is transformed into the name of something else, and rather less noble, as is to be expected.

⁶² Hughes 2018: 295.

⁶³ Hughes 2018: 334 & 340–3.

⁶⁴ Hughes 2018: 310.

⁶⁵ Hughes 2018: 313.

was afraid” (*Iliad* 24. 689). Having yoked the horses for him, he drives him quickly through the camp. “And no one was aware of them,” Homer writes, ending the episode (24. 691). “Nothing. Dead country silence. But the dream was too close to the facts for comfort. / He started the car and away,”⁶⁶ Hughes ends the episode.

As Achilles at the end of the *Iliad*, Achill is still alive at the end of Hughes’ novel. We do not know his thoughts, but Hughes’ last words may well resume them: “One nod of the head, one tip of the scales. / The way it always was. / The way it has to be.”⁶⁷

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AN ULSTERMAN NAMED ACHILLES

Summary

The protagonist in Hughes’s novel shares a lot with the protagonist of Homer’s *Iliad*. As did Achilles, so does Achill live in two worlds. He knows that what he does is wrong but he carries it out superbly. He wants to be honoured by his fellow-fighters as he honours them, but recognizes them to be scumbags. What makes him voluntarily despise a quiet life, however, is not to get in this world. He has to die in order to find requital. It is a riddle why he really wishes for it: a poor soul, a great hero, Achill as well as Achilles.

The IRA is dissolved, the Homeric society is no longer either, and whether she ever was, remains uncertain. Both Hughes’ novel and Homer’s epic portray something from the past, irretrievably lost, not much regretted. The narrative, however, they both establish, and their way of story-telling, is still fascinating. It is the proof, if needed, that literature does much more inspire our imaginative understanding than any kind of academic text could ever hope to achieve, this one included.

⁶⁶Hughes 2018: 313.

⁶⁷Hughes 2018: 314.