

[Culture](#)

[Book Reviews](#)



Illustration to "The Iliad" (between 1760 and 1769) by John Michael Rysbrack (Flemish, 1694-1770) (Artvee)



by Chris Herlinger

[View Author Profile](#)

cherlinger@ncronline.org

[Join the Conversation](#)

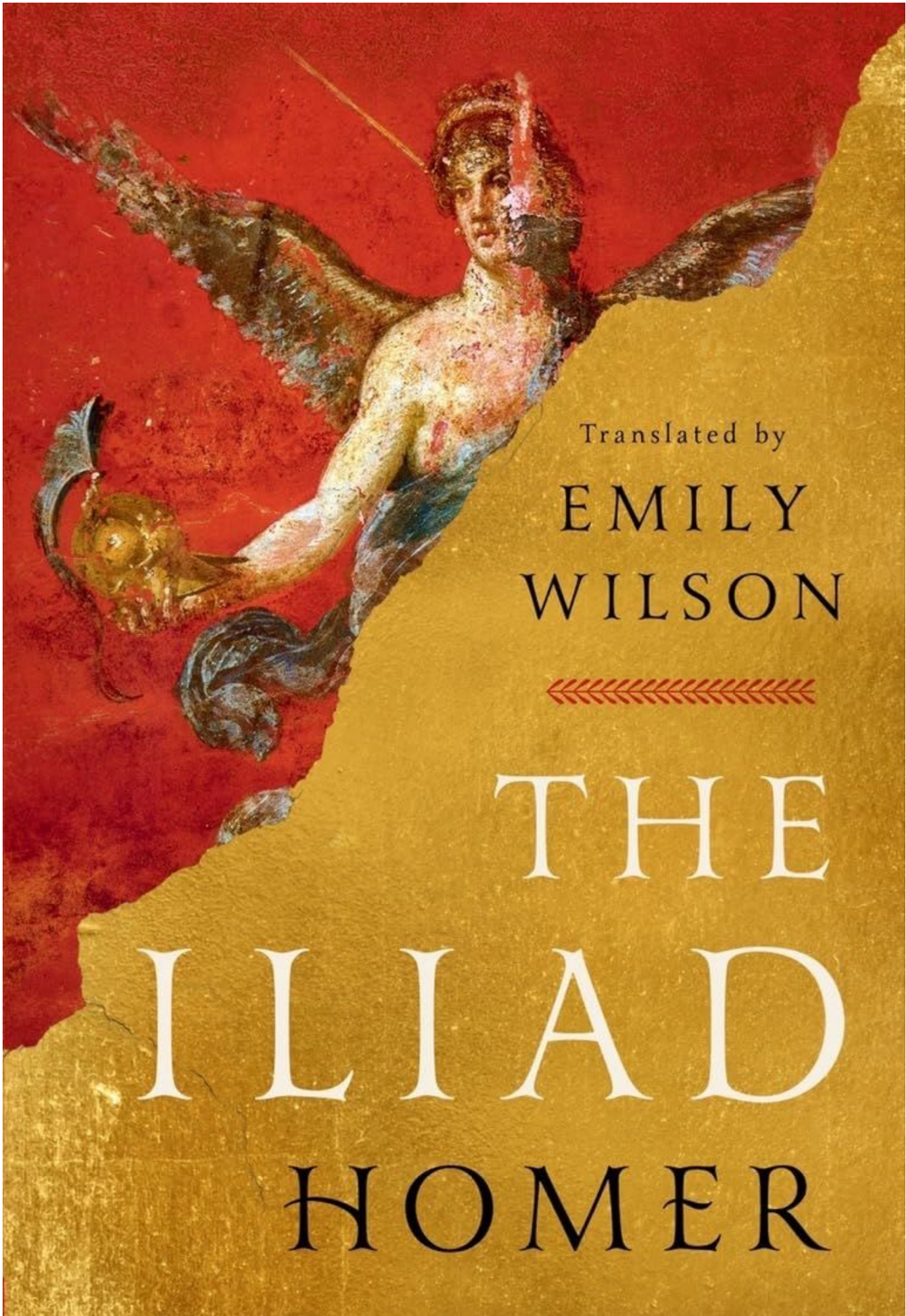
November 9, 2024

[Share on Facebook](#)[Share on Twitter](#)[Email to a friend](#)[Print](#)

With major wars raging in Europe and the Middle East and with the U.S. Veterans Day upon us, perhaps it is time to re-engage with the magnum opus of war poetry, Homer's "The Iliad."

[A new translation of the epic](#) by British American scholar Emily Wilson invites us to do so in welcoming ways. Wilson's English rendition is nicely complemented by a recent collection of poetry (in translation) written by Ukrainian poets in response to a decade of war in their country. Adding to the mix is a moving, conceptually daring new documentary about the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

Wilson's "Iliad" translation arrived last year in hardcover and has been recently released in a paperback edition, which will no doubt find favor in classrooms and adult reading groups.



Translated by

EMILY
WILSON



THE
ILLIAD
HOMER

The Iliad

Homer (translated by Emily Wilson)

848 pages; W.W. Norton

\$19.99

Wilson's translation of a work depicting the Trojan War and believed to date from the eighth century BCE was highly anticipated, given the success of her earlier translation of Homer's "The Odyssey."

It does not disappoint.

Every generation has its "Iliad," and this may be ours. It will be interesting to see how readers of Homer — and there are many, as I know from taking several online courses on the poet — take to the new translation, given people's strong opinions of two classic and established English translations, by the late American scholars Richmond Lattimore and Robert Fagles.

Both editions are fine, and each has its fans. Lattimore's is favored by classics scholars for its adherence to the original Homeric Greek; Fagles', meanwhile, is often the choice of general readers because of its more obvious "poetic" bent.

Critics have acclaimed Wilson's rendering; [Kirkus Reviews declared](#) that this "bloody tale of ancient war and grief comes to vibrant life in modern-day English," adding that "Wilson has again presented a Homer that sings."

What I appreciated in reading the new translation is Wilson's keen sense of the poem's earth-bound qualities.

In a marvelous introductory translator's note, Wilson notes that the center of the poem is an abiding awareness of human mortality. "I know no other narrative that evokes with such unflinching truthfulness the vulnerability of the human body," writes Wilson, who teaches at the University of Pennsylvania.

In an introduction that precedes the translator's note, Wilson writes that the Trojan War epic is a story we already know, in a sense, from our common human experience and fate. "You will die. Everyone you love will also die," Wilson writes. "You will lose them forever. You will be sad and angry." She concludes that knowing this "changes nothing."

"The Iliad," she argues, "will make you understand this unfathomable truth again and again, as if for the very first time."

That insight helped me approach Wilson's translation with fresh eyes. In one of my favorite chapters of the poem (Book Eight), a simple description stood out for me. It is the moment that the Greek warrior Teucer strikes down his Trojan opponents "in quick succession" and "laid them on the earth that feeds us all."

Advertisement

I marveled at the simplicity and beauty of that description of the earth. as I did of the account of the very last section of Book Eight, which amounts to a pause in the poem.

After dramatic descriptions of battle, the last verses of the chapter focus on the hundreds of campfires the Trojans light as a signal to their Greek opponents that any attempt to escape from their entrenched positions will be foolhardy.

The narrative "pause" here is a time of rest and reflection for the soldiers — a contemplative, quiet moment of hushed anticipation of what comes next.

Wilson renders the scene beautifully, writing of "Hearts high," of soldiers looking up at "dazzling moon," and "bright stars," surrounded by "high lookout points" and "tall clifftops."

The section concludes: "A thousand fires were burning on the plain / and by each fire sat fifty men, their faces / lit by the gleam of burning wood. The horses / stood by their chariots and chomped white barley / and grain and waited for the goddess of Dawn."

Wilson is careful to caution contemporary readers to approach Homer with an understanding and appreciation of his time, when wars were fought with spears, arrows and chariots rather than bullets, artillery and drones. Still, it is difficult for me to read the description of troops massed on the plains without thinking of contemporary wars, particularly in Ukraine. It is not hard to imagine Ukrainian soldiers at night facing Russian forces from across their trenches, their faces illuminated by wood fires — or perhaps more likely, by lanterns or flashlights.



A service member of the Ukrainian armed forces walks at fighting positions on the line of separation near the rebel-controlled city of Donetsk April 26. (CNS/Reuters/Anastasia Vlasova)

That kind of frontline imagery appears only occasionally in a recent anthology of Ukrainian war poetry published in the wake of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022, and edited by acclaimed poets Carolyn Forché and Ilya Kaminsky.

But the poems collected in [*In the Hour of War: Poetry from Ukraine*](#) span broadly, with work that depicts war as an unwelcome intruder on all aspects of life, for Ukrainian soldiers and civilians alike. (And to be clear: many of the poems predate the 2022 events, with poets writing of the realities in Ukraine since 2014, when Russia invaded parts of eastern Ukraine. Ukrainians always make clear theirs has been a decade-long fight against Russian invasion.)

IN THE HOUR OF WAR:

POETRY FROM UKRAINE

edited by Carolyn Forché and Ilya Kaminsky



Anastasia Afanasieva • Yuri Andrukhovych • Alex Averbuch

Natalka Bilotserkivets • Dmitry Bliznyk • Andriy Bondar • Ekaterina Derisheva

Boris Humenyuk • Yurii Izdryk • Aleksandr Kabanov • Kateryna Kalytko • Iya Kiva

Marianna Kiyanovska • Lyudmyla Khersonska • Boris Khersonsky • Halyna Kruk

Oksana Lutsyshyna • Oleh Lysheha • Yuliya Musakovska • Viktor Neborak

Lesyk Panasiuk • Marjana Savka • Iryna Shuvalova • Ostap Slyvynsky

Lyuba Yakimchuk • Oksana Zabuzhko • Serhiy Zhadan

In the Hour of War: Poetry from Ukraine
edited Carolyn Forché and Ilya Kaminsky
114 pages; Arrowsmith Press
\$22.00

What strikes me about this remarkably broad and expansive anthology by 27 poets is the concrete imagery that also defines Wilson's "Iliad" translation, but with a contemporary sensibility that renders current realities vividly and movingly.

"And our land is decorated with bloodied fragments / of cement walls" writes poet Dmitry Bliznyk. Another poet, Ekaterina Derisheva, notes: "houses discuss with each other / where the projectile exploded / and the glass lenses / were blown to shreds."

While the war intrudes and becomes normalized, it never ceases to shock, its horrors difficult to describe. "The language in a time of war / can't be understood" writes Lesyk Panasiuk, who begins one poem this way: "Russian soldiers drop from the sky clinging to parachutes of our faces."

This is a country whose citizens are experiencing life as if in a trance. Poet Halyna Kruk writes: "a human walks in the woods like an echo, / lost in thought, distracted / some bullet moves with its own velocity." Not even one-time idylls of peace like forests are safe anymore. War intrudes everywhere and on everyone. Lives, sadly, must be recalibrated in the midst of displacement, fear and flight.

It is not surprising that in a predominantly Christian country, religious imagery evoking the cross and the hope of resurrection appears in some of the work. "Here lies the Lord. Slain in a coffin / The resurrection, it seems, is off schedule," writes Marjana Savka, who ends a poem about a Christ who "walked here among us" this way: "He will rise again. Casting off his cross and vulnerability. / He will rise again and will join our ranks, / Desperate, / Brave, / Familiar, / Alive."

If religious imagery is a familiar trope, so is the representation of battle. Soldier-poet Borys Humenyuk's "When you clean your weapon" continues the tradition of understatement bordering on irony that characterized much of the English poetry emerging from the trenches of World War I.

Writing of the experience of an unmarried teen-aged soldier who has "never swaddled a baby before" Humenyuk writes: "The weapon becomes your only kin / You and the weapon are one." In fact, they become so much like one that "hands, face, hair, clothing, shoes" all reek of gunpowder. The horrifying conclusion? "They

smell of war / You smell of war / You and war are one."



The documentary "Intercepted," directed by Oksana Karpovych, juxtaposes images of Ukraine's devastation with Russian soldiers' phone calls from 2022. (Film Forum/Christopher Nunn)

The "modern" understated tone of Humenyuk's beautifully rendered poem — not something associated with the dramatic and gripping immediacy of "The Iliad" — is also displayed in a new documentary directed by the Ukrainian-Canadian filmmaker Oksana Karpovych.

The remarkable and revelatory "[Intercepted](#)" juxtaposes recordings of phone calls between Russian soldiers stationed in Ukraine and their families back home (and gathered by Ukrainian authorities) with images of day-to-day life in Ukraine.

In a masterpiece of concision, Karpovych eschews graphic images and lets the horror of war unfold in the recorded conversations.

Some of the soldiers express frustration with their mission, believing the Russian invasion of Ukraine is pointless — a fool's errand. But others are full of bravado, and speak of exploits of torture and brutality. Perhaps most disturbing, though, is how

some of the relatives revel in the violence the soldiers describe and display deep-seated hatred of Ukrainians, calling them "khokhols" and comparing them to animals.

Hatred of enemy in war is nothing new, of course; Achilles' deep-seated rage against the figures of Agamemnon and Hector defines the narrative of "The Iliad." Wilson's new translation of that epic poem and encounters with recent Ukrainian war poetry and an arresting and masterful new documentary show that, tragically, war remain one of our constants as a species.