Introduction
Making Homer new

Day by day make it new.

Ezra Pound, Canto LIII

In 1939, French philosopher Simone Weil declared that the *Iliad* was "the purest and the loveliest of mirrors."[1] At the outbreak of World War II, she read Homer's epic with a sense of political urgency – doing so was hardly an escapist activity or a turn away from contemporary history in favor of the classical ideals of the distant past. As war began to rage across Europe, Weil argued for pacifism and discovered in the *Iliad* that "force, today as yesterday" remained at the "very center of human history."[2] A quarter of a century earlier, the *Iliad* also served as a mirror of sorts during World War I. At that earlier moment, soldiers and citizens tended to see in the *Iliad* not the dehumanizing machinery of force but rather its valorization and justification. Early in World War I, the *Iliad* provided a heroic framework through which modern nations, soldiers, and writers projected cultural significance onto the war. In 1915, the British naval fleet, led by the flagship *Agamemnon*, sailed to the Dardanelles and the Battle of Gallipoli. Modern soldiers thus occupied the same lands which had decades earlier been excavated and identified as a Homeric landscape, the Trojan plains.[3] Modern writers went to the war, confident that Homer would enable them to understand their experiences and that they were ultimately participating in an ongoing literary tradition that was aligned with the war effort. British writer Patrick Shaw-Stewart re-read the *Iliad* all the way to Gallipoli, and the poet Rupert Brooke "promised to recite Homer"

[1] Weil, "The *Iliad*, or the Poem of Force," in War and the *Iliad*, trans. Mary McCarthy (New York Review of Books, 2005), 1.
[2] Ibid.
[3] See Eileen Gregory, *H.D. and Hellenism: Classic Lines* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), 23; Paul Fussell, *The Great War and Modern Memory* (Oxford University Press, 1975), 155–61; and Elizabeth Vandiver, *Stand in the Trench, Achilles: Classical Receptions in British Poetry of the Great War* (Oxford University Press, 2010), 248–82.

throughout his wartime experience; both men were among the millions of the War's casualties.[4] Between 1914, when Gilbert Murray announced that the Greek tradition ennobled the "strange deep gladness" of wartime casualties, and 1939, when Weil used the *Iliad* to construct a language of war protest, writers working across Europe turned to Homer to re-evaluate the relationship between the literary tradition and contemporary history.[5]

Homer looms in the early twentieth-century imagination as a site of contestation about the purpose and value of literature at a moment of global violence. Seeing literature as a potential instrument of social change, modernist writers across Europe adapted Homer to critique and disempower the kinds of widespread cultural appropriations of Homer that nurtured the Greek "illusions" that perpetuated modern wars.[6] An era of unprecedented warfare prompted Irish novelist James Joyce, American poets Ezra Pound and H.D., and Russian poet Osip Mandelstam to engage the Homeric epics to fabricate the imaginative and cultural conditions that would make homecoming, healing, and recovery possible for modern citizens. Working in different languages, genres, and national traditions, these writers are unique among the era's classically oriented writers because of their intensive interest in Homer's open-ended, continuing relevance to the modern world. Their evolving readings of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* across the modernist period reveal their surprising versatility in the development of modernist aesthetics and politics.[7]

H.D., Mandelstam, Pound, and Joyce returned to the Homeric tradition over their decades-long careers to affirm the literary and sociopolitical value of their art. Describing her remaking of Greek literature in the

[4] Michael Wood, *In Search of the Trojan War* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 34–5.

[5] Murray, "How Can War Ever Be Right?" in *Faith, War, and Policy: Addresses and Essays on the European War* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1917), 44. Also quoted in Shanyn Fiske, *Heretical Hellenism: Women Writers, Ancient Greece, and the Victorian Popular Imagination* (Athens: Ohio State University Press, 2008), 193.

[6] After both world wars, H.D. concluded that "the Greeks and Trojans alike fought for an illusion" in *Helen in Egypt* (1961) (*H* vii). The narrator of Woolf's experimental war elegy *Jacob's Room* (1922) notes that it is "the governesses who start the Greek myth," who in praising young boys according to Greek ideals of beauty nurture the modern "Greek spirit" of English culture. The narrator concludes, "The point is that we have been brought up in an illusion." *Jacob's Room* (London: Hogarth Press, 1990), 133.

[7] On twentieth-century receptions of Homer, see Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood, eds., *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon* (Oxford University Press, 2007). On the reception of Homer from the ancient to modern worlds, see W. B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1954); Edith Hall, *The Return of Ulysses; A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2008); and Piero Boitani, *The Shadow of Ulysses: Figures of a Myth*, trans. Anita Weston (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 124–5. Also see David Adams, *Colonial Odysseys: Empire and Epic in the Modernist Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).

aftermath of war, H.D. argues, "My work is creative and reconstructive, war or no war, if I can get across the Greek spirit at its highest, I am helping the world, and the future."[8] Joyce saw his fiction as a "moral history" of Ireland aimed at imaginatively liberating his country, and Pound saw writers as the "antennae of the race" (*JSL* 88; *LE* 297). Mandelstam used his allusive lyric poetry to argue against totalitarian oppression, exemplified when he successfully prevented an execution by sending to a political official a volume of his poems bearing the inscription, "every line in this book argues against what you plan to do."[9] To varying degrees, they all shared H.D.'s hope that the poet might be "the original rune-maker, the majic-maker" whose "words are sacred."[10] In a war-torn century, Joyce, Pound, H.D., and Mandelstam engaged in ongoing dialogues with Homer to test what literature could be and do and, ultimately, what it was for.

My title, "Modernism and Homer," draws attention to one of the central paradoxes of modernist writing: the vital presence of classical literature in a movement nominally dedicated to the modern and the new. Modernism is often defined by a profound sense of rupture from the past caused by global warfare and the myriad social, technological, political, and economic changes that marked early twentieth-century history. This moment of rupture generated enthusiasm for artistic novelty and experimentation realized in modernism's strikingly avant-garde movements (e.g. Dadaism, Cubism, Surrealism, Futurism). Voicing this fervor, the Russian Futurist Manifesto "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (1912) called upon modern artists to pitch the literary past "overboard the ship of Modernity."[11] Pound concluded that the first objective of modernist writing was to "break the pentameter," as writers sought to liberate themselves from the constraints of conventional literary forms that suddenly seemed ill-equipped to respond to twentieth-century life (*C* LXXXI/538). However, the literary past persisted for Pound and his contemporaries. Reading many of the complex, allusive masterpieces now at the center of the modernist canon often requires a return to Homer. Despite insisting on its own novelty, modernist art depended on a vital relation to the past,

[8] Barbara Guest, *Herself Defined: H.D. and Her World* (Tucson: Schaffner Press, Inc., 2003), 218.
[9] Clarence Brown, *Mandelstam* (Cambridge University Press, 1978), 123.
[10] H.D., undated letter from 1943, *Between History & Poetry: The Letters of H.D. and Norman Holmes Pearson*, ed. Donna Krolik Hollenberg (University of Iowa Press, 1997), 32.
[11] David Burliuk, Alexey Kruchenykh, Vladimir Mayakovsky, and Velimir Khlebnikov, "A Slap in the Face of Public Taste" (1912), quoted in Mary Ann Caws, ed., *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 230.

by influence, contrast, or a combination of both. Engaging the Homeric tradition helped these writers to reject the Futurist agenda to discard the past and to articulate a productive model of historical thinking that opened new channels of connection between the present and past. They returned to the Homeric tradition over the course of their long careers, as they set out "day by day" to "make it new."

The title "Modernism and Homer" might be taken to imply that there was a single, stable Homer that these modernists read and adapted. In what follows, however, I excavate a history of idiosyncratic, contradictory, dynamic readings of Homer across the modernist period to consider the aesthetic and sociopolitical versatility of the Homeric epics in the evolution of these writers' careers. These conflicted, changing readings of Homer contradict a more static sense of "Homer" that was in fact a useful, overdetermined concept enabling the modernist writers I study to argue for the literary value of their writing by drawing on the cultural authority associated with Homer even as their writing emerged as a complex analysis of that authority. A genealogical unearthing of these engagements with Homer helps us discern a story that was lost at the consolidation of the modernist canon, a story that is marked less by mythic unity and more by discontinuity and disorder, a story that these modernist writers themselves participated in concealing. The association between high modernism and Homer originated as a tactical defense of modernist writing initiated by the modernists – particularly Joyce, Pound, and T. S. Eliot – at a time when it was expedient for them to use Homer's cultural currency to promote their own and each other's work. Their promotional strategies intentionally obscured the complex, changing engagements with Homer that fueled their literary and sociopolitical projects. The movement to depoliticize writers like Pound and Joyce helped them gain admission to the modernist canon, but their readings of Homer evolved in such interesting, influential ways precisely because these readings were inseparable from their changing politics.

In their argument for the importance of Homeric writing in the canon shifts of recent decades, Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood conclude, "the place of Homer in the twentieth century must . . . be understood as part of th[e] gradual erosion of Europe's cultural isolation."[12] The classical writing of Joyce, Pound, H.D., and Mandelstam participated in crucial ways in the opening up and even dismantling of the European canon Graziosi and Greenwood describe. Joyce and Pound have come to be

[12] Graziosi and Greenwood, *Homer in the Twentieth Century*, 14.

associated with the high modernist canon, but they shared with H.D. and Mandelstam a sense of cultural exclusion at the outset of their careers. For reasons of nationality, culture, gender, and language, these writers were not the logical heirs of the Homeric tradition. As a woman, H.D. struggled against a Western literary tradition that silenced and excluded women. Joyce's Stephen Dedalus laments the fact that, as a citizen of colonized Ireland, "he would never be but a shy guest at the feast of the world's culture."[13] Similarly, Pound in "Hugh Selwyn Mauberley" rails against his American heritage, being born in a "half savage country, out of date" (*SPo* 61). Mandelstam, too, understood his cultural and linguistic isolation from European culture and envisioned a future when Europe might learn Russian and thus recognize the "audacity" of Russian poets who had appropriated Homer from them and "who abducted the dove Eurydice from them for the Russian snows" (*CCP* 79). Homer was a foundational, yet protean figure of an international classical culture that H.D., Mandelstam, Pound, and Joyce reached across various cultural faultlines to claim. At a moment when the cultural currency associated with the study of Greek sharply declined, these writers working on the margins of Europe discovered their own personal in-roads into the Homeric tradition. They refused elitist appropriations of Homer and celebrated the mysterious qualities of Homer that spurred their imaginations about the possibilities and limits of literature in a world at war.

Homer and the politics of reading modernism

The Homeric writing of Joyce, Pound, Mandelstam, and H.D. emerged in a crucible of antagonism: *Ulysses* stood trial in the United States (*The United States of America* v. *One Book Entitled 'ULYSSES,' 1933*), Pound was imprisoned for wartime speeches he delivered on Radio Rome (1945), and Mandelstam was banished from Russia's major cities in 1934 for speaking to fewer than a dozen people a poem mocking Stalin. The Homeric epics offered these writers a symbolic language to defy their enemies. The *Odyssey*'s Cyclops story provided a model for subversive, cunning speech overcoming physical power that inspired Joyce and Pound. Joyce used this story to provoke his censors and challenge their power in the censor-defying "Cyclops" episode of Ulysses. Decades later, Pound quoted Homer's Greek "Ou tis," the "no man" pseudonym Odysseus tells Polyphemus, in his Pisan Cantos (*Od* 9.364–7). In an American Detention Training Center for

[13] Joyce, *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (New York: W. W. Norton & Co., 2007), 157.

wartime speeches deemed treasonous by the American government, Pound used Odysseus' cunning language against his jailers to assert his verbal power against their institutional and physical power. H.D. and Mandelstam also found in the Homeric epics an arsenal of tropes, language, and images that mobilized their responses to war and oppression. Both poets returned to the figure of Helen throughout their careers to analyze the origins of contemporary wars by interrogating the latent imaginative violence of traditional representations of Helen as the cause of the Trojan War. In his literary history of Helen, Matthew Gumpert argues that cultural appropriations of Helen demonstrate the ways that "the West has labored to make Helen belong or make the past at home in the present."[14] The work of H.D. and Mandelstam uncovers the contentious nature of this task – by challenging dominant, antagonistic representations of Helen, both poets champion their newly reimagined versions of her as an image of the power poetry might continue to possess as an instrument of cultural recovery.

Despite the clear historical versatility of the Homeric epics for a range of modernist projects, the misconception persists that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* serve primarily as ahistorical, mythological touchstones for modernist writing. The earliest critical history of Joyce's *Ulysses* illustrates the origins of critical commonplaces about modernist receptions of Homer. This history also suggests the ways Homer was used in the earliest articulations of modernism. On September 29, 1920, Joyce wrote to Carlo Linati about his then in-progress "damned monster-novel" *Ulysses* and sent him a "summary – key – skeleton – scheme," which he marked "for home use only" (*JSL* 271). This schema offers a shorthand (but idiosyncratic and cryptic) plan for *Ulysses*, including Homeric titles and correspondences for each episode. After describing the novel's underlying intent and structure, Joyce turned to the trouble with censors that had punctuated his career and, more recently in the United States, his serial publication of *Ulysses* in *The Little Review* (whose editors were prosecuted weeks later for publishing his "Nausicaa"). In the midst of various forms of antagonism and censorship, fully aware that his future readers might dismiss *Ulysses* as both incoherent and obscene, Joyce prodded Linati, and then Eliot, Valery Larbaud, and later Stuart Gilbert to use the novel's architecture and its Homeric plan in a targeted public relations campaign to pre-emptively dismantle charges of formless incoherence and obscenity.[15] Thus, the

[14] Gumpert, *Grafting Helen: The Abduction of the Classical Past* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 2001), xi.

[15] See Katherine Mullin, *James Joyce, Sexuality, and Social Purity* (Cambridge University Press, 2003), 202.

critical history of the most famous modernist adaptation of Homer began at the request of its author, months before *Ulysses* was published in Paris and, due to bans in England and America, more than a decade before it was available to a mass readership.

The *Odyssey* offered Joyce's first critics a means to defend Joyce and *Ulysses* against the real and imagined objections of censors and bewildered readers. The earliest critical conversations about Joyce's use of the *Odyssey* were thus a tactical maneuver designed to mobilize the mythic and aesthetic value ascribed to Homer to diffuse attacks on *Ulysses*. Of necessity, this campaign overlooked the much more complex, multifaceted reading of Homer evident in both *Ulysses* and in the genetic source materials Joyce left behind giving some clues about his creative process.[16] In championing Joyce and *Ulysses* against censors and potentially hostile readers, Larbaud, Eliot, and Pound used Homer's cultural authority to hail *Ulysses* as an emerging masterpiece. In his review, Pound quoted the *Odyssey* in Greek and called for "all men [to] unite and give praise to *Ulysses*" (*PJ* 194). Pound used Homer's cultural currency in a way that suggests that Homer set the standard for the early praise of *Ulysses*. Larbaud argued that, because of its apparent transparency, the *Odyssey* offered the promise of comprehension to readers of *Ulysses*. Larbaud described the confusion of these readers by noting, "The reader who approaches this book without the *Odyssey* clearly in mind will be thrown into dismay . . . for he is plunged into the middle of a conversation which will seem to him incoherent." He continues, "But where is the key? I venture to say, in the door, or rather on the cover. It is the title: *Ulysses*."[17]

Pound and Eliot disagreed about this sense that the *Odyssey* was the key to unlock *Ulysses*. Then in the midst of his own complex engagement with Homer, Pound argued against the idea that the *Odyssey* should be viewed as an interpretive tool and instead saw Joyce's *Odyssey* as "part of Joyce's medievalism, chiefly his own affair, a scaffold, a means of construction, justified by the result, and justifiable by it only" (*LE* 406). In one of the best-known pieces of modernist literary criticism, Eliot echoes and formalizes Larbaud's sense that the *Odyssey* served as a source of order and coherence for *Ulysses*. In 1923, Eliot famously identified Joyce's mythic method as "simply a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving a shape and

[16] See Kevin Dettmar, *The Illicit Joyce of Postmodernism: Reading Against the Grain* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996), 162–8; and Perry Meisel, *The Myth of the Modern: A Study in British Literature and Criticism after 1850* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 144.

[17] Larbaud, "James Joyce," in *James Joyce: The Critical Heritage, Volume I, ed. Robert H. Deming (London: Routledge, 1997), 260.*

a significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history."[18] Eliot's characterization of Joyce's systematic use of Homer quickly gained critical traction as a way of understanding Joyce's use of myth, even though Joyce privately objected and suggested the less systematic, more open-ended, and ultimately less marketable alternative "two plane" (*JSL* 297). Even though there is significant evidence that Joyce did not read the *Odyssey* only as a source of mythic order, Eliot's theory provided a conceptual framework for justifying Joyce's "damned monster-novel" in a hostile cultural and social environment.

This snapshot reveals the formation of critical discourse about Joyce's mythic and systematic engagement that then became entrenched in the years of the rise of modernist studies. This critical history anticipates a much broader movement in the years surrounding World War II when the Homeric epics were used in ways that affirmed the approaches of Eliot and Larbaud. At this later moment, critics used Homer's mythic dimensions to promote an ahistorical vision of modernist writing that suited the rising tide of formalism and New Criticism. Formalist, mythological, aesthetic studies especially appealed to Pound's publishers and his earliest critical advocates in the 1950s. A mythological, ahistorical vision of Homer helped Pound's first advocates redirect public discourse on Pound by presenting an apolitical, aesthetic Pound, who, at that time, was imprisoned in a mental hospital for the criminally insane.[19] Pound's politics, personality, and biography at this key moment of the formation of modernist studies were treated by one noted Pound scholar as "peripheral booby traps," and his work with Homer provided a field of study for avoiding such traps.[20] For decades, Mandelstam scholars working in the Soviet Union, Europe, and the United States tended to avoid political readings of his poems altogether, in a political climate when access to accurate information about his life, poetry, and the historical contexts that shaped both was impossible to verify. Thus, the prevailing methodology for reading his poems – called subtextual criticism – treats a poem's allusions as the key to its meaning, usually without reference to historical context. Scholarly approaches to H.D.'s poems formed at a later historical moment – in the late 1970s and early 1980s with the pioneering work of Susan Stanford Friedman and others. Because H.D.'s critics have been drawn to the institutional

[18] Eliot, "Ulysses, Order, and Myth," *The Dial* 75 (1923): 483.
[19] On the campaign to rehabilitate Pound's legacy, see Gregory Barnhisel, *James Laughlin, New Directions, and the Remaking of Ezra Pound* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2005).
[20] Hugh Kenner, *The Poetry of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1951), 217.

processes that (in Friedman's phrase) buried H.D., they have directed sustained attention to the critical history of modernist studies. Studies by Friedman, Rachel Blau DuPlessis, Eileen Gregory, and others on H.D.'s classicism thereby offer critical models that can illuminate the Homeric writing of her male contemporaries. However, these models have yet to be integrated into broader discussions of modernist classical writing. As such, years after the passing of New Criticism, after the reappraisal of modernist writers in light of their historicity and their political engagements, these formalist, mythic assumptions about modernist adaptations of Homer remain largely intact.

The tendency to treat the Homeric epics as an interpretive key for decoding allusive modernist writing can still be felt in reading guides to works like *Ulysses* and *The Cantos* that tend to stabilize dynamic allusive practices in terms of mostly static 1:1 correspondences.[21] For practical purposes, reading guides must conceal the drama of allusion underlying modernist Homeric writing. They cannot account for Joyce's and Pound's continual reworking of their modern figures of Odysseus or for H.D.'s and Mandelstam's ongoing rewritings of Helen. These guides also by their very existence convey an overwhelming standard for a prerequisite knowledge required to read modernist texts. None of these writers would have comfortably met such standards: none read ancient Greek with any degree of fluency, and their readings of Homer were often idiosyncratic.[22] Despite this gap, their allusive writing has come to be associated with authoritative values frequently at odds with the literature itself. For example, Joseph Pucci argues that "allusion demands, and in demanding creates, a powerful reader . . . the Full-Knowing Reader." Pucci celebrates modernism as the culmination of the history of the "Full-Knowing Reader." "When they read [Pound's] *Cantos*," Pucci claims, "full-knowing readers confront the acme of allusive writing in the Western literary tradition, because they are asked to forgo entirely the normal constraints implied in reading and to draw entirely on the competencies of full-knowing reading to make these

[21] For example, see Don Gifford and Robert Seidman, *Ulysses Annotated: Notes for James Joyce's* Ulysses (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1988); and Carroll Terrell, *A Companion to The Cantos of Ezra Pound* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[22] One example of this is Pound's Greek in the Pisan Cantos. Pound tried to quote Homer from memory throughout, and many of his quotes are barely coherent. Pound relied on educator and translator Dudley Fitts to correct his errors, which has caused an editorial conundrum ever since (does one leave the errors as a meaningful – and telling – record of the conditions in which the poem emerged?). Ronald Bush and David Ten Eyck take up such questions in the critical edition of the Pisan Cantos, forthcoming from Oxford University Press.

poems mean."[23] However, the works of Mandelstam, H.D, Pound, and Joyce do not often display the scholarly precision applied in studies of their allusions. Their writing vitally depends on accidents, mistakes, distortions, and creative misreadings. And, these writers were more concerned with how readers might manage partial, incomplete, and failing knowledge than they were in creating assured pedantic readers.

Focusing on the literary processes as well as the published products of these writers provides a new way of thinking about their engagements with Homer that does not reproduce the tactical, dehistoricizing, mythic flattening initiated by high modernism's first defenders at a time when such flattening was expedient. Following the open drama of allusion in these works across the first half of the twentieth century allows us to appreciate in new ways the improvisatory, unsystematic nature of modernist Homeric writing. The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were never quite the known entities to these writers that they have sometimes seemed to be to their critics. Their notes, drafts, letters, and research notebooks show that "Homer" meant very different things to them depending on what they read, how, and when – these materials show that they were self-consciously interested in the historically and culturally specific understandings of Homer that emerged from their readings of and about the Homeric epics.

Reading Homer in the twentieth century

As students of the Homeric tradition, H.D., Pound, Mandelstam, and Joyce were keenly interested in the cultural and linguistic pathways of transmission that brought the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* from ancient Greece to modern America, Russia, and Ireland. In their attention to transmission and translation, they pursued a dialogical, fluid, evolving notion of the literary tradition (and refused to see it as static, monological, monolingual, and monolithic). Collectively, their work undermined the rigid standards of fidelity in translation advocated half of a century earlier by Matthew Arnold in "On Translating Homer," a series of lectures at Oxford (November and December 1860 [published 1861]). They did so through their own dynamic, playful translation practices (e.g. Pound's Canto I and H.D.'s contributions to the Poets' Translation Series in 1915–6). They

[23] Pucci, *The Full-Knowing Reader: Allusion and the Power of the Reader in the Western Literary Tradition* (New Haven: Yale, 1998), 28 and 241. On modernist difficulty and elitism, see Leonard Diepeeven, *The Difficulties of Modernism* (New York and London: Routledge, 2003) and Sean Latham, *Am I a Snob?: Modernism and the Novel* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2003).