An Excerpt of Otto Maria Carpeaux's History of Western Literature: The Greeks and Romans

A New Translation

Alan M Dalke

December 2023

Greek Literature[1], so varied in verse metrics, style of expression, genres and temperaments, seems a little monotonous in its subjects. Many times, theatrical pieces return to the same stories, poetry always celebrates the same ideals, and prose writers lean on the same quotations. The basis of Greek literature continues, during the centuries, always the same, and this basis is a cycle of epic poems that constitute a traditional and invariable cannon. The greater part of these epics and poems was linked, in any way, to the name of a legendary poet; the name that is found still today in the covers of our editions of the Iliad and the Odyssey: the name of Homer.[2]

No classical author has ever achieved such undisputed fame. The name of Homer became a synonym for poet. This glory is due, in large part, to the innumerable failed efforts to imitate him. It'd be difficult to list the 'modern' epics that were written to rival Homer; and the manifest ruin of all imitators strengthens the undisputed opinion: Homer is the greatest of poets. The ancient Greeks agreed, but for other reasons; because never – other than in the last phases of literary decadence – a Greek poet thought of imitating Homer. The Homeric epics were considered a fixed cannon, to which it was forbidden to add other epics, of more modern origin. The Iliad and the Odyssey were used, in Greek schools, as textbooks; not as we others do, reading to boys some great works of poetry to educate their literary taste; but in the way one learns the

[1] G. Murray: The History of Ancient Greek Literature. New York, 1912.

[2] The first printed edition of the Homeric epics is of Chalkondylos, Florence, 1488. Followed by Aldina, 1504, Stephanus, 1566, and innumerable others, until the critical edition of Immanuel Bekker, 1858. The best modern edition is Allen, 5 vols., Oxford, 1902/1912. The main works about Homer, beyond the ones cited in the discussion of the "Homeric question" are the following:

K. Bréal: Pour mieux connaître Homère. 2ª ed. Paris, 1911.
K. Roth: Die Odyssee als Dichtung. Paderborn, 1914.
T. T. Sheppard: The Rise of the Greek Epic. Oxford, 1924.
E. Turolla: Saggio sulla Poesia di Omero. Bari, 1930.
W. I. Woodhouse: The Composition of Homer´s Odyssey. Oxford, 1930.
F. Robert: Homère. Paris, 1950.
E. M. Bowra: Heroic Poetry. Oxford, 1952.

catechism by heart. To the ancients, Homer was not a literary work, mandatory reading for students and object of critical discussion between literary men. In antiquity, too, just like in modern times, Homer was undisputed: but not as epic, but as Bible. It was a code. Verses from Homer served to support literary opinions, philosophical theses, religious sentiments, judicial sentences, and political motions. Homer's verses were cited in speeches from lawyers and politicians as irrefutable arguments. "Homer": this means "tradition", in the sense the Roman Church used the word, as the rule for interpretation of doctrine and life.

But this doctrine and this life has nothing to do with our life and our traditions. Homer is, or could be, the bible of a different world. The famous "objective realism" of Homer, that made him the rule of Greek life, precisely removes him from our life, whose reality would require different, objective rules. To us others, Homer cannot be anything other than the symbol of a great literary work, purely literary and capable of being discussed. Because of this, the authenticity of the Homeric epics – the famous "Homeric question" – would have had the greatest importance to the ancient Greeks, the same that, in the XVIII and XIX centuries, did the discussions about the authenticity of biblical books among theologians. To us, the Homeric Question, that so captivates philologists and archeologists, is of less importance. More important is knowing if the Iliad and the Odyssey are venerable monuments or living forces. But there can be no doubts: although immensely remote from us, the two poems continued to be synonyms for Poetry.

Matthew Arnold, in his essay about the art of translating Homer[3], gave to "Homeric realism" a stylistic definition: Homer's style would be "fast, direct, simple and noble". The first three qualities define realism. By the fourth Homer is distinguished from all other realists. Homer speaks of all that is human; includes in human life the gods, that have faces like ours, but also the subhuman and even animal side of our life. The physical fatigues, the food, the love in its physical expressions, all appears in Homer, and the more grandiloquent words about gods and heroes would serve only for an unpleasant contrast with the reality of the life depicted, if not for that fourth quality of the Homeric style: all seems dignified, noble, and not by the choice of euphemisms, but by the use of stereotyped adjectives and comparisons. The apparent monotony of these repetitions seems to tell us: see, human life is always like this, eternally like this; and this aspect of things sub specie aeternitatis dignifies everything without ever disfiguring the truth. Homer – or however the poet was called, it does not matter – achieves the miracle of giving true life in fixed formulas, in cliches. It does not matter if this is the result of the innate capacities of a genius people or of the work of a poetic genius. It reveals the presence of a great capacity for stylization, the same that shows itself in the composition of the two epics.

The Iliad is full of battle sounds and personal fights. At first glance, it is hard to distinguish the details. Everything and all seem the same, like in paintings by

[3]M. Arnold: "On Translating Homer", 1861. (In: Essays Literary and Critical, 1865.)

Florentine painters of the XV century, in which all figures have the same height. An analysis of the plot soon reveals a multiplicity of episodes around the main characters: Anger, absence, and final battle of Achilles, the individual martial enterprises of Ajax, Diomedes, and Menelaus, the interventions of Agamemnon and Ulysses, that noble, this prudent, the episodic wisdom of Nestor and the episodic slander of Thersites, and more, the Trojan episodes: the weakness of Paris, the stoic bravery of Hector, the sentimental feeling of Andromache, the tragic feeling of Priam. The end of Troy is absolutely not the subject of the poem. At the beginning, it is indicated that the subject is the wrath of Achilles. But this "Aquileis" occupies only part of the poem; other parts, in which the battle for Troy is the subject, break the unity, and the "Aquileis" ends in the tragic XXIII book, with no depiction of the fall of Troy. But the Iliad has one more book: the XXIV. The end of the epic is the meeting between Achilles and Priam: Between Achilles, whose personal attitude barred the completion of the Greek plans, and Priam, who knows, however, that his city is condemned. The same, however, we know from the beginning and through all the episodic battles: Troy is lost. The Iliad is a Greek poem; the largest part of the narrative is between Greeks, and the point of view of the poet seems the Greek, against the assailed Trojans. In the Latin versions of the Iliad that were made at the end of antiquity and that have come through the name of Dictys and Dares, the perspective changed: the authors took the Trojan side; and the middle ages, that only knew the Latin versions, followed them. From the time of the humanists, it seems to us a misrepresentation of the sense of the epic; but we'll have to admit the sense of justice in the medieval interpretation. Homer is Greek; but he does not take sides, keeps himself objective. Almost to the contrary, his human sentiment inclines more to the Trojans; it is to the Greeks he remembers, in the memorable verses, the destiny of all generations that "fall like the leaves of trees"; and the only episode in which a certain sentimentalism is revealed is the farewell of Hector and Andromache. In all the epic we feel vaguely and painfully the future end of the assailed city; the tragedy of Troy is the poetic determinate that unifies the disperse episodes of the Iliad around the "Aquileis", that ends with the decisive strike against Troy: the death of Hector.

In the Odyssey, an Identical unity of composition is revealed. At first appearance, there is no connection between the "Nostos", the journey of Ulysses through the Mediterranean in search of his homeland, and the "Romance of Ithaca", the expulsion of the suitors of faithful Penelope. The "Nostos" is a great fairy-tale: the adventures of a fantastic captain, between lotus-eaters, cyclopes, mermaids, in the islands of Calypso and Circe, between the rocks of Scylla and Charybdis; it is, at the same time, the dream and nightmare of Greek sailors. The "Romance of Ithaca" is not a fairy-tale: It is a domestic tale, almost bourgeois, described with the realism of a Parisian comedy-writer of the XIX century, with interludes of popular realism, from the figure of the shepherd to Ulysses' dog, that recognizes the owner and dies. Exactly in between the two parts, in book XI, the "Nekyia", the descent of Ulysses to Hades, where he finds the dead from the Trojan war lamenting their death. With this episode the adventures end. From this moment the hero's poet sings the prosaic reality:

the house, the family, the servants and the dog. In the reign of death, Ulysses finds the way of life. The "Nekyia", between the fantastical adventures and the way home, serves to commemorate the somber end of Troy and the tragic destiny of the Greeks, of which only Ulysses will find the final peace in the life of the Greek aristocrat, with his children, servants, and domestic animals. With this "noble realism" is the intimate unity between the Iliad and the Odyssey confirmed.

The question raised about the unity of both poems is born, however, from this same unity. The equilibrium between the Olympus and the tragedy in the Iliad, between the fantastical adventures and the crepuscular idyl in the Odyssey, is so perfect, and the objectivity of the poems is so grand, that the reader forgets he is reading poetry. The plot of both epic poems is just like human life: it was not invented; all must have happened in this way. It isn't necessary to explain or interpret anything. The poet disappears behind the poem. And thus, it was possible to doubt his historical existence; after, the identity of the authors of two epics; and finally, the individual authorship of the poems.

Some doubts existed already, but the great devil's advocate was Friedrich August Wolf. In his Prolegomena ad Homerum (1795), he pointed to contradictions and stylistic differences between the Iliad and the Odyssey and within each epic; basing himself in the experiences of the XVIII century, that had discovered anonymous popular poetry and believed itself to hold in the songs of the legendary Ossian a Nordic pendant of the Homeric poems, Wolf denied the unity of the epics; they would rather be compositions of a Greek collective genius. The Romanticist passion for popular poetry and for "inspiration", without the contribution of "Reason" from classicists, approved the wolfian thesis. Karl Lachmann (Betrachtungen uber die Ilias des Homer, 1837) considered the Iliad a collection of 16 independent poems, afterwards unified by an "editor". G. Hermann (De interpolationibus Homeri, 1832) admitted the authorship of Homer – the name doesn't matter – for two short poems: "The Wrath of Achilles" and "The Return of Ulysses"; those would be the nuclei around which the epics were developed by interpolations and anonymous appendages, later attributed to Homer himself. The increasingly accurate analysis of language, of style and of composition convinced the majority of philologists; the great authority of Ulrich von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff is primarily responsible for the provisory victory of the collectivist theory[4].

Against the philological dissections, however, were the critics who hadn't lost sight of the literary qualities of the poems: the symmetric grouping of speeches, the intentional antithesis between Achilles and Paris, the ethical judgement of characters, the Odyssey's explicit answer to the questions left from the reading of the Iliad. Contradictions are found, too, in authentic works of individual authors, ancients and moderns, and eventually the Homeric contradictions lost the importance that was attributed before, in view of the unity of conception

[4]U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff: Die Ilias und Homer. Berlin, 1920.
U. von Wilamowitz-Moellendorff: Die Heimkehr des Odysseus. Berlin, 1927.
P. Cauer: Grundfragen der Homerkritik. 3ª ed. 2 vols. Leipzig, 1921/1923.

and composition of the two epics. The romantic view of popular and collective poetry reveals itself a prejudice, and "Unitarianism" gradually gains ground[5].

The study of the structure of the poems, instead of the destructive analysis, reveals a unity of design. There seems to be a contradiction between the heroic ethic of warriors, in the Iliad, and the domestic ethic of the aristocratic landowners in the Odyssey. But that warlike ethic is the glorification of the kalokagathia, the ideal of physical and spiritual perfection, the same that informs the introduction of the Odyssey, the so-called "Telemachy", in which were found the pedagogical intuitions that Fénelon had guessed[6]. The pedagogical designs of Homer were, after Eduard Schwartz, studied by Jaeger[7], and the function of the Homeric poems in antiquity became clear. The heroic pathos of the Iliad and the aristocratic ethic of the Odyssey are ideal images of life that exert a lasting influence over Greek reality. In the "Telemachia" and the "education" of Achilles this intention is clear. The instrument of the pedagogical intention is the creation of ideal examples taken from myth. The tradition only offered a series of battles; Homer interpreted them as exemplary victories of superior men, the greatest being that of Achilles. That is why the Iliad does not go beyond that victory, that is essentially the victory of the hero over himself. The presence of the Homeric gods, that are by definition human ideals, reveals not only the human condition, but also the capacity of men to overcome it. In the Odyssey, the gods act as instruments of justice in the world: thus the 'happy end'[8], the substitution of the tragic for the idyllic ending. These "examples" can be applied – and Homer emphasizes it – to the most diverse temperaments and to men of all social conditions. Greeks of all ages find in Homer answers to the conduct of life; the content and even the art lost the main role considering the superior strength of the ethical tradition.

"Homer" is the Greek world itself. It was born with the Greek civilization: the language and meter, the hexameter, are born at the same time. Belonging to a time that is, from the historical point of view, a primitive time, the Homeric epics reveal simultaneously the existence of a perfectly mature literature. It is not possible to determine precisely the time when the Homeric epics were composed. When Schliemann discovered, in Asia Minor, the ruins of the city of Troy, and when the existence of a pre-Hellenic civilization was revealed in Mycenae and Crete, a definitive solution to the Homeric problem was expected. It was not possible, however, to establish a perfect agreement between the philological analyses and the archaeological discoveries. The Iliad faithfully

[5]I. Van Leeuwen: Commentationes Homericae. Leyden, 1911.
E. Bethe: Homer. Dichtung und Sage. 3 vols. Leipzig, 1914/1927.
E. Drerup: Homerische Poetik. Wuerzburg, 1921.
C. M. Bowra: Tradition and Design in the Iliad. Oxford, 1930.
P. Von der Muehll: Der Dichter der Odyssee. Leipzig, 1940.
E. Howald: Der Dichter der Ilias. Zurich, 1946.

[6]E. Schwartz: Die Odyssee. Muenchen, 1924.

[7]W. Jaeger: Paideia. Die Bildung des griechischen Menschen. Berlin, 1933.

[8]Carpeaux uses here the English expression 'happy end', meaning a traditional, satisfying, happy ending.

describes the feudal epoch of Greece[9], and the content of the Odyssey stands near the Phoenician era of the Mediterranean civilization[10]. But it is impossible to distinguish between the historical reality and the poetic panorama. The most likely time of the Homeric origins is between the IX and VII centuries before our era. In the epics, the "pre-Homeric" religion and – in part – the Mycenaean civilization are already forgotten. Rationalization is so advanced that Greeks from all ages could read Homer without finding there primitive incompatibilities with their own time. Soon after, the Batrachomyomachia[11] was possible, the first heroic-comic epic, a description of the "Homeric" battle between frogs and mice, a parody of the Iliad, without offending the majesty of Homer. Homer encompasses all: sun and night, tragedy and humor, the entire Greek universe of which it is the bible and ideal cannon. An aesthetic and religious, educational and political cannon; a complete reality, but not the immediate reflection of a reality. If Homer was just this reflection, it would have lost all its importance with the fall of Greek civilization. But it was already, to the Greeks, an ideal image; and has never disappeared. The equilibrium between realism and ideality is what gives the Homeric poems eternal life: the aesthetic, religious and political bible of the Greeks could transform itself into the literary bible of the whole western civilization.

[9] A. Lang: The World of Homer. London, 1910.
W. Schadewaldt: Von Homers Welt und Werk. 2.ª ed. Stuttgart, 1951.

[10] V. Bérard: Introduction à l'Odyssée. 2.ª ed. 2 vols. Paris, 1933.

[11] The Batrachomyomachia was attributed to the legendary poet Pigres. Likely from the V century BCE, although the language is from Alexandrian times (maybe a posteriorly altered version). Edition by A. Ludwich, Leipzig, 1896