

PLATO AND HOMER. THE PHILOSOPHER'S OPINION OF THE GREAT POET

Plato's references to Homer are numerous and can be found in works that cover all the phases of the philosopher's writings (from the early dialogues to the mature or late ones).

The reasons why Plato invokes Homer are varied and can be diametrically opposed to each other. In some places the philosopher turns to Homeric lines in order to strengthen or give weight to his arguments (e.g. *Phaed.*, 112 a, *Leg.*, 680 b 4 ff., 706 d 3 ff.), elsewhere to embellish his argument (e.g. *Apol.*, 34 d 5), in other places to create a parallel between a contemporary situation and an epic one (*Symp.*, 174 d 2) and other times to consult Homer and use his words as an example (*Rep.*, 404 b 10 ff., 441 b 4 - c 2, 468 c 10 - e 2). Indeed, at one point the philosopher's thinking seems to be so close to this poet that the Platonic ἀνδρείκελον (that is, the image of a man) comes to be identified with the Homeric θεοείκελον. At *Republic*, 501 b Plato says that the ἀνδρείκελον must be constructed by the philosophers in such a way as to be associated exactly with the Homeric θεοειδές and θεοείκελον (that is, the image of man to be similar to and as beautiful as god). Here, it is worth recalling James Adam's charming comment on *Rep.*, 501 b that «It is pleasing to meet with so cordial and spontaneous an acknowledgment of Homer as a kindred spirit in a passage so full of Plato's characteristic idealism»¹. According to Adam, the observation of "Longinus" (*Subl.*, 13, 3) that Plato deserves the characterisation Ὀμηρικώτατος more than Herodotus, Stesichorus and Archilochus is correct, as in his texts he channels the myriad streams of the Homeric headspring.

On the other hand, there are abundant points in Plato where he turns against Homer. For example, in *Charmides*, 161 a 1 ff., the philosopher bumps into a Homeric line that says «αἰδώς [i.e. shame] is not a good companion for whoever is in need» (*Od.*, 17, 347 αἰδώς δ' οὐκ ἀγαθὴ κεχρημένῳ ἀνδρὶ παρεῖναι). This line reflects a realistic popular attitude that fits with the situation of the beggar Odysseus. After an absence of twenty years Odysseus appeared in his palace not as king but disguised as a beggar, an old man, bowed and dressed in rags, so that he could feel out the situation and judge how he could regain his property. His son Telemachus is the first to offer him charity and gives him the order to beg from

1. J. ADAM, *The Republic of Plato*, vol. II, Cambridge, Cambridge Univ. Press, ²1963, p. 42.



each suitor individually, so as to get to know them one-by-one. Telemachus hides the true reason as to why Odysseus begs with the proverbial phrase «shame is not a good companion for whoever is in need». Plato cannot reconcile with the realistic meaning of the phrase and, in an unbending way, concludes that for Homer αἰδώς is sometimes good and sometimes bad. Something similar is not, however, the case for Plato as shame, temperance and other virtues can only be good.

In *Hippias Minor* (371 a - b 1) the philosopher interprets Homer oddly, even misinterprets him, reaching the point where Achilles has been sketched by the poet as a deceiver, treacherous and arrogant, and that not even Odysseus could catch Achilles' lies! The truth is that strange views can be heard in this dialogue, which clash with common sense, for example that the honest man and the liar are the same!

Yet, it is in the *Republic* and *Phaedrus* where Plato vehemently attacks Homer. Let us examine the two works.

In the *Republic* (595 a ff.) the philosopher explains that poetry with a mimetic character (such as Homeric and dramatic poetry) presents truth at third hand and, as such, must be excluded from a properly founded city. Because truth is above all and, for Plato, the only true world is the ideal one. The world in which we live (the tangible or the apparent) is an image of the true one and a second-hand imitation. When painters and poets mimic the tangible world they are essentially constructing images of images. They are presenting, that is, the ideal world at third hand with the result that they are three removes from the truth. Imitation (and, consequently, mimetic poetry) is a παιδιὰ (a game, an entertainment) and not ἔργον (that is, a serious occupation; *Rep.*, 602 b 8, cf. also *Soph.*, 235 a 1 ff., *Pol.*, 288 c, *Leg.*, 889 c 6 - d 4). Homer, as a mimic and constructor of images, is three steps below the truth as regards virtue and, as such, cannot serve as the governor of the polity or as a general; nor is he in a position to educate people and to improve them morally (*Rep.*, 599 c ff.). The mythical narratives of epics (such as plots, disputes and battles between gods) are characterised by Plato as false and some even as badly made (*Rep.*, 377 d 4 ff.). The philosopher prohibits such narratives from being heard in his city; there, children must hear beautiful myths that will lead exclusively to virtue. According to Plato, Homer commits a stupid error when he says (*Il.*, 24, 527 ff.) that «there are two jars at Zeus' threshold; one is filled with misfortunes and the other with goods. To whomever Zeus gives, all mixed up, from one of the two, he will at some time suffer and at another be fortunate. To whomever Zeus gives only from the misfortunes, this makes him dishonoured». The philosopher disagrees with the above lines because, in his opinion, god is good and the cause only of the good things that happen to people. For the bad things, people should look elsewhere for the cause and not to god. When Homer presents the great hero Achilles crying and grieving heartrenderingly over the death of his friend Patroclus (*Il.*, 18, 22 ff., 24, 3 ff.) or when he makes him confess that he would rather be alive and working elsewhere for a poor and insignificant boss than be the ruler of the dead in the Underworld (*Od.* 11, 488-491), Plato reacts and deletes these lines (*Rep.*, 386 a 6 ff., 387 b 1 ff.). They may be lines of great poetic value and have a pleasant sound but, according to the philosopher's opinions, they do not make the young either manly or worthy fighters. The sweetness of Homeric poetry, Plato

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says, on the one hand, creates pleasure and sorrow but, on the other, distances us from the law and excellent discourse. The morally weak gods and heroes are bad role models for the young. The mimetic poets can corrupt even good people (*Rep.*, 605 c 7). Homer is the greatest poet and the first of the tragedians. His poetry charms but, because he serves the pleasurable and sweet Muse, he has no place in a well-governed polity. In the sterile society of Plato only hymns towards the gods and encomia towards good people are permitted (*Rep.*, 607 a 2-8, cf. also 398 a - b 4). One must be protected from the remaining poetry as it cannot demonstrate that it can distinguish virtue and truth. For Plato the best thing is for man to reject evil and become good. This will happen when he does not neglect justice and other virtues nor permits himself to be swept away by honours, money, positions and even by poetry (*Rep.*, 608 b 4-8).

In the *Phaedrus* Plato comments with the usual Socratic irony on the cases of Homer and the lyric poet Stesichorus who were punished by being blinded, because they erred in their treatment of mythological material. More specifically, Stesichorus was suddenly blinded because in one of his poems he unjustly slurred the goddess Helen. According to Plato's arguments, Homer remained in complete ignorance and blindness because he did not realise the cause of his punishment and, thus, did not correct it. According to the philosopher, however, Stesichorus was a μουσικός (= musical) man and for this reason he realised the cause of his punishment and so when he composed his *Palinode* («recantation»), in which he restored the good reputation of Helen, he recovered his sight once more (*Phaedr.*, 243 a 3 - b 3 ἔστιν δὲ τοῖς ἀμαρτάνουσι περὶ μεθυστικῶν καθαρός ἀρχαῖος, ὃν Ὅμηρος μὲν οὐκ ᾔσθετο, Στησίχορος δέ, τῶν γὰρ σμμάτων στερηθεὶς διὰ τὴν Ἑλένης κακηγορίαν οὐκ ᾔγνόησεν ὥσπερ Ὅμηρος, ἀλλ' ἄτε μουσικός ὢν ἔγνω τὴν αἰτίαν ... καὶ ποιήσας δὴ πᾶσαν τὴν καλουμένην Παλινωδίαν παραχρῆμα ἀνέβλεψεν).

Plato presents the poet Stesichorus as superior to Homer, even though Stesichorus operated with Homer as his model (cf. "Longinus", *Subl.*, 13, 3)! From the above comparison Stesichorus is presented as a μουσικός man whilst Homer is not; this is not simply a contrast between a lyric and an epic poet, but something more is being implied: the μουσικός man is sensible, good (*Resp.*, 349 e) and his whole behaviour is marked by harmony (*Resp.*, 403 a 8). He is for certain inspired by the ὀρθή Muse, who delights the excellent people, those who are distinguished by virtue and education (*Leg.*, 658 e 8-659 a 1, 668 b 5-6). By contrast, the ἄμουσος is foolish, bad (*Resp.*, 349 e) and follows the ἡδεῖα Muse, who offers pleasure and pain but circumvents the law and rational principle (*Resp.*, 607 a 5-8, *Leg.*, 668 b 5). As such, the μουσικός is a superior, a true artist. K. Bassi² observes that in the *Phaedrus* Homer is presented as naive and Stesichorus as a well-educated poet.

The allusive and multi-level language of Plato can also be seen in the verb οὐκ

2. K. BASSI, Helen and the Discourse of Denial in Stesichorus' *Palinode*, *Arethusa*, 26, 1993, pp. 54-55.

ἦσθετο (*Phaedr.*, 243 a 4), as αἰσθάνομαι means: «to perceive i. through the senses, ii. through the mind». Homer never felt purification either physically (by having his vision enlightened), or intellectually (by having his mind enlightened). As the unmusical man that he was, he never understood that there was such a purification. His mind was not enlightened so as to show him the cause of his physical blindness and nor was his physical blindness able to make him consider its cause and rectify it. In contrast, the loss of his physical sight was of concern to Stesichorus; being musical, devoted to the Muses, as he was, his mind was enlightened and he diagnosed the cause. Thus, by correcting his error, his eyes were immediately illuminated. The composition of the *Palinode* with the treatment of the true myth, where Helen never betrayed her lawful husband, was never swept away by her love for Paris and never followed him to Troy, healed the poet both spiritually and physically. Plato teaches us in the *Phaedrus* just how closely knowledge (*i.e.* intellectual enlightenment), on the one hand, is connected to physical enlightenment and, on the other, ignorance (*i.e.* intellectual blindness) is connected to physical blindness. The enlightened poet tells the truth, whilst the blind poet does not touch it (cf. *Resp.*, 600 e 6 τῆς δὲ ἀληθείας οὐχ ἄπτεσθαι).

We are obliged to note, however, that Plato does not behave completely honourably in the above passage from the *Phaedrus*. He is very well informed of the content of the Stesichorean *Palinode*³, in which its creator (that is, Stesichorus) did not criticise only Homer but also Hesiod for inaccuracies against Helen (cf. fr. 193 *PMGF*), yet Plato chooses to censure only Homer. There are two reasons for this: a. the example of the blind Homer suits Plato's theories of natural and intellectual blinding. Although Hesiod blasphemed against Helen (for example, fr. 176, 7 M.-W.), he did not suffer any kind of punishment, and b. (most of all) as we have already noted, it was an enduring aim of Plato constantly to criticise Homer (I discuss the reasons below). The explanation Plato gives for Stesichorus, that this poet was able to diagnose the cause of his calamity because he was a μουσικός man («being devoted to the Muses, a well-educated man») is completely subjective and serves the philosopher's purpose (that is, to disparage Homer as non μουσικός in comparison to Stesichorus). Even so, the reader of Plato may well ask: but how, therefore, could Stesichorus as a μουσικός ἀνὴρ (that is, virtuous, wise and a follower of the ὀρθή Muse) commit such a great error and compose a slanderous poem against the goddess Helen (Ἑλένης κακηγορία)? But this question, it seems, did not concern the great philosopher at all.

I end my paper with the following conclusions: Plato systematically criticises Homer because, on the one hand, Homer dominated Greek education and culture more than any other poet and, on the other, because Plato considered Homer as a great threat to his philosophical system. The Homeric epics were the primary teaching texts in schools. In the *Daitales* of Aristophanes (fr. 233 *PCG*) a boy is

3. Cf. J. A. DAVISON, *From Archilochus to Pindar. Papers on Greek Literature of the Archaic Period*, London, Macmillan, 1968, pp. 204, 206 ff., R. KANNICHT, *Euripides Helena*, vol. 1, Heidelberg, Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1969, p. 26 f.

examined on Homeric vocabulary. We know that Alcibiades once punched a schoolmaster whom he asked for a rhapsode of Homer when the teacher revealed that he had nothing by this poet. On the other hand, Alcibiades was so enthused by another teacher who had given him an edition of Homer that he himself (the teacher) had corrected that he said to him: «Are you teaching children when you are able to correct Homer? Why do you not then teach young men?» (PLUT., *Alc.*, 7, 1, *Mor.*, 186 e, AEL., *V. H.*, 13, 38). At *Rep.*, 392 e 2 ff., the philosopher chooses the beginning of the *Iliad* to demonstrate the difference between poetic narrative and imitation. This choice is not at all random as the beginning of the *Iliad* was certainly known to every schoolboy.

Homer was truly worthy of the title of teacher of the whole of Greece (cf. *Rep.*, 606 e 2-3). But, Plato is forced to exile him from the ideal city that he is attempting to found as he considered the poetry of Homer dangerous for the moral development of children. In the Homeric epics perfect psychographs are given of various human characters but Plato has not been convinced of the benefits of the epics on human souls. The greatest poet of Greece is expelled from Plato's model polity and, thus, the road opens for a new educational system in which philosophy, as the highest form of *mousike*, will replace poetry⁴.

Despite all this, Plato does not stop confessing the love and respect he has had for Homer since childhood (*Rep.*, 595 b 9-10). He does not stop believing Homer to be the best and most divine of the poets (*Ion*, 530 b 9-10, *Rep.*, 607 a 2, also *Phaed.*, 95 a 1-2, *Alc.*, II 147 c 6-7), the first teacher and leader of the tragedians (*Rep.*, 595 c 1-2, *Rep.*, 607 a 3, *Theaet.*, 152 e 4-5). Finally, he does not stop claiming to be captivated by the poet (*Rep.*, 607 c 6 ff.) and to have Homeric lines constantly in mind. In the *Apology*, 41 a 7 f., Socrates, condemned to death, presents the possibility of his eternal companionship with Homer in the Underworld as a good of inestimable value. To close, I slightly paraphrase a question that can be found in the *Theaetetus* (153 a 1 ff.). Even here, Socrates expresses it in a somewhat ironic way, although I believe that Plato feels the truth of the question: «Who, then, can challenge Homer, and not make himself a laughing stock?».

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4. Cf. also E. A. HAVELOCK, *Preface to Plato*, Oxford, Blackwell, 1963, P. MURRAY, *Plato on Poetry: Ion; Republic*, 376e-398b9; *Republic*, 595-608b10, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1996, p. 19 ff.

