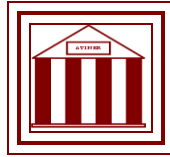


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**Reformulating the Homeric Question:  
The Point of View of the Poems' Reception in  
Visual Arts and Literature**

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**Abstract**

The famous "Homeric question" which basically consists of debates about the authorship of the Iliad and Odyssey, is an insoluble quarrel. It is believed that the "Homeric question" should be recast, this time considering the point of view of the poems' reception in visual arts and literature. No longer would it be fit to ask about the authorship of the poems and about its genesis, not even about its authenticity, but how each reader sees Homer and modifies our gaze

**Key Words:** Greek Literature, Visual Arts, Homer, Godard, Theo Angelópoulos, Cinema

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I think one of the most interesting and illustrative texts to expose the "Homeric question" is a small part of the humorous text of Umberto Eco, "Dolenti Declinare (reader's report to a editor)." When the main character is writing a reader's report for a editor, he is faced with Homer's Odyssey. His overall impression is positive, the book appeals to him, the story is beautiful, passionate and adventurous: it has stories of love, fidelity and adultery, it presents giants, cannibals, drugs, and even some western and suspense in the final scenes. What pleases him, above all, is the boldness of this Homer in how he uses the assembly, the flash back in the narrative and the composition of the stories within each other. Only at one point the reader discourages the publication of the book: the problem of copyright. I quote some excerpts from this report:

“Firstly, it is no longer possible to know for certain who the author is, perhaps he is dead. Those who knew him say that it would be difficult to argue with him about minor modifications in the text, because he was blind as a mole, did not follow the manuscript and seemed not to know it well. Quoted from memory, it is not sure that the text was written exactly in that way, since the typist would have made interpolations. Did he really write it, or is he just a tool? [...] Linder says that rights do not belong to Homer, because we still hear some bards who would want to receive a percentage on some passages

According to a literary agent from Chios, the rights belong to local rhapsodes, which have practically done the work as slaves, but it is not known if there is a registered work in the local society of authors. An agent of Smyrna, on the other hand, says that all the rights belong to Homer, and that when he died, the city archived the proceeds. But it is not the only city to have such pretensions. The inability to establish if and when he died prevents us from the use of the law of 43, about published works within fifty years after the author's death. Now, there are signs of life of one named Calino, who wants to own all the rights, but he asks for us to buy the Odyssey and also the Thebaid, the Epígones and Cypriots: besides, they don't have much value, many say they are not really works from Homer” (ECO, 1985: 157).

The impossibility of defining the Homer's identity, whether he is alive or dead, where and when he was born, and even if he is indeed the author of the book could cause to the publisher a infinite fictitious legal confusion. When viewing the text of Homer through the lens of contemporary copyright, Eco ridicules attempts to define its authenticity, such as Aristarchus of Samothrace, demonstrating the great difference between the notion copyright in antiquity and today.

The famous "Homeric question" which basically consists of debates about the genesis of the Iliad and Odyssey, is an insoluble quarrel. On the one hand, we have a group of Unitarians, made up of those who believe that both the poems are works by the same author, or that each one of the poems has a

different author. The representatives of the other group, called Analysts, argue that the unity of both is only apparent, because they would have been formed from the juxtaposition of heterogeneous poems. There are many attempts to identify interpolations, contradictions, defects stylistic, structural schemes, episodes, dating, etc. and also many attempts to identify temporal layers in the texts. These are the tools used by researchers who intend to elucidate the question of authorship of the poems (Nunes, 2002).

The Homer's biographical tradition called *Homeri Vitae*, already demonstrated multiple inconsistencies regarding his name, his country and his age. Besides the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, there are many other poems assigned to the same poet, as the *Epic Cycle* (poems on the Trojan War and Thebes), *Thebaid*, *Cipria*, the *Homeric Hymns*, *Homeric Epigrams* etc.. There are some burlesque and even some poems such as *Margites* the *Batracomiomaquia*, the *Goat clipped seven times* the *Cércropes* etc. (Bunse, 1974). In turn, the late school *Corizontes*, precursors of the current group of Analysts have already suggested the hypothesis of a distinguished author for the *Iliad* and another to the *Odyssey*.

According to *Crestomatia* of Proclus, the poet justly could be called cosmopolitan (Proclo. In: Bunse, 1974: 18), because many cities claimed itself to its naturalness. "Cosmopolitan", of uncertain origin, of uncertain time, holder of multiple names, traveler, liar ("all travelers lie about Ulysses". *Od.*, XIV, 124ss.), the fact is that Homer is a mythological character. It is undisputed, however, the importance and fame that the poet gained in antiquity and that fame extends to the present. In this sense, Plato says in the *Ion*, that Homer is the best and most divine of poets (*Ion*, 530b.), and in the *Republic*, that Homer is the Greece's educator (*Rep.*, 606e.).

The author of the *Odyssey*, as well as the author of the *Iliad*, did not leave his autograph, did not inscribed his name in the body of the poem, and even within the poems there is a conception of multiple authorship, which credits the authorship of the Muses and the self-education of bards (*Od.*, XXII, 347-8.). At the opening of the *Odyssey*, the narrator invokes the Muse without declaring his own name. Phemios and Demodocus are referred slowly, but the poem also include other bards, some particular and some other anonymous: Medonte, one of the suitors of Penelope (*Od.*, XVI, 253.), a bard that protects Clytemnestra (*Od.*, III, 267 .), and one bard at the court of Sparta (*Od.*, iv, 17.). In some steps we can perceive values of literary criticism, which consider repetition as a negative point (*Od.*, XII, 450ss.) and extol the value of "new", as can be seen in the section where Telemachus declares: "men always praise the most the newest song they hear." (*Od.*, I, 351-2).

Despite this valuation of novelty in poetic composition, it is undisputed the relationship of the poems with traditional material and oral culture. The method allowed the poet to use the formulation of a huge range of standard formulas and traditional themes, which is handled with ingenuity and creativity, according to their abilities (LAGE, 2004: 140-1). I agree, therefore, with Peradotto, stating that the *Odyssey* shows a highly developed knowledge of

consciousness of the poet of his power to control and play with the material "supplied" to him by tradition (PERADOTTO, 1990: 31).

One of the indications of this relationship with the poetic tradition can be noticed in the silence of the *Odyssey* regarding the *Iliad*, as noted by Pucci. According to him, when confronted with other heroic traditions of which it is inserted, the text of the *Odyssey* operates a recognition and delimitation of their own literary territory (PUCCI, 1995: 65). The silence that it kept in relation to the *Iliad* is, according to this perspective, an eloquent indication of the intertextual dialogue established. He suggests that

“numerous times *Odyssey* indisputably indicates their willingness to ignore the *Iliad* and *Iliadic* tradition. This helps me in favor of the hypothesis that the *Odyssey* knew the *Iliad*. The two texts were probably drawn simultaneously [...]. It is clear that the text of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* presuppose one each another, they overlap each other and are limited to the point that one, somehow, writes the other” (PUCCI, 1995: 35-36).

Pucci notes that the "textuality" of a text should be understood as a process of "read-write". All texts, not just those attributed to Homer, are composed as they cast a glance at the others. The time alluding thereby help us to realize that every story is the picture of consciousness that a text has of himself (PUCCI, 1995: 82).

When we encounter this elusive moment, we realize that the game of exchanging glances presents itself as a fundamental principle in the history of aesthetic tradition. Longinus *On the Sublime Treaty (Peri hýpsous)* observes that the path toward the sublime passes through imitation (*mimesis*) and envy (*zélisis*) of the great prose writers and poets of the past. He finds inspiration not as a divine breath, but as an expression of the genius of the ancients that inspire the youngers. He notes that not only Herodotus, but also Stesichorus, Archilochus, Plato, and many others still would have drunk in thousands of gullies derived from the famous Homeric source (*Trat. the subl.*, XIII), disputing with the old and admired poet.

Longino suggests an exercise that consists of writers at the time of the composition of their texts, closely propose three questions:

“how Homer might have expressed this or that, or how Plato or Demosthenes would have clothed it with sublimity, or, in history, Thucydides. [...] How would Homer, had he been here, or how ' would Demosthenes, have listened to what I have written, or how would they have been affected by it? [...] With what feelings will future ages through all time read these my works? [...] (*Treat. subl.*, XIV)”

By proposing that the writers mimic their predecessors and submit their texts to an imaginary audience, composed of great writers of the past and the



future, Longino does nothing more than to admit the existence of an effective dialogue between readers-writers of the past, present and future. I would like at this point to propose here some imaginary questions, in the spirit of the critical exercise suggested by Longino: if Homer were a painter, how would he represent the scene of the blinding of Cyclops according to the archaic profile painting convention? If Homer was a filmmaker, how he would shot *Odyssey*? If Homer was present at a banquet and he was offered wine in the cup laconic (which combines the Cyclops scene painting of the snake and fish the mouth open) (LAGE, 2004: 89) what would be his reaction? If Homer watch the films Godard's *Contempt* and Angelopoulos' *Ulysses' Gaze*, would he doze in the middle of the movie? If he met later in a cafe with Godard and Angelopoulos, would they do any comments about the movies? Would he liked the movies? In about a hundred years, the Homeric question still have ardent supporters or it will consist only of a page of history of literary criticism?

In the field of fiction, interactive dialogue with Homer was mimicked by many authors, among which are Luciano, in his *A true story*. The narrator of the story, Luciano, in the course of his travels, reach the Island of the Blessed. Homer is there, along with a number of historical and mythological characters. Not containing his curiosity, and both of them without having nothing else to do, they start talking about various subjects and Luciano directs to Homer a series of questions, to which the poet responds promptly: he is said to be from Babylonian and that his real name was Tigranes, having gone to Greece as a hostage, and therefore he changed his name; about the texts of disputed authorship, he claims to be the author of all of them; about why the poem started with the wrath of Achilles, he said that he did not have any important reason to do this, he doesn't know how to start the poem and just had the first idea; contrary to what Luciano thought, the poet said to have first written the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* having been composed later; about his blindness, Luciano not even have to ask him nothing about, because he proved with his own eyes that the poet can see (*True Story*, 2:20).

The fiction of Luciano illustrates how "questions Homeric" answers are varied, and sometimes even unusual, according to the viewpoint of each author. The Homer by Luciano would be different from Homer by Plato, by Proclus, by Dante, by Joyce. If the name "Ulysses", or "Homer" has a reference unstable and varied, depending unconditionally of the readers and translators who are situated in the field of the knowledge and the arts, I am led to believe that the Homeric question should be recasted. No longer would it be appropriate to ask about the authorship of the poems and about its genesis, not even about its authenticity, but how each reader sees Homer and modifies our gaze. Ultimately, I think the Homeric question should be approached from the point of view of the reception of the poems.

Regarding the history of the reception of the *Odyssey*, I consider pertinent to repeat the question, formulated by Peradotto:

And what about the audience of the *Odyssey*, or its readers? What audience? What readers? For them what does the name "Odysseus"

refer to? Does the name “Odysseus” refer to the “same” subject for a reader of, say, Homer, Sophocles, Euripedes, Virgil, Dante, Tennyson [...]? What is it precisely that *any* name refers to? (PERADOTTO, 1990: 93.)

The question could also be reformulated in terms of what Brandão expressed the question whether Homer would be the first of the philosophers:

The answer could be found through the proposition of a new question: What Homer? Indeed, it seems that each Homer is determined by the time, place, field of knowledge, discourse and genre - ultimately, each reader, with special emphasis on translators who (as critics) are a kind of special readers, since he snatches his reading to the sphere of intangible assets, to versions in different languages, either in the same language versions (that Plato is arguably the most prominent paradigms in dispute with Homer), it is still in the "intersemiotic translation" when the old poet's text is transposed to painting and sculpture, to theater or to cinema (Brandão, 2006: p.18).

Considering the history of the reception of the Homeric Odyssey in the field of visual arts, in the plastic arts and in the movies, we envisage a series of readings and looks casted upon the poem, which modify and enrich our perception of the works of the past, as of the works of the present. By multiplying the gazes, the Western aesthetic tradition can be realised not as a series of static accumulations of works, but as a living process of transformation and dialogue that goes beyond the chronological limits of time, allowing the works to relate the one to the other and, otherwise, re-write them.

When I am confronted with a multiplicity of interpretations and visions on the composition of the poems and on his own nature, and with the richness of these literary monuments, which generated multiples manuscripts, scholia, debates and translations, I am led to question the relevance of the Homeric question, in the way in which it has been cast. Considering the impossibility of defining authorship of the poems and verify the authenticity of the texts, and considering the arguments that seek to demonstrate the existence of a single author or multiple authors for the Iliad and the Odyssey, I wonder if it would be perhaps more interesting to consider the works in his survival, as Benjamin suggests, as a living process of metamorphosis and renewal? (Benjamin, 1992) Or, as suggested by Valéry, consider the works according to their essential incompleteness (Valery, 1999)?

The position I advocate here could perhaps be called "post-analyst", since I believe that the poems have multiple authors, that are the readers; or it could even be called "post-unitary" because I suggest to attribute the unique name “Homer” to the most different artistic expressions that identify the dialogue with the Homeric tradition: thus I suggest the use of the terms " Angelopoulos' Homer", the " Godard's Homer," the " Lucianus' Homer", and so on.

I want to end these reflections with an image in the manner of a Homeric simile invoking a story. Just as the history of the reception of the Homeric poems, the history of architecture of the Acropolis of Athens is an interesting example of the multiple possibilities of reinterpretation, recreation,

transformation and illumination on a unfinished monument. From the beginning, the Acropolis accumulates a history of overlapping and layering (MEE & SPAWFORTH 2001: 47ss.). The first traces of occupation dates back to the Neolithic period. Later, around the thirteenth century BC, it was fortified and was probably built on top of it a Mycenaean palace. From about 750 BC the place became sacred, with the cult of the goddess Athena, harboring archaic temples. With the Persian invasion (480 BC), many of them were completely destroyed, and after it, it was required extensive remodeling throughout the fifth century; during the rule of Pericles were built the Parthenon (447-432) and the Propylaea (436-432), and later the temple of Athena Nike and the Erechtheum, whose ruins until the present day can be sighted.

Another grandiose project structuring the Acropolis followed during the Roman Empire, as well as a fire, attributed the Heruli, which destroyed part of the Parthenon. This same temple was converted in the sixth century into a Christian church dedicated to the Virgin Mary, remaining so until 1456. From the year 1460, it was converted into a mosque, with the Turkish invasion, whose rule lasted for four centuries. In the year 1687, the Parthenon was used as ammunition dump was blown up by Turkish and Venetian. In 1801-5, the seventh Lord Elgin retirouparte sculptures and structural blocks, which are now in the British Museum. Currently, the Acropolis is being restored and preserved, being the most emblematic site of Athens and an archaeological site that is visited by hundreds of tourists daily.

The line-up changes, structural changes, the unfinished monuments, different inputs, the participation of several architects, painters, sculptors and other artists, the presence or absence of vegetation, adaptations, different cults and religious festivals, the depredations, fires, looting and depreciation caused by tourism during all these centuries imprinted their mark on the monument.

Its latest transformation can be seen at the night: the new lighting, created by Pierre Bideau, in 2004. Having been invited by the Greek filmmaker Michalis Kakoyánis, Bideau realized the dream of his life: the entire Acropolis lit with over a thousand species of lights, being the Parthenon lit with three hundred sixty-four different types. The effect is achieved is that the Acropolis seems to float through the city and, according to him, the monument "breathe at night." Dull lights were placed inside the Parthenon, yellowish, like fire, giving an internal life of the building. The columns have a neutral white light, one of yellow gold and a white. The lighting design emphasized the three-dimensionality of the buildings and also establishe an analogy with the movement of sunlight: the east side won blinding white light and the west warmer white. The intention was not to change the beauty of the monument, but just cover it with a "imperceptible light" (BENVENISTE, 2004: 36). Signs of our times: as Bideau was able to create a new Acropolis with his lights, revealing an absolutely unprecedented monument, in the same sense the Western aesthetic tradition sheds new light upon Homer, multiplying the images that we had not even dream before. Never a culture left so many pictures ...

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