

A MODERN GREEK VIEW OF HOMER¹

Inside every man there is a Homer who goes on muttering his own rhapsody. He is blind and cannot see us; we again do not hear him except in very rare moments.

The words are George Seferis'. They were written in Cairo, Egypt, during the second world war, and may be viewed as a reflection of the writer's gloomy state of mind in those days which were difficult for Greece and for the world. We may also take these words as a general statement about the function and limitations of poetry. But I have quoted them mainly for their metaphor which is based on the traditional notion of a blind Homer and because it touches upon Seferis' view of Homer, which he expresses in more than one place of his essays².

The blind rhapsode Homer, author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the Greek poet par excellence, is a literary stereotype, who still gazes at us with vacuous eyes in museums and from the pages of books. The real Homer (if there was one, for this poet's identity is as much disputed as Shakespeare's) may have indeed been blind or grown blind in old age. There is nothing peculiar in the phenomenon of a blind old man orally composing long fascinating narratives in poetic form. Many of us have known blind people who are mentally alert and quite capable of setting before our eyes images they cannot themselves see. Likewise, a deaf Beethoven could create harmonies with sounds. The blindness of Homer, however, is mostly interpreted symbolically. Critics and aesthetes have been fascinated by the paradox of the sightless visionary whose physical defect only enlarged his inner sight: the wise yet helpless seer whose name is sometimes Teiresias, sometimes Oedipus, and sometimes is identified with the far-seeing but impractical artist of modern times, like T. S. Eliot or Seferis himself.

On the other hand, the blindness of the poet may be seen as something imposed on him externally, by a society unwilling or incapable to comprehend his message. Thus, the blind Homer «who goes on muttering his own rhapsody» and

1) This is part of a longer paper with the title *The View of the Classical World in Seferis' Dokimés* which I read at McGill University in Montreal, in February 1976, at the invitation of the McGill Department of Classics and the Programme in Modern Greek Studies. I owe a debt to Professor Edward Phinney of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst who helped me with the final draft of the present paper.

2) I am using the third edition of *Dokimés* (Athens, 1974), and am quoting or discussing excerpts from the essays (whose titles I am giving here in English) of the first volume: «Introduction to T. S. Eliot», «Dialogue on Poetry», «Monologue on Poetry», «Extract from a Letter on 'Eunostos'». The translations are my own. Other essays relevant to the discussion are «A Comparison between C. P. Cavafy and T. S. Eliot», of the first volume, and «A Staging for 'Thrush'» and «Digressions from the Homeric Hymns», of the second volume. Some of the Seferis essays can be read in English in *George Seferis, On the Greek Style* (Boston, 1966).

is heard only rarely by others is the misunderstood poet of any age. It is also this misunderstood poet whom Seferis defends in an early essay against those who find modern poetry too esoteric, obscure, and mostly absurd, and it is Homer he chooses to juxtapose with modern poetry in order to make his point. He argues that ancient Greek poetry itself or at least much of it, were we to scrutinize it, would easily fall under the category of absurd or seemingly absurd poetry. But it is not absurd :

Nor would the figures of El Greco be absurd because they do not seem to conform to the anatomy of the human body as we know it, nor are Mallarmé's or Valéry's poems void of logic. But that is what happens. We find Homer rational as most of us look in Homer not for the poetry but for the «Wrath of Achilles» (...) the story of the *Iliad* absorbs our rational tendencies, those which prevent us from operating poetically and create problems (...) it also happens that many of the later poets, old or young, great or minor, felt that the «Wrath of Achilles» was not the poetry itself and that it burdened them. That is why they decided to write without it (that is, the story of the «Wrath of Achilles»), and since the sensibility of man had taken at the same time a few more steps in internal areas, unrecognized before, some unhappy poets resembling Orestes, poets, that is, who saw images just as Orestes saw the Erinyes — unseen by the chorus — found themselves in a tragic dilemma between keeping silent or speaking and writing in difficult and seemingly crazy terms. They chose to speak. Let us have sympathy for them, for none managed to find a better solution to the problem of the age.

The attitude which underlies the passage, a good sample of Seferis' maturing thought in the thirties, is both justified and expected from a poet still young at the time. But the passage also offers us the suggestion, startling to some, that Homer is operating under the surface of myth not unlike the poets of our own time. Homer seems easier to approach because he uses as the framework of his epic stories well-known to his listeners and to us, but inside this framework there is poetry that can be grasped only by the open-minded and sensitive reader. We tend to confront poems conceptually instead of letting ourselves share in the total experience of the poet. Homer appears to offer himself to this sort of confrontation, but the matter does not end there. Seferis illustrates this with another passage :

On the question of difficulty, I find that these Homeric lines : «the day will come when sacred Ilios shall perish / and Priam and the people of well-armed Priam» are as difficult to understand from the point of view of their poetry as Mallarmé's line : «une sonore, vaine et monotone ligne». The only difference is that the former leaves some residue when translated into prose, while the latter does not leave any.

I am not quite sure what Seferis means when he says that the Mallarmé line (from «L'après-midi d'un faune») leaves no residue when translated into prose; theoretically any verse, however subtle or esoteric, can be turned into prose. Perhaps he means that the bone of myth which holds the Homeric lines (from *Iliad* 4; it is Agamemnon who speaks foretelling the doom of Troy) and makes them intelligible even to one who reads the epic as a story and nothing else is missing from the Mallarmé line, which is too abstract or too self-conscious to be meaningful for the average reader. There is indeed a great distance between the

story-teller Homer and the representative of *poésie pure* Mallarmé³, between Agamemnon delivering a general's threat in the form of a prophecy and the afternoon musings of a faun. But we do have Seferis' suggestion that the Homeric lines mean more than they say on first reading.

Seferis does not elaborate on this. It is reasonable to suppose, however, that, were he to do so, his thought might run as follows. On the first plane, Agamemnon's angry prophecy of Troy's destruction is a natural sequel to Pindarus' treacherous shooting and wounding of Menelaus, which again recalls Paris' original treachery, and establishes the feeling that Troy is doomed⁴. But it exhumes new poetic feeling if abstracted from its specific context and read as a comment on the fate of a whole civilization (bronze age men slaying one another) or of the human race itself. The prophecy suddenly encompasses the individual too. Agamemnon himself was destined to perish by treachery, and Priam's military efficiency suggested by the adjective «well-armed» was of no avail to him or to his people. The adjective then glows with tragic irony. Priam becomes all of us; homo sapiens lost in his wisdom, homo faber ruined by his own machines.

Did Homer intend all that? Probably not, but this is irrelevant. As Schiller notes in his treatise *Über Naive und Sentimentalische Dichtung*: «our heart interrupts our reading and separates itself readily from its object in order to gaze into itself⁵. Ancient myths include all the meanings which we can extract from them. The sufficient reader (Montaigne's *suffisant lecteur*) will find in the works of others things not meant by their writers to be there. So Seferis reads the *Iliad* not simply as the story of the «Wrath of Achilles» but as a vessel into which he will fit his sensitivity. He is, on the other hand, aware that the poetic emotion evoked by the epics of Homer beneath the lines of the narrative, is not something which we can easily put in objective terms. It is only a boundary towards which we tend without ever reaching it, a blending of cognition and emotion, the interaction of Homer and ourselves as readers.

An intelligent reading of the *Iliad* enables Seferis to remark, also, that certain part of the epic, like the sixth and the twenty-fourth books, could touch the soul of a Christian. The remark is made as a corrective to Eliot's view of Vergil as the most «Christian» of the ancient poets. Seferis is likely to think of the farewell scene of Hector and Andromache related in the one book and of the Achilles and Priam scene described in the other. The first scene is sentimentalized by the presence of the baby Astyanax and by the «tearful smile» of Andromache. The second offers us a glimpse of the high noon of Greek tragedy. Existential questions voiced much more fully in the open theatres of fifth—and fourth—century Athens about the dilemma of life and the meaning of death had their prototype in such Homeric scenes. The *Iliad*, that great saga of military honor, the story of

3) Cf. Nikos Kazantzakis, *Zorba the Greek* (New York, 1952), p. 133. The narrator of the story reaches for the poems of Mallarmé, but after some hesitation he drops the book: «for the first time in my life it all seemed bloodless, odorless, void of any human substance. Pale-blue, hollow words in a vacuum. Perfectly clear distilled water without bacteria, but also without any nutritive substances. Without life». The translation is by Carl Wildman.

4) See E. T. Owen, *The Story of the Iliad* (Toronto, 1964), pp. 34—35.

5) I borrow the Schiller passage from Cyrus Hamlin, «Platonic Dialogue and Romantic Irony», *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature* 3, 1 (1976), p. 9.

a war ostensibly fought over a beautiful woman, can be taken in its entirety as a tragedy, the tragedy of the most valiant of men Achilles. It is indeed one of the most powerful statements ever made on man's instinctive search for self-recognition in a world which still provides us with awesome images of war-induced cruelty. The picture of a dead Lebanese soldier being dragged by a military truck, which appeared recently in the press, reminded us all too vividly of the scene in which the dead Hector is dragged around the plain of Ilium by the chariot of Achilles, and we are struck by the fact that the only point which makes the Homeric scene dated is the use of the chariot. The significance of this and other scenes in Homer is of course perceived only by people like Seferis, who are wont to look at the world not merely from a front balcony, as it were, but also from a setback terrace.

In discussing Seferis' view of Homer, however, there is another point which we should not fail to make. This writer's defense of poets after Homer who ignored Homer's narrative framework because it did not suit them, is balanced by an observation Seferis makes elsewhere. Numerous authors, including modern ones like Cavafy, Joyce and Eliot, owe a debt to the story-teller Homer, the external Homer so to speak, who supplied them with a system of objective symbols, a set of external facts, episodes and characters, around which they built their own works. Seferis did the same in his *Mythistorema* and his *Thrush*, poems that echo Homeric, mostly Odyssean, episodes and figures; and while he encourages us in his essays to look for the hidden Homer, the poet in contrast to the story-teller, he seems to acknowledge at the same time, by his own works, that it is the narrative structure and objective realism of the Homeric poems that support the poetry.

Π Ε Ρ Ι Λ Η Ψ Ι Σ

Ἡ κατὰ παράδοσιν εἰκὼν τοῦ Ὀμήρου ὡς τυφλοῦ γέροντος ραψωδοῦ (ἀνταποκρινομένη εἰς πραγματικότητα ἢ μὴ) ἐρμηνεύεται καὶ συμβολικῶς. Κατὰ μίαν ἐκδοχὴν «τυφλός» ποιητὴς δύναται νὰ ὀνομασθῆ ὁ μὴ κατανοούμενος ἢ καί, εἰς σπανίας περιπτώσεις, διωκόμενος ὑπὸ τῆς κοινωνίας τῆς ἐποχῆς τοῦ ποιητῆς. Εἰδικώτερον δὲ «τυφλοὶ» ποιηταὶ εἶναι οἱ σύγχρονοι τῶν ὁποίων τὸ ἐρμηνευτικὸν ὕφος λαιδορεῖται ἢ ἀπορρίπτεται ἀσυζητητὶ ἀπὸ τὸ πολὺ κοινόν. Ὑπερχμυνόμενος τῆς συγχρόνου ποιητικῆς τεχνοτροπίας ὁ Γ. Σεφέρης, ὑποδεικνύει εἰς τινὰς τῶν *Δοκιμῶν* τοῦ ὅτι οἱ σύγχρονοι ποιηταὶ δὲν εἶναι οὐσιαστικῶς περισσότερον παράλογοι ἀπὸ τοὺς ἀρχαίους καὶ ὅτι, εἰς τὰ βασικά τῆς κίνητρα, ἢ ποίησις δὲν ἔχει ἀλλάξει ἀπὸ τὴν ἐποχὴν τοῦ Ὀμήρου. Ἡ εὐθὺν βαρύνει τοὺς ἀναγνώστας, οἱ ὁποῖοι τοὺς μὲν συγχρόνους ποιητὰς παρεξηγοῦν, τοὺς δὲ παλαιούς θεωροῦν ἐξωτερικῶς. Ἡ ἐμβάθυνσις θὰ δεῖξῃ καὶ τὴν ἐνότητα μεταξὺ παλαιᾶς καὶ νέας ποιήσεως.