

## A Platonic look at Homer's Iliad

Achilles' wrath, to Greece the direful spring  
Of woes unnumber'd, heavenly goddess sing!

In the glittering and vast stellium that was ancient Greece, the two brightest stars were Plato and Homer: the former is known as the founder of the West's rational and systematic approach to truth, the latter as the founder of the West's literary tradition. But perhaps the simple division of philosopher on the one hand, and epic fiction writer on the other fails to capture the range of either: Plato's use of myth and story, and his power to move the reader in the drama of his dialogues, along with his ability to elevate and initiate those who follow him along the path of philosophy is there for any who are open to such possibilities. And Homer, whose understanding of the human condition and the stage upon which we are required to unfold our mysterious nature has rarely been surpassed, has perhaps obscured his wide-ranging wisdom by hiding it in symbolic and mythic language.

Can we draw the two together by reading Homer with Platonic eyes? Will Platonic concepts help us to gain a deeper understanding of the two great epics attributed to Homer, and will his verses give us insights into the narrative which Plato offers us, scattered through various dialogues, of the soul's journey?

Perhaps we should begin by summarizing the Platonic tradition's view of the human soul's place in the turning of the universe. The human soul is seen as an essence which has a deep core belonging to the eternal world of intellect (in more modern terms, a *spiritual* core); in her pristine condition the soul has beheld all the beautiful truths which reside in that world. But being unable to hold her place there, and being attracted by the reflection of that beauty in the material world, she *descends* into a terrestrial body and more or less forgets her pristine vision and its content. In her embodied state she must recover her deep-seated but obscured memory of the eternal forms by exploring the images of them as they are reflected in the material world. The impulses which are part and parcel of its association with body are irrational – not that they run against reason because in their ordinary state they are perfectly good and natural – but an important part of the soul's path is to centre herself on reason so that her life here is dedicated to the rediscovery of those beautiful truths which are seen by the inner eye of the soul rather than the eye of the body. For this reason our task is to establish a proper relationship with the body and its irrational impulses (which are considered to be organised by an "irrational soul" upon which the rational soul rides), and to refine our rational-intuitive grasp of what lies behind the ever-flowing beauties of the material world: the path of *ascent* to the consciousness of eternal truths is, for Plato and his tradition, the path of philosophy.

So what does the story of the siege of Troy (or Ilium as it is called in Greek) tell us about the task before us? Homer's *Iliad* is a narrative which directly describes only 50 days of the ten year siege, but within that on-going narrative there are references both backwards and forwards so that it covers the events before the expedition the Greeks made to Ilium, as well as later events which draw the adventure to a close. So although not fully

described, the beginning of the tale in the judgement of Paris should be in the reader's mind. The judgement arose after Eris ("Discord") threw down a golden apple at a feast attended by the Olympic Gods, saying, "A gift to the fairest" – and which was then the subject of competing claims by three Goddesses, Athene (Goddess of Wisdom), Hera (Rulership), and Aphrodite (Beauty). Proclus, in his *Scholium on the Republic*, says:

1 "Paris also is said to have been appointed a judge of Athena, Hera and Aphrodite; and that of three lives which were proposed to him, he chose the amatory life: and this not with understanding, but with reference to apparent beauty, and pursuing the image of that beauty which is intelligible. For he who is truly amatory, taking intellect and prudence for his guides, and with these contemplating both true and apparent beauty, is no less the votary of Athena than of Aphrodite. But he who alone pursues the amatory form of life *by itself*, and this accompanied with passion, deserts true beauty, but through folly and luxury leaps to the image of beauty, lies about it in a fallen condition, and does not attain to a perfection adapted to an amatory character. For he who is truly amatory and studious of Aphrodite, is led to divine beauty, and looks down upon all that is beautiful in the regions of sense."

The result of Paris' choice leads directly to the abduction of Helen by Paris (note that he is both a royal prince and a shepherd – a very mixed nature), and the subsequent war between his city, Troy, and the alliance of the Greek kingdoms. Helen is, in fact, the bribe which Aphrodite offered Paris in return of his apple-winning vote. The other great Homeric epic, the *Odyssey*, was considered to be the symbolic story of the soul making its re-ascent to its heavenly home in the face of all the obstacles thrown in the way of wandering Odysseus: but this first epic seems to be about the descent into materiality by the rational soul. Hermeas in his *Commentary on the Phaedrus* writes,

2 "By Ilion (Troy) we must understand the generated and material place, which is so denominated from *mud* and *matter* (*ilus* and *hyle*) and in which there are war and sedition. But the Trojans symbolise material forms, and all the lives which subsist about bodies. Hence also the Trojans are called *genuine* (*ithageneis*). For all the lives which subsist about bodies, and irrational souls, are favourable and attentive to their proper matter. On the contrary, the Greeks are [symbolically] rational souls, coming from Greece, *i.e.* from the intelligible [and eternal realm] into matter. Hence the Greeks are called *latecomers*, (*epelus*), and vanquish the Trojans, as being of a superior order. But they fight with each other about the image of Helen, as the poet says

Around the phantom, Greeks and Trojans fight. (Iliad V, 451)

*Helen* signifying intelligible beauty, being a certain *vessel* (*helenoe*), attracting to itself intellect. An emanation therefore of this intelligible beauty is imparted to matter through Aphrodite; and about this emanation of beauty the Greeks fight with the Trojans (*i.e.* rational with irrational lives<sup>1</sup>). And those indeed, that oppose and vanquish matter return

---

<sup>1</sup> Conformably to this, Proclus in *Plat. Polit.* p. 398 says, "that all the beauty subsisting about generation [or the regions of sense] from the fabrication of things is signified by Helen; about which there is a perpetual battle of souls, till the more intellectual having vanquished the more irrational forms of life, return to the place from whence they originally came." For the beauty which is in the realms of generation is an emanation of intelligible beauty.

to the intelligible world, which is their true country; but those who do not, as is the case with the multitude, are bound to matter. As therefore the prophet in the tenth book of the *Republic*, previously to the descent of souls, announces to them how they may return (to their pristine felicity) according to periods of a thousand and ten thousand years; thus also Calchas predicts to the Greeks their return in ten years, the number ten being a symbol of a perfect (or complete) period. And as in the lives of souls some are elevated through philosophy, others through the amatory art, and others through the royal and warlike disciplines; so with respect to the Greeks, some act with rectitude through prudence, but others through war or love, and their return is different [according to their different pursuits]."

If the descent into terrestrial life is the over-arching theme of the *Iliad*, what does Homer offer us?

Of course many of the lines of the epic describe the wearing and bloody fighting on the plain of Troy before the unyielding walls of the city, and the noble and ignoble deeds of the characters on both sides. But let's go back to the opening lines and remind ourselves of the prayer of the bard to the Muses:

Achilles' wrath, to Greece the direful spring  
Of woes unnumber'd, heavenly goddess, sing!  
That wrath which hurl'd to Pluto's gloomy reign  
The souls of mighty chiefs untimely slain;  
Whose limbs unburied on the naked shore,  
Devouring dogs and hungry vultures tore.  
Since great Achilles and Atrides strove,  
Such was the sovereign doom, and such the will of Jove!      (*Trans. Alexander Pope*)

In fact what comes over to us more vividly than the strife between the two declared sides is the strife *within* the Greek camp – it is the quarrel between Achilles and Agamemnon which sounds the keynote of the epic, and the wrath enkindled by it in the heart of Achilles, the son of the water-nymph Thetis, is Homer's theme. We may want to look carefully at some of the main points of this theme and think about them in Platonic terms, such as:

- The retreat of the hero into his tent, withdrawing from the fight against Ilium, even as the Trojans gain the upper hand. An embassy from Agamemnon bearing much booty as a peace offering is rejected with the words: "Phoenix, dear old father, noble lord, I don't need such honours, for I possess honour in the will of Zeus."
- The fact that his beloved comrade, Patrocles, goes out to fight in the battle which is going badly for the Greeks in the armour of Achilles, and is subsequently killed having been mistaken for him.
- Homer's report of the ritual he performs for Patrocles stands as one of the highlights of the epic, and is commented upon by ancient Platonists; says Thomas Taylor: "he [Achilles] invokes the four winds, and sacrifices twelve Trojan youths upon the funeral

pyre. This, says Syrianus, as reported by Proclus, "imitates the immortalizing of the soul by theurgists, and pertains to the separate soul of Patroclus. . . . It is also related of him, that he made a libation all night on the pyre:

All night Achilles hails Patroclus' soul  
With large libations from the golden bowl.

*Iliad 23*

The poet all but proclaiming to us, in these verses, that Achilles was busily employed about the soul of his friend, and not about his visible body only, and that all things are symbolically conducted by him. For the libation from a golden bowl signifies the fountain of souls,<sup>2</sup> and the libation itself symbolizes the outflow from there which imparts a more excellent life to an individual [human] soul, and is able through undefiled purity to lead it from bodies to an invisible and divine condition of being."

- Before Achilles goes out to fight, Homer says that his mother, Thetis, requires Hephaistos (the God of mundane creation) to make him a new set of armour: there is a



long description of the new shield which was part of this gift: it showed the Earth, sky and sea, the sun, the moon and the constellations; two beautiful cities full of people - in one a wedding and a law case are taking place while the other city is being besieged by a feuding army; a field being ploughed for the third time; a king's estate where the harvest is being reaped; a vineyard with grape pickers; a herd of straight-horned cattle with the lead bull being attacked by a pair of savage lions which the herdsmen and their dogs are trying to beat off; a picture of a sheep farm; a dancing-floor where young men and women are dancing; and the great stream of Ocean.

- Finally we may like to consider the way in which the siege was ended (although not directly described by Homer in the *Iliad*): the famous story of the wooden horse in which the Greeks hid in order to gain access to the otherwise impregnable city. We should note that the word for wood (hyle) is also the word for *matter*.

<sup>2</sup> The "fountain of souls" was considered to be the Goddess Rhea, from whom not only souls spring, but importantly in the understanding of Syrianus' interpretation, also virtue.