

THE SECRET OF HOMER

By

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To this day I can't make out how it happened, and I've never been in such a state of mental confusion. It all began during the last session of the Moscow Society of Lovers of Classical Literature. At the meeting there was a stranger who came up to me afterwards, introduced himself, and asked me to visit his school. "I'm worried about my boys," he said. "Technology, mathematics, and physics have absorbed all their interests. I'd like to inject a fresh stream into their education."

I accepted his invitation and have not regretted it. The senior pupils—boys of sixteen and seventeen—greeted me warily and after the first lesson one of them asked me point-blank, "Have they sent you to cure us of our technical 'abscess'?"

"No," I answered. "But didn't you find what I was talking about interesting?"

"Not bad," answered someone sitting on the window-sill, "Not bad so far."

But, as I knew quite well they were still only boys and when the hexameters of the ancient myths resounded in the snug classroom, the eyes of these self-confident adolescents lit up with enthusiasm and curiosity. I must admit that in my work with students reading philology and history I've never encountered such attention and such interest. What apparently was a duty for arts students was a marvellous fairy-tale for these lads.

I came to them once a week, and every time they astonished me with their freshness of perception and their remarkable memory. And only one of them—the tallest and probably the strongest lad who sat in the second row and beat time to rhythm of the verses with his brawny arm thrown over the back of the chair—never asked me any questions. Sometimes I put a question to him myself but his answers were laconic and monosyllabic.

"You talk like a Spartan," I said to him once, and that, perhaps, was my first mistake.

A month passed, and another. The boys I knew were working hard at their favourite subject, and had nearly finished assembling an extremely complicated

apparatus something like "time machine". My lessons were only a kind of "pedagogical adjunct", so I was quite literally thunderstruck when the taciturn lad suddenly stopped beating time during one of my talks and said, "The stress. It's wrong. Your..."

"Come now," I said. "The stress in this word only changed during the Roman Empire. Have you started learning ancient Greek?"

"He's learnt it already," said one of the boys.

"Is that true?" I asked.

"Oh no. I just read the textbook you were talking about. That's all."

"Don't believe him," said a chorus of voices. "Artem knows the 'Iliad' by heart."

"Is that true, Artem?"

"Well, yes."

I asked him a number of questions. Choosing his words without difficulty, Artem answered me in the language of Homer. His pronunciation was not perfect, but that fault could be easily eliminated.

Then, about ten days ago, Artem and I had an argument. We had just been reading the place in the "Aethiopsis", that tells how Achilles, having mortally wounded Penthesilea, the queen of the Amazons, divests her of her helmet, his trophy by right of victory, and suddenly, struck by her beauty, falls in love with the dying woman.

"It is thought that Arctinus of Miletus, the author of this poem, was a pupil of Homer's," I remarked.

"I don't doubt it," said Artem. "What a scene!"

"Smashing!" said one of the boys.

"Really, friends," I said, turning to the whole class, "can't you find a better sounding expression than 'smashing'?"

"Emotion does not always dictate euphonious expressions. You know that better than anybody else," returned Artem.

"But such masterpieces as the 'Aethiopsis', the 'Iliad'. .."

"In expurgated translations—yes. Homer's heroes are live people. Sometimes tender, sometimes stern, but they always have a ready tongue. Achilles shouts at Agamemnon: 'You sot, you son of a bitch!', but the translator hums and haws and thinks up idiotic words—'Wine-bibber! Dog-like man!' And how Zeus abuses Hera!"

Artem gave a short laugh.

"That's where Homer is great," he continued. "In everything an artist, in everything a poet. Anyone else would have started the story of the Trojan War with Adam, but Homer plunges straight into what is most important and most vivid:

"Of Peleus' son, Achilles, sing, O Muse, The vengeance, deep and
deadly; whence to Greece
Unnumbered ills arose."

"Perhaps you are right," I began carefully, approaching the subject of that day's lesson—"the Homeric Question", "but the whole point is that Homer never existed..."

"What do you mean—never existed. That can't be!" cried the lads.

"No, Homer never was. There was a collective creator—hundreds of bards who clothed the original nucleus of the legend in a poem of surpassing beauty."

"Is that absolutely certain?" asked Artem.

"Absolutely and I personally hold the same opinion. In the seventeenth century the Abbe d'Aubigniac expressed doubts about the existence of Homer, pointing out a large number of contradictions, and since then the research carried out by Grote and Hermann, and before them by Wolf, has confirmed this completely. There had been arguments about it before in fact, but opinion of Aristarchus that Homer created the 'Iliad' in his youth and the 'Odyssey' much later, in his old age, prevailed."

"But the ancients did believe Homer existed?" persisted Artem.

"The ancients did not know the analytical method developed in the middle of the nineteenth century."

"In questions like this you have to integrate," someone remarked.

"What did you say? Integrate?" said I, laughing. "Technical terms again in a lesson in the humanities?"

"Don't be angry," said Artem in conciliatory tones. "But it's difficult for me and my comrades to believe that Homer never existed. The question must be gone into."

"Do you know, boys," I said, "how the ancients viewed this question? Seven towns disputed the honour of being the birthplace of the poet, and an ancient quatrain has come down to us:

'Attempt not to discover, where Homer was born, and who he was;
All cities proudly claim to be his birthplace;
the spirit is all, not the place;
The birthplace of the poet was the glory of the
'Iliad', the story of Odysseus.'

Nor is that all. Homer was thought to be the son of Apollo and the Muse Calliope, he was called a native of Chios, Lydia, Cyprus, Thessaly, Luca, Rhodes, and Rome; and even a descendant of Odysseus himself, the son of Telemachus and Polycasta, daughter of Nestor."

"Warm!" cried Artem suddenly. "Warm! That last one's the theory to be checked. It's no accident that Odysseus occupies such an important place in both the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey'. There were special reasons that impelled the ancient bard...."

"Or ancient bards," I hastened to add.

"No, the ancient bard to make Odysseus the central figure in the second epic. Any way, the only song of the 'Iliad' that is not directly connected with the subject—the wrath of Achilles and its consequences—tells of the adventures of Odysseus."

"You mean the 'Dolonia'?" I asked.

"I'm speaking of the song in which Odysseus and Diomedes go scouting and kill the Trojan spy—"

"They kill Dolon the spy and so the song has been called 'Dolonia' by the experts. But what follows from that?"

"There was some connection between Homer and Odysseus. That's what follows."

"As a matter of fact, the archaeologist Schliemann who got permission from the Turkish government to 'excavate ancient Troy, had no doubts at all about the existence of Odysseus. On the island of Ithaca, of which Odysseus was king, Schliemann discovered the remains of the stump of an old olive-tree among some stone ruins. You remember how to test Odysseus, his wife Penelope, ordered her servant Eurycleia to carry her husband's bed outside, and the angry Odysseus said:

'...there's a wondrous contrivance
Hid in that well-wrought bed, which myself and no other invented.
Once, in the courtyard, there grew a leafy and
wide-spreading olive,
Flourishing and full-grown, and like to a
pillar in thickness.
Round it I built a wall with great stones fitted
together,
Making a chamber, and then, on top, I roofed
it securely.
And I make folding doors of solid construction to guard it.
Then I cut off the boughs of the leafy and
wide-spreading olive;
Then I cut off the trunk and smoothed the stump with the hatchet.
As a good craftsman should, and shaped it
true with the T-square
So as to form a post and bored in it holes with
an auger.' "

"And was it that very bed that Schliemann discovered?" exclaimed Artem.

"Schliemann found the remains of a huge olive-tree surrounded by stone walls, but that may well have been a coincidence. What conclusions can be drawn from this passage?"

"Plenty. This bed was a secret known only to Odysseus' family, and only he or his son could have been acquainted with it. Even Eurycleia the nurse didn't know the bed could not be moved. And if Odysseus really did exist, then why deny the possibility of Homer's existence? All that must be checked."

Those were the words he used: "That must be checked." There was something unusual in Artem's words. I recalled the exclamation made by one of the boys 'smashing'. But I only said:

"My job is not to 'win you over' to the side of the humanities.

"All I wanted to do was to interest you a little in the art of the ancients and their history. After all, acquaintance with art ennobles man."

"And doesn't working together on the solution of man's urgent problems ennoble us?" asked Artem, rising to his feet.

He went quickly out of the classroom and somebody remarked, "Artem's gone straight to the lab."

I did not see him again until one very memorable day when he came up to me

himself and said, a little embarrassed: "I've got everything ready; we can set out in search of him now, if you like."

"In search of whom?"

"Of whom? Of Homer."

I burst out laughing.

"But Homer must be 'sought' in ancient manuscripts. One has to analyse and compare texts, and plunge into an infinitude of commentaries."

"Or plunge into the infinitude of time," remarked Artem. "The machine is ready. I 'thought you'd agree."

I was so bewildered I let Artem take me to the laboratory. Some sort of apparatus stood by the window, its polished metal gleaming, and, on the whole, resembling a twentieth-century battery truck.

I got on to the metal seat and Artem sat down beside me. I swear now, hand on heart, that I had not taken any of it seriously. I was sure that Artem had simply decided to play a trick on me and would laughingly confess to his joke. But nothing of the sort happened. He bent over the control panel and suddenly the walls of the laboratory began to disappear slowly before our eyes. Vague outlines of human figures appeared, demolishing the walls of the laboratory with strange movements. The sun blazed for an instant, and as suddenly vanished.

It was some time before I came to myself. Our "truck" was running down a stony road. We were surrounded by green groves, and the sun was high in the sky. Artem stopped the truck at a bend in the road, from which the sea could be seen. "Where are we?" I asked. "We'll soon know," answered Artem. He leaped lightly from the "truck" and began quickly to climb a knoll. At the top sat a man in a yellow garment, of unusual cut. When he got up and bowed to Artem, I saw that its sleeves had been cut short. "Why, it's a chiton!" I thought. Beyond the knoll lay steep slopes, and in the distance towered great rocky mountains. A voice seemed to whisper in my ears, "Olympus. This is Olympus."

Artem came running down the hill, and jumped into his seat on the truck.

"Well, what did you find out?" "Everything's fine. The goatherd said that Homer is dead, but his grandfather remembered the poet very well."

"What century is it now?" I asked, still not believing that all this was not a dream.

"Now?" Artem bent over the instruments and turned a knob above something that looked like a speedometer. "We're in the twelfth century— B.C., I mean."

There were several more "stops" and finally we came to a halt in the middle of a broad meadow. Evening was falling and singing could be heard coming from a hamlet whose low cottages showed through the trees. There was no one to be seen. Artem asked me to get up for a moment, took a packet from under the seat, and opening it, offered me a cheese sandwich. "Where are we now?"

"I'm afraid we may have gone too far this time." Artem took a huge bite from his sandwich with great relish and then suddenly nudged me, pointing towards the hamlet. A horseman was galloping at full speed through the dewy grass toward us. He was approaching us rapidly and the clank of his armour drowned the barking of the dogs and the song and the incessant singing of the cicadas. The horseman galloped up to us and pulled up in astonishment, raising his heavy spear in his right hand. I drew my head into my shoulders, expecting the blow to fall any moment, but

Artem, without getting up from his seat, raised his hand, still holding the lunch packet, and greeted the horseman loudly in Aeolian. "Rejoice!" said Artem. "Rejoice!" "Thou, too, rejoice, youthful warrior, and thou honourable sir," replied the horseman, jumping off his horse.

"We are seeking Homer," said Artem. "Have you not seen him?"

"Homer?" repeated the warrior. "Homer. ... I have not heard of this basileus. Or perhaps he is a simple swineherd who has fled from your house?"

"No, he makes verses."

"Makes verses? Then it must be the poor singer! He was with us yesterday and sang for a long time in the square, but may the curses of the Gods fall on my head if any one of us gave him so much as an old bone. He is better off in other places where there are still stupid dogs who have forgotten what Troy cost us. This beggar took the road to the sea." Artem turned a key and our "truck" began to move gently over the grass. The horse gave a start, and shied, and galloped off towards the hamlet, and for a long time we heard the voice of the horseman calling his steed.

In the morning we saw the sea. The air was clear; a quivering line of jagged rocks marked the contours of a distant island. Artem got out of the "truck" and helped me get down. The sun was rising in a blue cloudless sky, promising a hot day.

"Someone's sitting over there," said Artem, nodding toward a rocky precipice. True enough, about a hundred yards from us, a man was sitting on a rock. At that distance he merged into the grey rocks, but as we came nearer I saw an old man, sitting motionless, his gaze fixed on the narrow strip of the distant island. We approached nearer.

"It's Homer!" exclaimed Artem. "It's Homer! And that's as true as that island there is Ithaca." The old man did not turn his head at the sound of our footsteps and seemed to be asleep; but when Artem addressed him, he immediately returned his greeting. Yes, the legend was true: Homer was blind.

"He can't see," said Artem. "He's blind." I examined the old man's face, expecting to see the sightless eyes of the poet, known to us all from the classical bust, but suddenly realized something more. He was not just blind. The wrinkled lids had sunk into the sockets. Homer had been blinded.

"Homer," I said. "Men of the future are speaking to you. Do you understand? We are separated by thirty-three centuries."

"Are you Gods?" asked the old man sonorously and simply.

"Oh, no! Not at all! We are mortals but have come here from the distant future. You are remembered and honoured, Homer, as a great poet. Your songs have been taken down in writing— both the 'Iliad' and the 'Odyssey'."

"Written down? I do not understand." "Well, with signs made on thin white sheets." "The Phoenicians do that," said Homer thoughtfully. "I have heard about that."

"But I must pain you. Some people doubt whether you ever really existed, Homer."

"Gods know no doubts. You are mortals," said Homer, smiling ironically, and with a quick movement grasped the rock on which he was sitting and I saw that his hand was strong and deft. Then he bent down and picked up a stone from the ground, clenching it hard in his fist.

"You see, we are very interested in certain contradictions in your poems."

"Are you not mocking me, strangers?" said Homer in a loud voice. Through the rents in his grey cloak one could see his still-powerful muscles grow tense.

"Careful!" cried Artem, and he seized the old man by the hand he had raised, ready to strike.

For a moment Homer struggled, then his hand opened, and the stone fell over the cliff. The sea, far below, received it with a splash.

"Anyone can insult a blind man nowadays," said Homer sadly. "What do you want of me? Go your way."

"We did not want to offend you at all—we are telling the truth—but there are certain contradictions in your poems... . For instance, I would like to know. ... You often speak in the songs about the 'Odyssey', of ironware and the use of iron weapons. But surely in your day iron was unknown, wasn't it?"

"Unknown? Yes, it was unknown to him who had no sharp-horned bulls to barter for an axe of grey iron, a sword, or a knife. Have you never met traders who bring ornaments and weapons from overseas? They take much for them in prisoners, wine, bulls, and hides."

"Perhaps, perhaps. But you must admit, Homer.

"Just a minute," interrupted Artem. "It's my turn to ask questions. Homer, have you eaten anything today?"

"Neither yesterday, nor today," replied Homer. "Nobody wants to listen to my songs here. Twelve crimson-cheeked ships, full of bold warriors, did Odysseus, the son of Laertes, lead to the shores of Ilium, and they did not return. They have not forgotten that here."

Artem rushed to our "truck" and got the lunch packet out. Before he got back to us, I took the opportunity to ask Homer point-blank: "It is believed that you yourself, Homer, fought in the ranks of the Achaeans in the war with Troy. Is that true?"

"I did," answered Homer in a very pensive manner. "With which of the heroes do they compare me?"

I shrugged my shoulders. "With none of them. It is believed that you were a simple warrior and that afterwards you sang of what you had seen."

Artem came running up to us and opening the packet, took Homer's hand gently and put a piece of bread and cheese in it. "Eat," said Artem. "It's bread and cheese." Homer slowly bit off a small piece of the bread and cheese, swallowed it, and put the rest in the folds of his cloak. "The bread is like air," he said, "and the cheese tastes good. I believe you, strangers, when you say you are not mocking an old beggar. Ask, and I shall tell you everything." "From your songs, Homer, we know that Odysseus, having killed Penelope's suitors, once again became the king of Ithaca. Did he live a long time?"

"One day I shall sing about that," said Homer. "Not now—later. Yes, Odysseus killed the suitors. Wailing and groaning, the kinsfolk of the murdered men carried the corpses out of the house. Those who had lived in Ithaca were buried by their own peoples, those who were natives of other cities were sent home in swift fishermen's boats. But Eupheithes stirred up the Cephallenians against him..."

"We know, we know," said I. "Let me recite this place to you by heart: 'Friends,

there has terrible havoc been wrought, among the noble Achaeans, by this Odysseus here. ... To unborn generations with scorn will our name be remembered, if we should fail to avenge the death of our sons and our brothers'."

"Yes, that is what he said, and brought a host of the Cephallenians to the house of Odysseus."

"And he was killed?"

"Yes, he was killed."

"But afterwards, what happened afterwards?" asked Artem impatiently.

"The fishermen came to the kinsmen of the murdered suitors, and in the night seven black-cheeked ships silently came ashore on Ithaca. When Odysseus sighted their masts, it was too late. And the Cephallenians—some with indifference, others with secret malice,—watched Odysseus fighting at the door of his house. Telemachus, the son of Odysseus, was the first to be killed. Eumaeus was slain by an arrow, thus the swineherd perished, that faithful, brave old man. The sword was knocked from Odysseus' hand, and he was bound hand and foot. Then cries were heard 'Kill Odysseus! Death to him, death!' 'No,' said those who remembered the might and wisdom of the hero, of him who wore the helmet and armour of Achilles by right. 'Then let him be blinded!' cried a stranger in the crowd, his eyes burning with hatred. Probably he was the kinsman of one who had perished at the hand of Odysseus. And they blinded the hero. Laughing, they pushed him into a boat. The sea was seething. 'Receive our sacrifice, O Poseidon!' shouting thus, they sent forth the boat with the hero in it. For many days it drifted over the great waves, and the sea-breeze whispered in the ear of the martyr 'Do you remember how you blinded Polyphemus? Now we are quits. Live if you can, O hero!'"

"And what happened then?"

"The waves cast the bark on a sandy shore. The gulls were screaming and circling boldly above Odysseus' head, crying plaintively 'You live, Odysseus!' Long did the hero wander, but everyone repelled him. A crust of bread here, a bunch of grapes there. That was all his food. The years passed. No one would have dreamed of recognizing the hero in the blind old man. One day in Athens, Odysseus was sitting by the fireside with a bowl of soup the noble master of the house had ordered to give him. Someone was singing, the strings were twanging, and it was noisy all around. Then the conversation in some way turned to the war and the losses incurred, and someone mentioned the name of Odysseus, saying 'No, Troy would not have fallen if that wise man had not boldly used his cunning.' So they talked, and the old beggar moved closer to the hearth. No light could he see without eyes, but the warmth reached him. And suddenly the heroes, his friends, appeared around him. 'You alone, Odysseus, have survived us. Have we indeed disappeared from this life without trace?' So said the heroes, and then Odysseus, remembering everything, rose suddenly, and carefully making his way barefoot towards the corner where the cithern sang, asked for it timidly. And, striking all the strings together with his palm, he let them go at once. Scarcely had the sound died away, than Odysseus began to sing of Achilles and of his terrible . wrath, that brought so much suffering to the Achaeans. And so the hero wanders over his beloved land. Some give him food, some set their dogs on him, but the fame of the deeds of the great heroes lives, and with it they live. And often a mysterious force drives him to this shore. He knows

that there, in the haze, lies the shore of his native Ithaca."

We returned to the apparatus. The "truck" answered Artem's touch with a growl of its motors. Artem dialled some numbers on the controls, while I sank into the seat lost in thought.

"Judging by all that, this old man considers Odysseus and Homer to be the same person," I said. "I don't know what my colleagues will think of it. Some, no doubt, will receive my communication without enthusiasm."

"Look here," said Artem, getting onto the ground. Leaning over the side of the "truck", he bent over me. "Turn this lever towards you."

I did as he said, but only when Artem had gone up the path toward the old man and the latter rose to his feet and came to meet him, did I understand by the familiar quivering of the objects vanishing before my eyes, that Artem was remaining behind. And suddenly somewhere I heard a cry, in a strangely distorted voice, from the old man: "O Zeus, Our father! There are Gods on bright Olympus still! Is not that you, my son Telemachus?"

To this day I cannot make out what happened. Least of all could I have expected a person so in love with technology, to behave so. Least of all...