

**CHANGING THE SELF AND THE WORLD.
THE HOMERIC HYMNS AS PATTERNS OF TRANSFORMATION AND
PROGRESS**

Abstract: *The Homeric Hymns represent the gods in a crucial and decisive moment of change in their lives, which also instigates a cosmic development. The Hymn to Demeter is built on the concept of crisis, which can be considered the first stage of progress. In the Hymn to Aphrodite, personal experience is a necessary instrument of change. The Hymn to Apollo portrays the birth of the god as a crucial cosmic innovation which generates conservative resistance in the world. Finally, the story recounted in the Hymn to Hermes is a metaphoric representation of the institution of technique and social life.*

Introduction

The narrative of the major *Homeric Hymns* has a peculiar charm. The plots of these poems tend to be more archetypal and paradigmatic than the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. We can say, using an Aristotelian definition, that such a form of poetry is φιλοσοφώτερον καὶ σπουδαιότερον; it tends to build some universal concepts in a more perspicuous way than the purer fiction of the Homeric poems. In the *Hymns* fiction is often conceived as paradigmatic or allegoric.

In the major *Homeric Hymns* the narrator does not usually limit himself to a static descriptions of the gods or a list of their attributes like in other kinds of hymns.¹ On the contrary, the gods are represented dynamically and in action. More precisely, the poet frames the deities in a crucial and decisive moment of change in their lives. The gods are not presented in their current and enduring power, but the hymnic praise consists of the revelation of their personal achievements or records, including the

¹ Cf. Clay (1989: 6).

acquisition of their τιμαί; in other words, of the process of change that brought about their ultimate essence.

The gods acquire a definite condition and a new self-conscience, but at the same time a decisive change in the world history, including the human world, arises. As a god is part of the *kosmos*, when he changes reality itself acquires a new form. Such a process is often seen as teleological, as the present reality is seen as an arrival point. The hymns, in fact, are set in the last stage of the development of the universe.²

I will not analyze the myths on which the hymns are based, but mostly the themes, the structure and the literary form of each poem, in order to show that these texts do not simply report stories of progress, but reproduce them to express the concept of development.

1. Hymn to Demeter

For example, the myth of Demeter raises some important issues related with progress, such as the invention of agriculture, but the *Hymn to Demeter* does not deal with this invention, which mankind already knows in the poem; the poet does not illustrate the evolution of the world and its elements, such as the birth of the seasons (which already exist),³ the creation of new human habits and the transformation of the nature. The only explicit aitiology in the hymn is that of Demeter's worship. However, we read in the poem no explicit description of the old world or of an earlier human condition. On this point the story is confused and elliptic.⁴ Actually, the hymn seems to be more interested in building some concepts in the abstract by means of a dramatized narrative than in explaining the traditional knowledge of the facts of the universe. The poem is probably the result of a literary elaboration of a pre-existing

² The Homeric Hymns are definitely cosmogonic rather than theogonic, cf. Bernarbé (2002: 96).

² Cf. Clay (1989: 255).

³ The story can be better reconstructed from other sources. Cf. Clay (1989: 202-7).

and known aitiological episode from a definite point of view. It is a deep reflection on the irreversible development of reality and life and on its tragic meaning, expressed by means of fiction and characterization. *Crisis* is the main narrative device, the triggering event being the sudden abduction of Persephone by Aidoneus at the beginning of the hymn.

The narrative is based on the occurrence of crucial events that produce permanent effects and on subsequent crisis that must come to a resolution. I see in the hymn two different paradigms dealing with such process:

a) The first category can be illustrated with the formula *OFFENCE-CRISIS-RESTORATION*. This is a full circle structure. After an offence and a subsequent crisis, apparently everything goes back to the starting point. For example, during the wrath of Demeter the world withers; afterwards the land returns to how it was before: see especially the case of the field of Rharion (vv. 450-4),⁵ where the use of the adverbs of time (v. 451 τὸ πρῖν, ἀτὰρ τότε, v. 453 αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα) makes this very clear. Surprisingly, in the *Hymn* we apparently find no development of nature, but only a temporary damage (a famine) that afterwards is restored.

b) The second category is *OFFENCE-CRISIS-ADVANCEMENT*. This means an actual development. In the hymn this development is essentially produced by the abduction, that represents a point of no return, and by the subsequent evolution of the story. By giving the grain of pomegranate to Persephone, Aidoneus spoils the possibility of a complete restoration and produces a definite change in the status of Olympian society and of cosmos. Such an irreversible process of change is the real theme of the hymn.

I believe that these two categories are very well-defined, though implicitly, in the poet's mind. They even conflict. In the last part of the hymn Demeter attempts

⁵ The story of Rharion recounted in the hymn differs from other versions: cf. Clay (1989: 599), Richardson (1974: *ad loc.*). I find the expression ἦρος ἀεξομένοιο in that position a little ambiguous, as it seems to allude somehow to the creation of the seasons and to a new cosmic asset.

and hopes to get a *perfect* restoration: see in particular vv. 390-400. Demeter's anxiety in these verses is noteworthy. She would like to live with her daughter all the time as before, but this is impossible: after the abduction, the gods already take for granted the change and the opposite possibility is not even contemplated. This is also the objective view of the narrator. Demeter and her daughter naively attempt to use the *A* category, but only the *B* category is possible: change is unavoidable, the full restoration of a previous perfection that has been spoiled is always an illusion. In this case, the *A* category does not really exist outside the minds and hopes of the characters.

May we also see a paradigm of *personal* development in the poem? It has been noticed that the hymn has some analogies with heroic myths and histories of quest, in particular with the *withdrawal and return* pattern.⁶ In the *Hymn to Demeter* the evolution of the protagonist is far less explicit, but the modernity of the poem also lies in its dramatic structure. The crisis is solved by means of a mediation between the interests of Demeter and Aidoneus, both of whom lose something bringing forth a new status of things. Most important, the new status implies an *acceptance*. Demeter must accept the change, as she finally does: see vv. 470f.: after knowing from Rhea that all is irreversible, Demeter does not say a word more. Her silence is eloquent and dramatically perfect.

We see a more explicit development in Persephone's case. She acquires a new status of adulthood and queenship at the price of her childhood innocence. At the end the girl seems to have not yet completely accepted her fate (see vv. 406-33).⁷ However, her acceptance is necessary, because Zeus and the other gods have already decided the new order, of which she is part. The growing up of the individual

⁶ See Sowa (2005:95-120), Lord (1967).

⁷ Some scholars consider her complaints not completely sincere.

is always related to the society. Here the social development depends on the traumatic but necessary separation of the mother-daughter unit.⁸

Finally, the contact of the humans with the gods is the symbol of a deep life change. As I have already pointed out, the hymn does not recount the development of agriculture and civilized life, but only the birth of the rites. To express the concept of life change in the human world, it is enough for this poet to represent the symbolic encounter of men with divinity.

2. *Hymn to Aphrodite*

In the *Hymn to Aphrodite* the importance of personal experience is even bigger. Zeus is angry because Aphrodite induced many gods to make love and beget sons with humans. Therefore, the goddess is condemned to experience mortal love in retaliation. Such a measure is not only a punishment. The action is also somehow aimed at putting an end to the mixed unions.

By punishing Aphrodite, in fact, Zeus induces her to reflect on her own actions. Mixed unions are represented not only as unnatural and, so to speak, unhealthy (see Eos' and Tithonus' case), but also as shameful for the gods. In the first part of the hymn Aphrodite seems to be irresponsible and reckless. She plays childishly with the lives of the gods and tries to deceive even the most austere goddesses, Athena Artemis and Hestia, who are the symbol of chastity and of important social functions. She does not understand the seriousness of her actions, which create chaos in the world.

When she falls in love with Anchises, things change. After having made love with the hero, Aphrodite is ashamed. She claims that she used to torment the other gods, but now that she is suffering the same feeling herself, her behaviour will change (vv.

⁸ The myth has attracted psychoanalytical interpretations. See Clay (1989: 201, n. 25).

247-55). The real meaning of these words is debated,⁹ but it is undeniable that we have here an act of self-conscience. Aphrodite now understands the seriousness of her games. Now she cannot blame the other gods, as she has become as guilty and impure as them, but, also, she will not longer induce mixed unions. In this case, the use of the adverbs of time is very meaningful too (v. 247 ἤματα πάντα; v. 249 πρὶν, ποτε; v. 252 νῦν δ' ἐδὴ οὐκέτι).

As J. S. Clay (1989: 152ff.) pointed out, the end of the mixed unions has a pivotal importance in the politics of the Olympus: it separates forever humans and gods and terminates the mythical era of the demigods. Therefore, the consciousness of Aphrodite, who as a goddess is part of reality, produces a definitive cosmic change. Progress is dramatically represented as a process of change of the individual.

In psychoanalytical terms, we can think of the story of Aphrodite as a limitation of unregulated sexual freedom. According to Freudian psychoanalysis such a freedom is represented by incest. The limitation and regulation of sex is the basis for the development of the society (see in particular the view of the Lacanian school). Obviously, in this case it is not a matter of incest. In the world of the gods, however, mixed unions are as shameful, obscene and unhealthy as incest in other contexts. The prevention of such obscenities has a deep social significance and an important social scope, as it is aimed at the establishment of an order. The intervention of the authority, the Father, affects the psychic world of the individual and leads him towards the social norm. As in the case of Demeter, Zeus represents the social necessity. The social norm is also represented in a scene where the lovers lie together only after having meticulously programmed their wedding, even if the goddess is only pretending to be a respectable girl (vv. 131-42).¹⁰

⁹ See Faulkner (2008: *ad loc*).

¹⁰ Cf. Bernabé (2002: 102f.).

3. *Hymn to Apollo*

For Anchises, the encounter with divinity is also a life-changing event and a powerful symbol. To understand this, let us first analyze the *Hymn to Apollo*.

In the Delian part (vv. 1-178) the birth of the god is expected as a big change in the *kosmos*. Islands and cities are afraid and shiver (v. 47 ἐτρόμεον καὶ ἐδείδιον) at the notice, and they refuse to host the pregnant Leto. The story might call to mind the evangelic tale of the birth of Jesus Christ, the messiah that would change the world, whose parents before the delivery could not find a place to stay for the night. On the other hand, the personified Delos, a humble obscure and rocky island, hopes that hosting such an illustrious birth (and, subsequently, a temple and a cult of the god) would considerably benefit its prestige and its social and economic development. But it also hesitates and fears the enormous power of the new-born, that could submerge it pushing the land down with his foot (vv. 62-73). The birth of the god is seen as a potentially dangerous innovation “among gods and men” (cf. vv. 68f.). This is a key point. Any strong innovation risks compromising the present system. As Delos’ reasoning shows, innovation is seen as a polarity. It is risky, as it could imply either the progress or the destruction of the reassuring and well-know present reality.¹¹

In the Theogonic myth the births of Cronus and, in turn, of Zeus, are feared and impeded by their fathers. It is not only a private matter of usurpation, as the taking of power by the new kings produces upsetting changes in the universe and in the divine society (e.g. the end of the age of the Titans). The birth of Apollo, it is true, could also be a threat for his father. The motif of Zeus fearing the hypothetical birth of a son stronger than him is well attested. Moreover, in the proem of our hymn, the gods tremble at the sight of Apollo, as he is seen as intrinsically threatening and subversive. But usurpation is not explicitly mentioned. As usual, the *Hymns* are more conceptual. In the poem the fear of change is not seen from the perspective of the

¹¹ Cf. Clay (1989: 40) on the irony which is here at work.

ruler deity, as in the *Theogony*, but from the perspective of the world itself. Reality depends on the gods, and therefore, the world trembles (τρομέω) thinking that an obscure and controversial innovation in the present *kosmos*, a new god, could subvert or even destroy it. The first part of the hymn represents fear as the main obstacle to change and progress.

But there is also another important aspect. Fear and change are concepts related to the experience of divinity. Epiphany is a recurrent motif in the *Homeric Hymns*. A direct contact with the gods is an extremely intense experience: it brings forth a crucial life change and is the reason for a new life and prosperous descent (as in the cases of Anchises and of the Eleusinians) but its unlimited power may also destroy life. See for example Anchises' opposite approaches (hope and fear, admiration and bedazzlement) towards the divine power in the *Hymn to Aphrodite*: when Anchises suspects that the maiden is actually a goddess, he asks for glory, happiness and an illustrious descent (vv. 102-106); afterwards, when he discovers that she is really a goddess, he is terrified that having made love with her would disable him (vv. 187-90).

In the *Hymn to Apollo*, the polarity in the feelings of the island and cities may be conceptually paralleled with the polarity that we find in epiphanies. Change of life is a shocking experience whose symptoms are fear and trembling. Progress can be defined a *sublime risk*. The risk of change is that people could lose themselves forever. For this reason change implies a crisis, and courage in the face of change is the only way to progress. Therefore, for the humans progress has a limit. In the *Hymn to Demeter* (vv. 242-6) Metaneira cries and faints upon seeing Demeter in her real appearance and interrupts the goddess while she is making her son Demophon immortal by means of fire. As a matter of fact, the woman's exceeding fear makes her son half-immortalized, or, in other words, half-developed (vv. 242f. καὶ κέν μιν ποίησεν ἀγήρων τ' ἀθάνατόν τε / εἰ μὴ...). The human heart cannot afford a perfect development. On this point, there is an evident discrepancy between the divine and

human worlds.

In the Pythian part, the combat with the forces of darkness helps to understand the symbolic meaning of Apollo as a positive force of newness and progress. Travelling throughout Greece in order to establish his cult, Apollo acts actively on the reality, which consequently develops and changes. But reality also has a resistance. In the last part of the hymn Apollo drives some Cretan sailors to Delphi in order to entrust them with his new cult and temple. Then the god, after revealing his identity, benevolently gives them some instructions. But they, despite the support of the god, are afraid (vv. 525-30). They doubt they could survive there, in an unknown and infertile land. They are terrified by the newness and by the future, and do not understand why they must renounce their reassuring earlier life. Apollo does not understand them; he is surprised and angry, as was Demeter after the cry of Metaneira, which for us is a perfectly understandable reaction. Again, development is presented as an upsetting innovation, that is sometimes too big for the forces, the courage and the intelligence of the humans, and which separates them from the divine world.

4. Hymn to Hermes

In the Delian part Apollo is briefly represented as an *enfant prodige*. The motif is also used in the *Hymn to Hermes*. But here we have something more: a hint to the process of growth. The god's growth and development is unnaturally rapid. It is concentrated in a single day. Thus, in the first part of the hymn the poet can represent the idea of advancement maintaining the unity of time. Even if it is not developed in its extreme possibilities, such a technique is very interesting, as it reminds us of some techniques of experimental literature or cinema. In an *appositive summary* of the first part of the hymn, the poet says that Hermes had born at dawn, at mid-day he played on the lyre, and in the evening he stole Apollo's cattle (vv. 17f.: ἤϋος... μέσῳ ἡματι ...ἔσπεριος). At night (vv. 163f.) Hermes himself explicitly claims that he is

already adult. Even if the three actions are not logical sequential phases, Hermes' maturation is somehow represented in stages. This is a very important feature of the concept of advancement, which we do not find in the other hymns.

Actually, as we understand some verses later, at noon Hermes did not simply play the lyre, but invented it. Such an invention does not only mean a private advancement: the god's first achievements become definitive traits of reality. Afterwards, Hermes is hungry and lights a fire (vv. 105-14) to roast the meat. The poet specifies that that act corresponds to the invention of the fire-sticks (maybe of the fire itself). The contingency becomes a definitive achievement.

The satisfaction of some basic requirements leads to the institution of technique and social life. The whole process is somehow represented as a necessary and natural (even if accelerated) development. Growth is the natural destiny of every child. By creating the lyre, Hermes procures a toy (see v. 52 ἐρατεινὸν ἄθυρμα). By stealing the cows, Hermes procures his nourishment (v. 64 κρειῶν ἐρατίζον). In this hymn progress and development are somehow represented as a physiological process of growth. Some basic achievements of humankind are concentrated in a divine life.

Conclusions

In conclusion, in the *Homeric Hymns* personal life experience expresses the deep meaning of progress. Progress is seen as an upsetting and risky experience, a *sublime risk*. It is a divine touch that may beatify or completely destroy you. But it is also a physiological and necessary process that is intrinsic in reality and in its natural development. Growing up always implies a crisis, as it is the loss of the previous self. Crisis is therefore no accident, but an integral part of progress. An *active* acceptance of the change, and not an attempt of restoration, is the only way to overcome a crisis and to produce advancement.

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