

THE RETURN OF THE ACHAEANS
*POLARITY AND ANALOGY IN HOMER*¹

Gioachino Chiarini

Department of Philology and Literary Criticism, University of Siena, Italy

Abstract. In the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey* the same mechanisms are at work as those described half a century ago by G.E.R. Lloyd in reference to ancient Greek philosophy: polarity and analogy.

Key words: polarity, analogy, [group of] four.

In the Homeric *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, as well as in other archaic anthems passed down to us under Homer's name, the same mechanisms are at work as those described half a century ago by Geoffrey Ernest Richard Lloyd (then an assistant to Moses Finley at Cambridge) in reference to ancient Greek philosophy: polarity and analogy.²

In epic poetry, the use of this dual mechanism as the basic principle of narrating *katà kosmon*, or "in and beautiful and orderly way" (which is almost like saying the narration is *beautiful in that it is orderly*) aimed to make characters, actions, situations and places and their interactions particularly memorable for the oral poet on the one hand, and on the other more highly-charged and affecting for the listener, thanks to each element's arrangement within a network of oppositional and analogical schemas that defined relationships in a specific context.

In book XXII of the *Odyssey* recounts the massacre of the Suitors. The large number of princely pretenders (more than fifty? more than a hundred?) from Ithaca and the surrounding islands gathered in Odysseus' palace to court Penelope who, after the revelatory archery competition, are slain one by one, stands in contrast to that of the architects of the execution, of whom there are just four: Odysseus, his son Telemachus, the swineherd Eumaeus and the cowherd Philoetius.

A few polarities and analogies are immediately evident - for example, a royal pair (Odysseus and Telemachus) is juxtaposed with a pair of servants (Eumaeus and Philoetius). The pairs are also analogous in terms of age: Odysseus is older and more authoritative than Telemachus, and Eumaeus is older and more authoritative than Philoetius.

And there is a polarity between the two younger

men, Philoetius and Telemachus. Telemachus was "just born" (as Menelaus tells us) when his father Odysseus left for Troy,³ while Philoetius, a servant "born in the house", was "six years old" at that time.⁴ So there is at least a five-year age difference between the two.

But Philoetius and Eumaeus, the servants, are set apart from one another not only in terms of age, but also personal background. In fact, Eumaeus was not "born in the house", or on royal property, nor was he born a servant. The son of a northern Syrian king, he had been abducted by Phoenician merchants and sold to the king of Ithaca, Laertes, whose wife Anticlea raised him at court with her youngest child, Odysseus' sister Ctimene.⁵ Eumaeus was thus a few years younger than Odysseus, reflecting the age difference between Telemachus and Philoetius.

This web of polarities contains further transversal dichotomies; more than I can illustrate on this occasion. The modular method is initially simple, but the relationships of reciprocity between components can become remarkably complex.

The base form of "orderly" narration in Homer thus has four elements: analogy is reproduced through a second polarity analogous to the first. But obviously, there are other more elementary and at the same time more comprehensive schemas, beginning with the

¹ See also my former *Odisseo. Il Labirinto marino*, Roma: Kepos; 1991: 75-90.

² Lloyd, G.E.R. *Polarity and Analogy. Two types of argumentation in early Greek thought*, Cambridge: CUP; 1966 (Bristol: BCP; 1992).

³ Od. IV 112.

⁴ Od. IV 209-210.

⁵ Od. XV 115; 363-367.

Correspondence to:

Gioachino Chiarini

Department of Philology and Literary Criticism, University of Siena, via Roma 56, Siena, Italy.

E-mail: chiarini@unisi.it

opening opposition of the *Iliad*, “Achaean versus Trojans”. Each side can be further divided into numerous elements, in relation to the other side, but also in internal opposition.

For example, in book I of the *Iliad* (during the ninth year of the siege) Achilles argues with Agamemnon and withdraws from combat. This generates a situation of extreme uncertainty among the Achaean attackers and the besieged Trojans, until in book VIII, the winds of fortune turn decisively in favor of the Trojans for the first time. After hours of fierce clashes beneath a rising Sun, at exactly midday Zeus takes hold of the scales of destiny and, as the Sun begins its afternoon descent, the pan with the Greeks’ death-demon suddenly drops, and the Trojans’ suddenly rises.⁶ From this moment until the death of Patroclus and Achilles’ reentry into the breach, the situation becomes increasingly difficult for the Greeks, with Hector breaking through the Achaeans’ camp walls and setting fire to their ships.

In book VIII we learn that the tents of the key heroes of the siege are spread throughout the Achaean camp. Here again, the description uses the image of a scale (Figure 1). Achilles, the Greek army’s mightiest champion, has his tent and his ships on the far right side of the camp, and Ajax Telamonio, the Greek army’s second-mightiest warrior, has his tent and ships on the far left side of the camp, but the central area is occupied by Odysseus’ tent and ships, and not those of the army’s supreme leader Agamemnon, as we would expect.⁷ Odysseus, then, is the true *tipper of the scale* in a conflict that will ultimately be won by the attackers, thanks not to the return of Achilles and the slaying of

Hector, nor to the efforts of Ajax (who in fact will end up going mad over his failure), but, according to myth, due to Odysseus’ cunning and the ruse of the horse.

There are interesting developments of this sort of elegant dichotomy in spatial references in the *Homeric Hymn to Apollo* (from between the VII and VI centuries B.C.). In the first part of the hymn, the goddess Letò (Latona for the Romans), one of the great Zeus’ lovers, while on the island of Crete begins to feel the labor pains heralding the imminent birth of Apollo and begins to search for a place – however humble or nameless – to host the nativity of this “tremendous god,” the great archer and future henchman for Zeus.⁸ She stops in numerous places, beseeching the residents for refuge, but none are willing to shelter the wandering mother and her child. The first part of this desperate journey, which moves in a clockwise direction (Figure 2), touches on cities, islands, promontories and mountains along the Aegean coast, and then circles back to Crete. From there, the goddess abandons her circular search and aims directly for the center of the Aegean, where she reaches the barren, rocky and until then unknown little island of Delos, where her wearying peregrinations finally came to an end.⁹ Delos takes her in and, with Apollo’s birth, becomes the first of the god’s two important cult centers. The symbolism the goddess’ movements, first circular (Figure 3) and then rectilinear (Figure 4), entails and signifies the *direct* extension of the values of Cretan culture to all of the Hellene populations in and around the Aegean sea.

The other, more important center dedicated to the cult of Apollo – a cult that would over time expand from pan-Hellenic (as it would remain on Delos) to universal, is Delphi (Figure 5).

At the beginning of time, it was said, Zeus had established the location of the oracle of the primordial goddess of subterranean waters, Themis, but making two eagles set off from the eastern and western ends of the world: the eagles met in the sky above Delphi. Now, the Great Flood having just ended, a monstrous Python born from the post-Flood mire is blocking access to the oracle, and Apollo is tasked with killing the monster and re-founding the oracle, this time in his own name. The god (Figure 6) leaves Olympus (where he had joined the other major gods in the meantime) and, travelling diagonally from north to southwest, reaches the middle of the Euboean gulf. From there, proceeding horizontally from east to west, he arrives at the virtual center of the cross, confronts the Python, kills him with an arrow and re-founds the oracle¹⁰ (Figure 7).

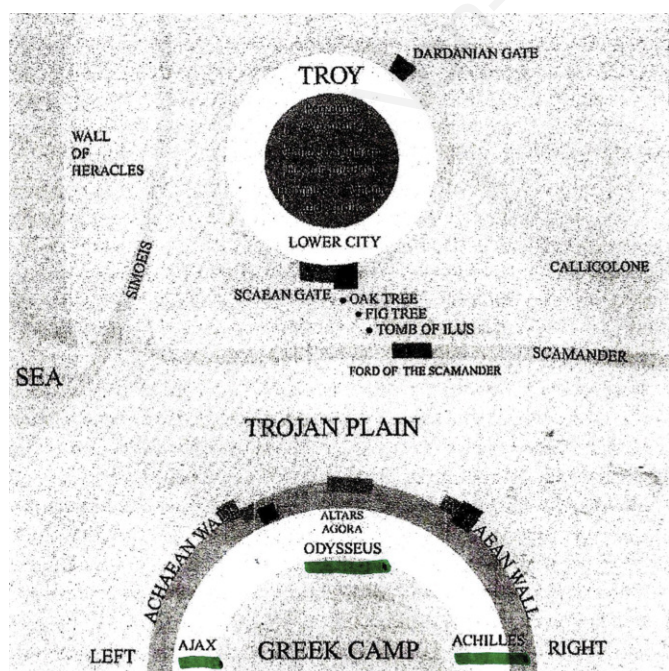


Figure 1.

⁶ Il. VIII 68-72.

⁷ Il. VIII 220-226.

⁸ H.I. III 25-50.

⁹ H.I. III 51-101.

¹⁰ H.I. III 214 214-293.



Figure 2.

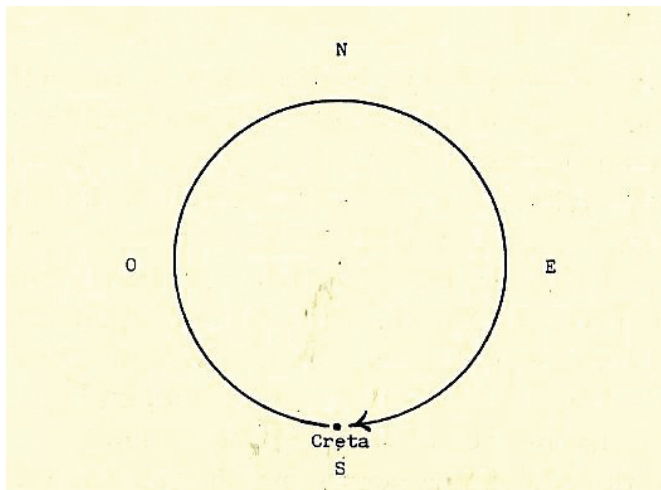


Figure 3.

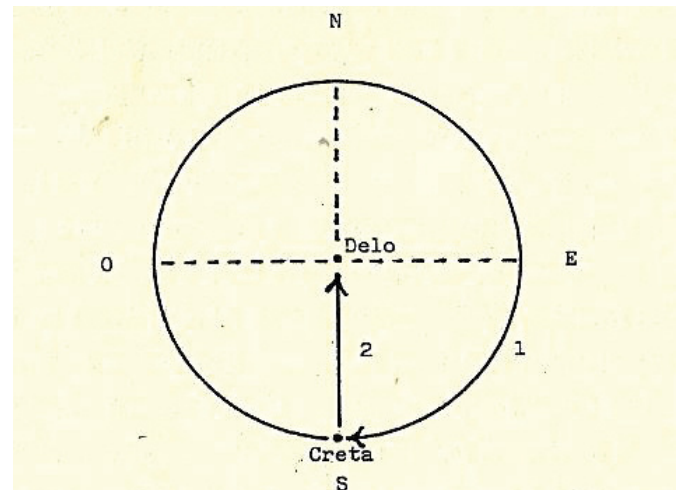


Figure 4.

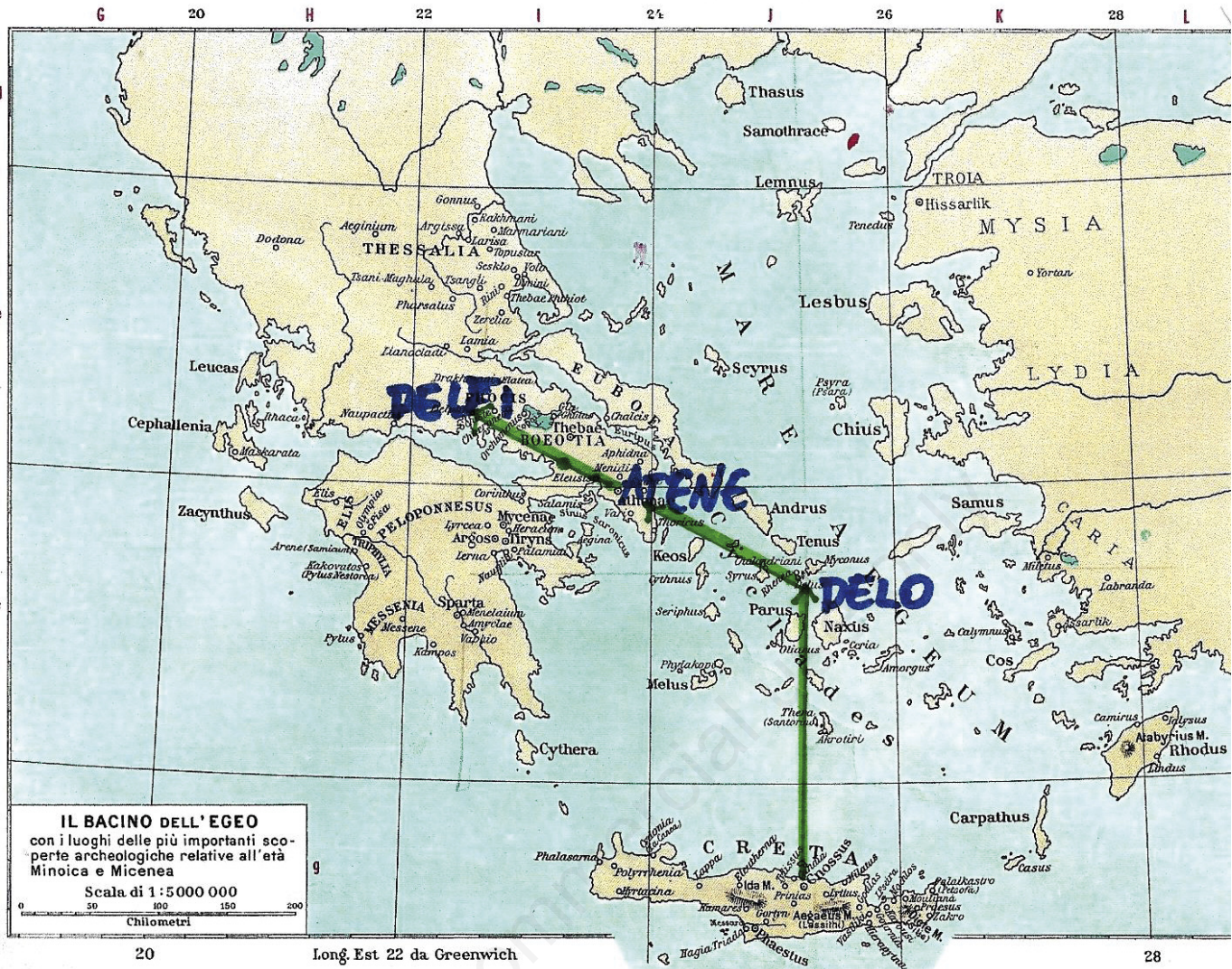


Figure 5.

Apollo then (Figure 6) transforms himself into a dolphin¹¹ and begins to guide a ship steered by Cretan sailors that has just come around Cape Maleas, drawing them along a diagonal course (from south to northwest) up the western coast of the Peloponnese to the vicinity of Ithaca. From there, changing direction and advancing through the Gulf of Corinth along a horizontal line that symmetrically mirrors the previous one (this time west to east), he reaches the center of the cross and leads the Cretan ship to land at the port of Delphi (Figure 8) the sailors of that ship will become the high priests of the new oracle.

In short, in archaic Greek epic, notations regarding space and distance, places and movements are not secondary or random elements, nor mere details to add color to the story, but rather essential components in defining polarities between characters, their status, their temperaments and their destinies. An even more sophisticated use of this type of polar and analogical

geography can be found decades prior to the *Hymn to Apollo* in book III of the *Odyssey*, where Nestor tells Telemachus what he knows about the Greek leaders back in their homelands.

After the taking and annihilation of Troy, the king of Pylos recounts, a dispute arose between the two supreme leaders, Agamemnon and Menelaus. Ajax the Locrian had profaned the temple of Athena by assaulting Cassandra, the loveliest of Priamus' daughters, and Agamemnon decided to postpone his return home in order to make an expiatory sacrifice, while Menelaus, having taken Helen back, is impatient to return to Sparta: half of the army (which means half of the leaders) stays with Agamemnon, and half leaves with Menelaus.

¹¹ H.I. III 389-545.



Figure 6.

Among those leaving with Menelaus (Figure 9) are Odysseus, Diomedes and the teller of the tale, Nestor, once again constituting a group of four. Almost immediately after their departure, Nestor continues, Odysseus changes his mind, turns back and joins Agamemnon's contingent for the purification rite, a reversal which, as we know, will cost him dearly – in fact, Odysseus will be the last of the Achaean leaders surviving the Trojan war to return home, in his case to Ithaca.

Things do not go so well for Menelaus either. Delayed by the death of the pilot of his flagship, he is forced back towards Egypt by the notorious Cape Maleas currents; the same currents that would later divert Odysseus during the phantasmagorical adventures of his *nostos* (the Lotus Eater, Aeolus the King of the Winds, the Cyclopes, etc.). As for Menelaus, he will be the penultimate Achaean leader to return home, to the city of Sparta (as he himself tells Telemachus: “after eight years I returned”, that is, after seven full years in transit).¹²

The route chosen by this first contingent (Figure 9) is, as Nestor indicates, the fastest one: the ships set out from Tenedos (a small island just off the Trojan coast), go around Lesbos, and then audaciously head out into the open sea, passing by the island of Pseira and reaching Greece at the latitude of Cape Gerestus, south of Euboea. Tenedos is a small island, Lesbos a large one, Pseira a small one and Euboea a large one. The play of polarities is repeated, in the terms already mentioned, for the four captains and for their homelands: Diomedes, heading towards Argos, completes his journey and arrives home; Menelaus, whose destination is Sparta, reaches it only with an excessive delay; Nestor, pointing towards Pylos, completes his journey and arrives home; and Odysseus, striving to reach Ithaca, ar-

¹² Od. IV 82.

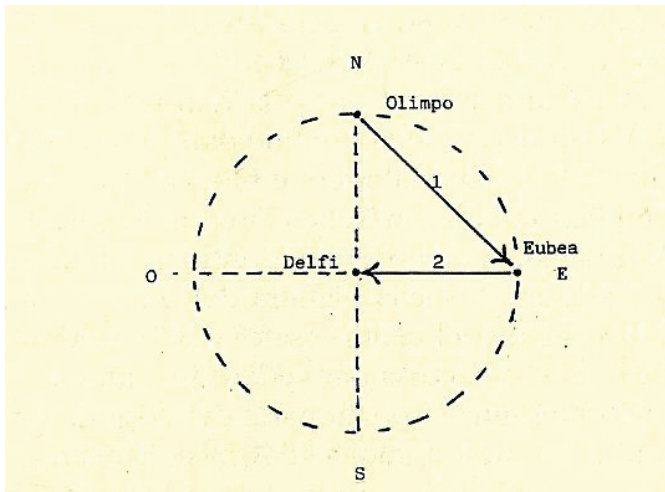


Figure 7.

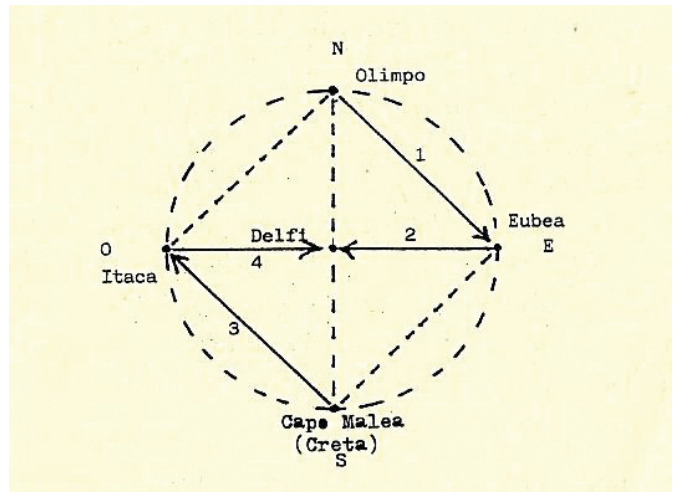


Figure 8.



Figure 9.

rives even later than Menelaus in Sparta.

To complete the picture, we can take a conclusive look at the return journeys of the second contingent¹³ (Figure 10). This second group comprised Agamemnon and three other leaders: Philoctetes, the famous Thesalian archer; Neoptolemus, the wrathful orphan of the wrathful Achilles; and Idomeneus, the king of Crete. How we must imagine said journeys is implicit. Avoiding the open sea, Philoctetes, directed towards Meliboea, and Neoptolemus, heading for Phthia, further south by the Gulf of Malia, must have chosen to follow the northern route along the coast, while Agamemnon, journeying towards Mycenae even further south, and Idomeneus, whose destination, Knossos, was the southernmost of all, would have chosen an island-hopping southern route.

Such is the *beautiful and orderly narration* in Homer.

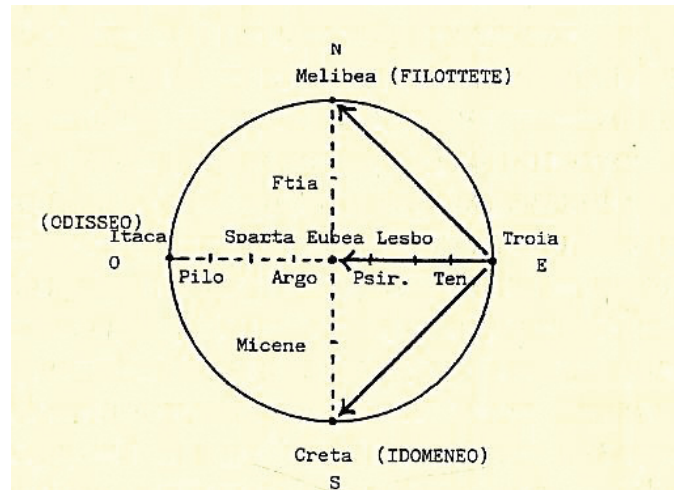


Figure 10.

¹³ Od. III 186-200.