# THE *LOGOS* AND THE POETS. SOME THOUGHTS ON THEOLOGY IN EARLY GREEK LITERATURE

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SUMMARY: *1. Introduction. 2. Homer. 3. Aeschylus. 4. After Aeschylus. 5. Conclusion.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

« THE *logos* is universal», says Heraclitus, «and yet, men live as if they had their own, private understanding» (*Vorsokr.* 22 B 2): τοῦ λόγου δ' ἐόντος ξυνοῦ ζώουσιν οἱ πολλοὶ ὡς ἰδίαν ἔχοντες φρόνησιν. From early on, Christians agreed with this: truth is one, and the universal *logos* is none other than the *Logos* Himself. Thus, St Justin can claim that, whatever is said truthfully, is part of Christianity (2 *ap.* 13,4): ὅσα οὖν παρὰ πᾶσι καλῶς εἴρηται, ἡμῶν τῶν Χριστιανῶν ἐστι.

If truth is one – indeed, if it is *the* One –, whatever is found to be true in philosophy cannot ultimately be in conflict with revealed truth. The pagan philosophers, too, live in the same world, and are part of creation; they reflect the same one truth, the same one *logos*. And the same holds true where truth is sought and found outside philosophy: in art, esp. in poetry. The truth of poetry and myth, imagined worlds and worlds of the imagination – these, too, are testimony to the selfsame *logos*.

These notions are well-known, and much-discussed. Early Christians can call Christianity ‚the true philosophy'. The mythical tales of the poets are more widely attacked – but even here, the trained eye does detect some truth in the light of allegory.[1]

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My thanks to Don Giulio Maspero for his kind invitation to give this lecture, and for his care and attention over its various drafts. - The lecture format has been retained; only a minimum of annotation has been added.

[1] Cfr., e.g., H. RAHNER, *Griechische Mythen in christlicher Deutung*, Rhein-Verlag, Zürich 1966[3] (Basel - Freiburg/Br. 1984[4]); J. DANIÉLOU, *Mythes païens, mystère chrétien*, Paris 1966; F. BUFFIÈRE, *Les mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque*, Fayard, Paris 1973[2]; J. PÉPIN, *Mythe et allégorie. Les origines grecques et les contestations judéo-chrétiennes*, Études augustiniennes, Paris 1976[2]; R. VON HAEHLING (ed.), *Griechische Mythologie und frühes Christentum*, Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, Darmstadt 2005.

However, for our present purpose, I wish to speak about something different: not about the *logos* of philosophy; nor about the *logos* alongside philosophy; but, so to speak, about the *logos* before philosophy. I propose to look at the pre-philosophical tradition in Greek literature, and esp. in Greek poetry, from Homer to the time of Socrates.

In turning to the poets, I do not mean to cast doubt upon Aristotle's distinction between οἱ μυθικῶς σοφιζόμενοι on the one hand, and οἱ δι' ἀποδείξεως λέγοντες on the other (*met.* B 4 p. 1000 a 18-20; cfr. A 5 p. 987 a 2f, A 6 p. 987 b 31f). But even οἱ μυθικῶς σοφιζόμενοι are, after all, σοφιζόμενοι, and in the opening chapters of the *Metaphysics*, Aristotle himself takes their views perfectly seriously (allowing for incompleteness and a certain lack of clarity). And he is surely right to do so – if, indeed, we regard discursive rationality as a defining property of man, not as a secondary historical or cultural development.

If this is so, there should be rational theology before philosophy. We should expect to find the traces of the *Logos* also in Greek poetry – and we should expect to find, not only the suggestiveness of myth; its intuitive perception and expressive reflexion of the truth; but also the ability of λόγον διδόναι. Already with the poets, *logos* is more than just an object of representation (its content, so to speak); it is also the subject of the enquiry (its principle of rationality). – Let me try to explain this.

My first point is this. Nothing could be more natural than to speak about the theology of the Greek poets. Greek poetry is theological poetry – certainly as far as it tells the stories of Greek myth. Greek myths are the tales of gods and heroes. They tell of a time when the immortals still moved freely among mortals.[2] This is why Homer and Hesiod are regarded as the fathers of Greek theology. It is from Homer and Hesiod, according to Xenophanes, that the Greeks learned all their preposterous stories about the gods (*Vorsokr.* 21 B 10-12). It is from Hesiod and Homer, according to Herodotus, that the Greeks received the very names, appearances, and functions of their gods (II 53,2). Thus, we might even say: unless we enter into theological debate with them, we shall hardly be able to understand them.

But – and this is my second point – in order to do this, it is not enough to consider *what* they say about the gods. We also need to pay attention to *how* they say and *argue* what they have to say. This is what I meant by saying: *logos* is more than just an object of representation; it is the guiding principle and subject of the enquiry.

Already in Homer, we shall see, there are distinct rules of how to speak about the gods. It is, I think, unsatisfactory to regard them as mere conven-

[2] Hes., *op.* 156-73 with West's commentary on 106-201; Cat. 64, 382-408 with the commentaries by Kroll and Syndikus; cfr. West on Hes., *op.* 108.

tions, poetical traditions, the singer's tricks of trade. I shall argue that they reflect theological decisions; that they are the result of conscious, rational choice – a theological choice of which we can describe and understand the reasons.

The poets, too, I am suggesting, knew what it means that ὁ λόγος αἱρεῖ: if you raise a question, you will be asked for an answer; if you give an answer, you are committing yourself, and limiting your options. We misunderstand these poets unless we take seriously that theirs, too, is a search for truth. They, too, are (in the words of Aristotle) ὑπ' αὐτῆς τῆς ἀληθείας ... ἀναγκαζόμενοι (*met.* A 3 p. 984 b 10); for them, too, αὐτὸ τὸ πρᾶγμα ὡδοποίησεν ... καὶ συνηνάγκασε ζητεῖν (*ib.* 984 a 18f).

I shall now turn to the poets themselves – but before I do so, let me sum up these preliminary remarks in three theses:

1. There is *logos* before philosophy. In early Greek poetry, there is not only the intuitive reflexion of divinity; there is also rational theology. Truth is not just reflected, it is also reflected upon. *Logos* is not only what we come to see in these poems (the order of reality); it is also argument: the light by which we see.

2. This pre-philosophical theology has a history. There is not just a wide variety of views; there is a coherent and continuous debate. Individual points of view are not independent of each other: they react to each other, they are in dialogue. Their connexion is *logos*: shared questions, purposes, concerns; a shared sense of what makes an argument, of what can (and what cannot) be said; a shared understanding of ὁ λόγος αἱρεῖ.

3. This *logos* is not just *their logos* – it is *the Logos*. We may not share all their questions, or their answers – but we can understand why the say what they say. We share their rationality. Their theology (and its history) is part of the presence of the *Logos* in the world.

I will now try to give some justification for these theses, and I shall try to do so in three steps. First, a brief example of those Homeric rules of how to speak about the gods. Second, a long jump ahead, to Aeschylus, and a somewhat more detailed interpretation of a famous (and famously controversial) passage from the *Agamemnon*. Finally, some suggestions about the course of the development till the end of the Vth century, and about its particular interest to us.

## 2. Homer

In 1904, the Danish classicist Ove Joergensen published an article on the rôle of the gods in books 9-12 of the *Odyssey*.[3] Why books 9-12? Because in these

[3] «*Das Auftreten der Götter in den Büchern ι - μ der Odyssee*», «Hermes», 39, 1904, pp. 357-82.

books (the so-called ἀπόλογοι), Odysseus recounts his adventures to the king and his guests gathered at the court of the Phaeacians – and this means: the anonymous narrator of epic is replaced by one of his characters. And why should this matter to the rôle of the gods? Because, as Joergensen shows, there is an important difference between the way in which the anonymous narrator refers to the gods, and the way in which the characters do it. The principle discovered by Joergensen (known as 'Joergensen's Law') is stated as follows in the recent Basel commentary on the *Iliad*: Unlike the ‚omniscient narrator', human characters in Homer ascribe events of unknown origin to the agency of an unidentified divinity – θεός, θεοί, δαίμων (also 'Zeus' as father of the gods).[4]

I give an example (more at Joergensen 366f). At *Od.* 15, 292, the poet tells us that Athena sends Telemachus a good wind for his journey home. At *Od.* 17, 148f, Telemachus himself tells his mother: ἔδοσαν δέ μοι οὖρον / ἀθάνατοι (J. 367). He is aware that a god has helped him, but he does not know which. The poet names Athena; Telemachus says «the immortals».

Joergensen has collected numerous instances of this, and he shows that the distinction is systematically observed, in both *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. To me, this looks like the result of thought, reflexion, conscious choice. Conscious of what? Of the difficulties and uncertainties man meets in speaking of the gods. ‚Joergensen's Law', I should say, is the expression of a theological insight. It reflects the decision not to ignore the difficulties of theological speech. This is the end of theological naïvety, already in Homer. Here is a rational principle, consciously observed. It is the first trace, in our record of Greek literature, of rational theology – of theological *logos*.

It is worth stressing this: ‚Joergensen's Law' is a matter of theology. It is not concerned with the limitations of human knowledge in general. Homer has things to say about this, too – but the gods are different. Not knowing the gods is not the same as not knowing something else. The gods are difficult to know, and, more importantly, *it is they who decide* how far they will be known. There is, thus, a fundamental, a constitutive difficulty about man's knowledge of the gods. And ‚Joergensen's Law' is a reflexion of this difficulty. – To illustrate this, let me briefly remind you of some central scenes.

In *Il.* 1, while Achilles and Agamemnon quarrel, Athena decides to appear to Achilles. The goddess comes down from Olympus (194f), takes Achilles by his hair (197), is visible to him alone (198): οἴῳ φαινομένη· τῶν δ'ἄλλων οὔ τις ὁρᾶτο. Nobody else can see her. Similarly, in *Il.* 5, Athena removes the mist (ἀχλύν 126) from the eyes of Diomedes so that he may distinguish gods and

[4] *Homers Ilias. Gesamtkommentar*, ed. J. Latacz: *Prolegomena*, München - Leipzig 2002², pp. 159-71: R. Nünlist - I. de Jong, *Homerische Poetik in Stichwörtern*, at 165: "Jörgensens Prinzip". Cfr. Joergensen, pp. 362-7.

men in battle (127). And when Odysseus, in *Od.* 13, wakes up on the shore of Ithaca (187), Athena approaches in the guise of a shepherd (though, we are told, a very elegant shepherd: 221-3). Odysseus does not recognize her. When she reveals herself, he says (311-19): ‚Ah, there you are. Where have you been? I could have used your help.'

It is clear, I think, that ‚Joergensen's Law' has a serious theological background. Already in Homer, there is a distinct sense that the gods are remote and difficult to know. This is certainly true when they are hidden from us on Olympus – and it is no less true when they stand right next to us.

Of course, I must not exaggerate. Homer develops no apophatic theology, no mysticism of un-knowing. Sometimes, the gods are difficult to know (ἀργαλέον σε, θεά, γνῶναι βροτῷ ἀντιάσαντι, Odysseus at *Od.* 13, 312); sometimes, it is quite easy (ἀρίγνωτοι δὲ θεοί περ, the Lesser Ajax at *Il.* 13, 72). But, let me repeat: it is they who decide about this. Man is, to put it like this, *deorum capax*; but χάριτι, not φύσει.

The gods, I said, are difficult to know, and they decide how far they will be known. This notion of divine self-revelation is remarkable, for obvious reasons; and it is particularly interesting to consider the reasons for such self-revelation. In *Il.* 5, Athena helps Diomedes to know god from man, because they are both on the same side. Her motive is perfectly plain. In *Od.* 13, matters are less straightforward. Athena is in disguise. She enjoys playing with Odysseus. Eventually she reveals herself – and Odysseus is astonished. This is a moment of great intimacy: the goddess caresses the mortal (288). And yet, we also sense an insurmountable distance between god and man. We are well on the way to an unfathomable divinity whose actions have become inscrutable.

I have made it sound as if there were a tendency, and a development. Indeed, I think, there is; historically, and also systematically. Once you start asking ‚how do we know', there is no stopping. It is like children asking why? why? why? Once you have seen that the divine is difficult to know, the difficulties will increase. The historical record bears this out. Theological questioning becomes more and more insistent, the problems more and more apparent – until, in the Vth century, there are those who say that, about the gods, you cannot say anything at all.

This is not the place to trace the steps of this development in any detail. I will just make some general remarks, to bridge the gap before we turn to Aeschylus.

In the *Iliad*, talk of the gods is omnipresent and, to this extent, confident and untroubled. Already in the *Odyssey*, divine presence is much reduced in quantity, and changed in quality. No longer do the gods instigate mortals to do wrong (as does, for instance, Athena when she urges Pandaros to break the truce in *Il.* 4). Indeed, the poem begins with a speech of Zeus, in which he explains that the gods must not be blamed for all the evil in the world; that

through their own misdemeanours, men bring much suffering upon themselves (*Od.* 1, 32-43).

The *Odyssey*, I believe, knows, and presupposes, and takes issue with the *Iliad* – in other matters, and *in theologicis*.[5] And this is just the beginning. It is no exaggeration to say that theology after Homer is theology with and against Homer. This remains true even for Plato – and beyond.[6] Hesiod, it has been argued, at the beginning of the *Theogony* turns against Homer to find fault with the inventions of Homeric epic.[7] And one could go on.

Instead of naming poet after poet, I will just mention the two main techniques of defending Homer and the tradition against moralist and rationalist censure developed in the VIth and Vth centuries: rationalizing correction, and moralizing allegory. On occasion, the attacks can be quite aggressive (see, e.g., Heraclitus, *Vorsokr.* 22 B 42; cfr. 40), and, up to a point, correction and allegory accept the charges – but their purpose is to defend, not to dismantle. In this sense, critical discussion is a form of recognition.

This is especially obvious when it comes to the question of truth. Again, there are exceptions (Heraclitus; perhaps Xenophanes) – but in general, the intention is to defend Homer and the tradition as a source of truth against inadequate interpretation and wilful misrepresentation. The assumption is that Homer knew what he was saying, and his interpreters know what it means (and how, now and then, the tradition needs to be corrected). These are big suppositions, and the flank is wide open to future attack (Plato, for instance, will have no patience with all this) – but it is important that the claim to truth is not given up.

What I have said is rather general and sweeping – but I hope it has become visible: 1) that there is a continuous debate; and 2) that this is a rational debate in which challenges are mounted, accepted, and addressed. In the course of this debate, some claims, of course, prove indefensible, and have to be abandoned. Already the *Odyssey* shows less of the gods – in order to present a tidier picture. We notice the first signs of reduction for the sake of clarity, precision, certainty. Ultimately, λόγον διδόναι seems to lead to reductionism. We shall see more of this at our next stage: Aeschylus.

## 3. Aeschylus

At the start of the *Agamemnon*, ten years have passed since the Greeks set sail for Troy. In the parodos of the play (the ode sung by the chorus when they

[5] Cfr. K. Usener, *Beobachtungen zum Verhältnis der* Odyssee *zur* Ilias, Narr, Tübingen 1990.

[6] Cfr. F. Mehmel, *Homer und die Griechen*, «Antike u. Abendland», 4, 1954, pp. 16-41.

[7] R. Kannicht, *Paradeigmata. Aufsätze zur griechischen Poesie*, edd. L. Käppel - E.A. Schmidt, Winter, Heidelberg 1996, pp. 191-202.

enter the theatre), the old men of Mycene, who were left behind at the time, recall an omen that occurred when the campaign began. Two eagles appeared and struck a pregnant hare (104-21). Calchas, the seer, they continue, gave this interpretation (122-38):[8]

κεδνὸς δὲ στρατόμαντις ἰδὼν δύο λήμασι δισσούς
Ἀτρεΐδας μαχίμους ἐδάη λαγοδαίτας
πομπούς τ' ἀρχάς· οὕτω δ' εἶπε τεράζων·
"χρόνωι μὲν ἀγρεῖ Πριάμου πόλιν ἅδε κέλευθος,
πάντα δὲ πύργων
κτήνη πρόσθε τὰ δημιοπληθέα Μοῖρα λαπάξει
προὸς τὸ βίαιον·
οἷον μή τις ἄγα θεόθεν κνεφά-
σηι προτυπὲν στόμιον μέγα Τροίας
στρατωθέν. οἴκ<τ>ωι γὰρ ἐπίφθονος Ἄρτεμις ἁγνά
πτανοῖσιν κυσὶ πατρός
αὐτότοκον πρὸ λόχου μογερὰν πτάκα θυομένοισιν,
στυγεῖ δὲ δεῖπνον αἰετῶν."
αἴλινον αἴλινον εἰπέ, τὸ δ' εὖ νικάτω.

And when the trusty prophet of the army saw it, he knew
the warlike tearers of the hare for the two Atreidae, two in temper,
the chiefs who launched the expedition; and thus he spoke
interpreting the portent:
„In time does this expedition capture Priam's city,
and all the abundant herds
of the people before the walls
shall Fate violently ravage.
Only let no envy from the gods cast into darkness,
struck beforehand, the great bit for Troy's mouth
that is the army encamped. For in pity holy Artemis is angry
with the swift hounds of her father
that sacrifice the wretched hare with all her young before the birth;
she loathes the feast of the eagles."
Sing sorrow, sorrow, but may the good prevail!

This is clearly presented als Calchas' *interpretation*. He *understands* the two eagles as a figure of the two sons of Atreus (ἐδάη 124), he speaks as an interpreter of signs (τεράζων 125) – and he finds that these signs indicate the fall of Troy (126-30).

However, Calchas does not only see success; he also senses a threat (131-4). This, too, is clearly marked as his interpretation. οἷον μή (131) signals appre-

[8] The Greek text follows the Teubner edition of Martin L. West (Stuttgart 1998²). The English translation is that of Hugh Lloyd-Jones (corrected edition London 1979).

hensiveness:[9] Calchas, it would appear, is not quite sure. His warning is not obvious and self-evident. It requires an explanation, and Calchas does, indeed, proceed to give his reasons (134-7). γάρ in line 133 «gives the motive for saying that which has just been said: 'I say this because [...]'».[10] And also δέ in line 138 is to be taken in a causal sense.[11] Calchas expects misfortune – why? He infers that Artemis must be angry with the two sons of Atreus – as she is angry with the two eagles (133-7). But why would she be angry with the eagles? Because she loathes their feasting on the hare (138). And why does the feast of the eagles point towards Artemis? Because she is the goddess who looks after the young brood of beasts (140-3). The eagles eat the hare with her unborn young (118f; 136f). Artemis will not like this. And thus, the signs are «favourable, but not without fault» (145).

The chain of reasoning is without a gap. So much explaining shows what now, in Aeschylus, requires explanation. His world is quite different from that of Homer. In Homer, mortal heroes freely mingled with the gods. The narrator of epic knew exactly what was happening on Olympus. No such easy commerce in Aeschylus. The perspective of his drama is the perspective of his characters: of human agents, trapped inside their world. Even Calchas, the seer, has no special knowledge.

Compare Calchas in Homer. There, he was «Calchas, son of Thestor, of augurs by far the best, he who knew what is and what shall be, and what was before, and who had shown to the ships of the Greeks the way to Troy, through his divining craft that had granted him Phoebus Apollo».[12] This is the first reference to Calchas in the *Iliad*. He is introduced through his most famous exploit: he is the seer who brought the Greeks to Troy. The events alluded to are obviously the very events recalled by the Aeschylean chorus: the omen of the eagles, the wrath of Artemis, the fleet trapped by a calm, the goddess appeased by the sacrifice of Iphigenia. In Aeschylus, too, Calchas completes his task. He gives a correct interpretation of the signs. His apprehensions come true (esp. 146-55). But, again: these are *apprehensions*, based on *interpretation*. The Aeschylean Calchas is no longer «he who knew what is and what shall be, and what was before».

The characters of Aeschylus are groping in the dark. The gods are hidden, distant, and remote. Man has to go by signs, and by conjectures. – This may, perhaps, help with another notorious problem of the *Agamemnon*: Why is Ar-

[9] See Headlam's commentary *ad l.*, and his note on Herod. 2, 89.

[10] J.D. Denniston, *The Greek Particles*, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1954², p. 60.

[11] *Ibidem*, p. 169.

[12] *Il.* 1, 69-72: Κάλχας Θεστορίδης, οἰωνοπόλων ὄχ᾽ἄριστος, / ὃς εἴδη τά τ᾽ ἐόντα τά τ᾽ ἐσσόμενα πρό τ᾽ ἐόντα, / καὶ νήεσσ᾽ ἡγήσατ᾽ Ἀχαιῶν Ἴλιον εἴσω / ἣν διὰ μαντοσύνην, τήν οἱ πόρε Φοῖβος Ἀπόλλων.

temis angry? The poet gives no explanation. We know *that* she is angry – it follows from the omen of the eagles. From it, Calchas infers the fact of her wrath – and, as it will turn out, he is quite right. The reasoning of his interpretation is clear: the death of the hare and her young points towards Artemis. But this does not explain why she should stop the Greek fleet. She can hardly be angry with the sons of Atreus because the eagles have struck the hare. Why, then, is Artemis angry?

The tradition reports that Agamemnon had offended Artemis. If even we know this, Aeschylus' audience will have known this, too. So – are we meant to remember it, and to fill for ourselves the gap left by the poet? I wonder. The presence of a perfectly good explanation in the tradition makes it, I think, all the more remarkable that Aeschylus has *not* included it.[13] In Aeschylus, the wrath of Artemis remains unmotivated, unexplained, mysterious. Calchas can just about infer the fact that something is amiss. But why this should be so, he does not know. The world of the gods remains shrouded in darkness. Mankind lives in uncertainty; Calchas is no exception. The seer may be able to infer a thing or two; but this does not mean that he can explain and understand it.

## 4. After Aeschylus

I have attempted to show that there is theological reflexion in Homer, and to give a sense of the debate after Homer through comparing a passage from Aeschylus. I shall now take the last of my three steps, making some brief suggestions concerning the course of the development till the end of the Vth century.

In Homer, Calchas knows; in Aeschylus, he makes informed guesses. The gods have moved further away. They have become more difficult to understand. Again, one must not exaggerate. No cloud of un-knowing, no dark night of the soul with Aeschylus, either. The gods are not entirely inscrutable. They still appear on stage – for instance in the *Eumenides*, the last play of the trilogy of which the *Agamemnon* is the first. The very form of the dramatic trilogy, too, helps us to understand the gods: the cycle of three tragedies can span several generations. This form of composition offers panoramic visions. Long-time patterns emerge, divine designs come into view – such as the curse haunting three generations of the Labdacids in the Theban trilogy.

And yet, the world of Aeschylus is not the world of Homer – nor that of the piecemeal correction of mythological detail that we find elsewhere. Aeschylus ties his human characters to the world of human experience *as we know it* (more

[13] Cfr. L. Käppel, *Die Konstruktion der Handlung der* Orestie *des Aischylos* (Zetemata 99), Beck, München 1998, 81ff.

or less). Sometimes, the gods appear. But Calchas and the old men of Mycene must not know more than we, too, can know. This is a narrowing of focus, a withdrawal, a reduction. Its purpose would appear to be: to acknowledge what is controversial and contested; to accept that the boundaries of theological speech have shifted; to look for common ground to speak about the gods.

In the vth century, this is becoming more difficult than ever. Protagoras says (*Vorsokr.* 80 B 4): «about the gods, I have no way of knowing: neither that they exist, nor that they do not, nor what they might be like in appearance; for there is much that gets in the way of knowing, especially the obscurity of the matter, and the shortness of human life» – περὶ μὲν θεῶν οὐκ ἔχω εἰδέναι, οὔθ' ὡς εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὡς οὐκ εἰσὶν οὔθ' ὁποῖοί τινες ἰδέαν· πολλὰ γὰρ τὰ κωλύοντα εἰδέναι ἥ τ' ἀδηλότης καὶ βραχὺς ὢν ὁ βίος τοῦ ἀνθρώπου.

What can one say after this? How can one carry on speaking about the gods? – Sophocles seems to have sought and found a way. If you cannot speak directly about the gods, try to do so indirectly. This is the direction in which Sophocles goes. Gods on stage are now the exception. The cyclic form of the trilogy is abandoned – and with it the long-time vision with its patterns and designs ... Sophocles develops the single play, the monodrama, concentrating on the crucial day, the crucial moment of a human life. All is seen *strictly* from within, from a human perspective. The point of view – not only of the human characters, but of the play as a whole, and of the poet – is the point of view of man. We see the world through the eyes of the tragic hero (or victim).

But how is this a way of speaking indirectly about the gods? Consider the *Oedipus Rex*: extraordinary events, but the stuff of reality, all perfectly possible in the world as we know it. Even more remarkable than the events themselves is their sequence. This is uncanny: the concatenation of coincidence, the clockwork precision of the plot, the inclination of the action, leading inexorably, inescapably towards the catastrophe ... And then, Oedipus, blind, steps out of the royal palace, and says:

> Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν, Ἀπόλλων, φίλοι,
> ὁ κακὰ κακὰ τελῶν ἐμὰ τάδ' ἐμὰ πάθεα -

«Apollo it was, Apollo, my friends, who brought about these cruel, cruel sufferings of mine» (1329f). – The gods are not on stage, but this is certainly not a world without gods. They are present in what the characters think, and say, and do (in their private fears, their public prayers and sacrifices – however misguided all this may be) – and, more importantly, they are present within the plot, behind the sequence of events. The clockwork of disaster suggests a watchmaker. In other words: The gods are present by implication. And Oedipus confirms this when he cries: Ἀπόλλων τάδ' ἦν ...

The gods are present in the view of events as arranged and presented by the poet. The effect is described by Aristotle, in chapter 9 of the *Poetics* (p. 1452

a 6-10):[14] «... even chance events seem more marvellous when they look as if they were meant to happen – take the case of the statue of Mitys in Argos killing Mitys' murderer by falling on him as he looked at it; for we do not think that things like this are merely random».

Protagoras says: «about the gods I have no way of knowing». Nor does Sophocles claim that he does. He has developed a form of drama that allows him just to present the evidence of the events themselves – and then to look at you and ask: 'You think this is pure chance?'

Sophocles puts the argument about the gods on an empirical basis: the perspective of Sophoclean tragedy is the perspective of the world of our experience. Again, a striking reduction of scope. Again, an attempt to meet a critical challenge. And again, a very successful move.

Certainly, the history of drama has never looked back. Euripides writes Sophoclean monodrama – though bringing the gods back onto the stage, showing what those implied watchmakers must be like, to judge by their handiwork ... And not only drama: history, too. The famous *novelle* in the work of Herodotus (Gyges and Candaules, Croesus and Adrastus, Polycrates and his ring) follow the same pattern: telling their stories without explicit reference to the gods; presenting the evidence in such a way as to point very clearly in one direction.

Let us look back. First, criticizing Homer, correcting myth, allegorizing the tradition; now, with Herodotus and Sophocles, an empiricist reduction designed to argue a point of theology. I think this looks like a coherent development. I think we may regard this as part of the history of *logos* – and of theology.

At first, the correction, one by one, of absurd and objectionable detail seems enough to save the tales of myth. This leads to the wholesale allegorizing of the tradition. And when this goes so far as to look arbitrary, there follows the retreat into empiricist sobriety; the withdrawal onto safe ground; the search for common ground – facing the fact that *all* talk of the gods has become problematic.

The last steps on this road were taken by Thucydides. With him, the gods have disappeared. Of course, religion is part of the world he is describing. It matters to what people think, and say, and do. But this is just another anthropological phenomenon. Theology is in the mind. About the gods, Thucydides has nothing to say; neither directly, nor by implication. Talk of the gods may figure in the world he is analyzing; in his analysis, there is no room for it.

Thucydides is obsessed with τὸ ἀκριβές, τὸ βέβαιον, τὸ σαφές. Whatever fails to meet his stringent standards of exactitude, precision, clarity – will be

[14] The English translation is that of M.E. HUBBARD: *Ancient Literary Criticism. The Principal Texts in New Translations*, edd. D.A. Russell - M. Winterbottom, Clarendon Press, Oxford 1972, pp. 85-132, at 103f.

ignored. And so, he gives us a history of late Vth-century Athens without the Parthenon, Sophocles, Socrates... There is a sense in which Thucydides is not interested in truth. What he wants is certainty – however much reality he has to sacrifice. Even the gods.

## 5. Conclusion

Let me sum up and conclude. – I have tried to show:

that, even before the arrival of philosophy proper, there is in early Greek poetry and literature a debate about the gods that is more than a congeries of unrelated views;

that the question 'what do we know about the gods' gives rise to the question 'and how do we know it', and that this leads to a development in which the boundaries of what can be said are drawn ever more narrowly – and in which new forms of theological demonstration are worked out (such as theology by implication);

that this development, arising from the need and the will to meet the challenges and to give answers to reasonable questions, turns into a form of logical self-limitation and reductionism that ends up by ruling out of bounds all reference to the gods.

At this point, it is becoming clear why all this is of special interest to us. A world whose intellectuals abandon the acknowledgement of truth for the power of method, certainty, control; a world of methodical doubt and scientific rationalism; a world in which theology has to speak the language of science, and is expected to reject whatever this language cannot say – this world is not irrelevant to us. It has a warning for us. If you try speaking like Protagoras, you may end up sounding like Thucydides. You may find yourself unable to say what you wanted to say. Perhaps you no longer even want to say it. Perhaps you have forgotten what it was that you wanted to say.[15]

Even if this is so; even if the structure of the theological debate in the late Vth century shows certain analogies to our own situation – so what? What can we do? We hold on to the ξυνὸς λόγος as best we can; we accept the challenge, shoulder the *onus probandi*, meeting our opponents on their ground, speaking their language, like Herodotus, and Sophocles. – But this is not all. I should like to make two further points:

[15] Plato, *Phaedo* 96 c 3-6: ἐγὼ γὰρ ἃ καὶ πρότερον σαφῶς ἠπιστάμην, ὥς γε ἐμαυτῷ καὶ τοῖς ἄλλοις ἐδόκουν, τότε ὑπὸ ταύτης τῆς σκέψεως οὕτως σφόδρα ἐτυφλώθην, ὥστε ἀπέμαθον καὶ ταῦτα ἃ πρὸ τοῦ ᾤμην εἰδέναι - on which more presently. Cfr. J.M. Rist, *On Inoculating Moral Philosophy against God* (The Aquinas Lecture 64, 2000), Marquette Univ. Press, Milwaukee 1999, esp. 80-3, and 96-100 (also 24; 33f; 41-3; 44f; 59-61; 65-9; 75). See also the reference to *Phaedo* 90 c/d at the end of Pope Benedict's lecture to the University of Ratisbon: *Insegnamenti di Benedetto XVI. Vol. II, 2: Anno 2006 (Luglio-Dicembre)*, Città del Vaticano 2007, pp. 257-67, at 266.

1. A look at the Vth century can alert us to a danger we are prone to miss. In ‚speaking their language', it is all too easy to move from a Herodotean perspective (adopting a sceptical view as a heuristic tool for the sake of the argument, *dato non concesso*) into the world of Thucydides where scepticism determines what is accepted as an object of enquiry. There is a warning here: not to allow the object of analysis to disappear in the analysis.

2. A look at the Vth century gives us an opportunity to ask: What happened then? How did they find a way out of their epistemological impasse?

The answer to this question is, I think: Enter Socrates. There is a famous passage in which the Platonic Socrates speaks with great clarity about the very problems I have just described: the danger of the object disappearing in the analysis; of losing sight of what one wanted to know; of forgetting what one once knew (or thought one knew). The passage is, of course, the autobiographical excursus of Socrates in Plato's *Phaedo* (96 a - 100 a). Here, Socrates tells of his youthful enthusiasm for ἡ περὶ φύσεως ἱστορία (96 a 8). However, soon he finds that his questions are not answered, his concerns seem to evaporate, he loses even what he felt sure of (ἀπέμαθον 96 c 3-6, at 6). He is disappointed with the reductionist explanations he is given, and takes refuge with the *logoi* (εἰς τοὺς λόγους καταφυγεῖν 99 e 5). 'Always start with your strongest *logos*', he says (100 a) – hold on to your strongest intuitions.

This is a moving plea for what we may call, in the language of later Platonists, σῴζειν τὰ φαινόμενα (Plut. *fac. orb. lun.* 923 a). From here, we may look back to Thucydides and ask ourselves whether we can make out a φαινόμενον that he sacrificed to his relentless pursuit of certainty. I think we can. Thucydides speaks of 'human nature' (φύσις ἀνθρώπων, ἀνθρωπεία φύσις, τὸ ἀνθρώπινον). He shows us human nature under pressure, at its worst. I think we have to ask: Why should this be decisive? Why should we define human nature by its worst, not by its best (or by an average)? I do not think Thucydides provides an answer – but I suspect this may be yet another consequence of his quest for certainty: the worst is always with us.

I think this is an incident of human reason turning its back on God, ending up trapped within itself. In the world of Thucydides, the *kalon* is a construction of human interests. Beyond that, it has no reality. The stuff of reality, clear and indubitable, is the *kakon*. But there is not much to be said about this, either. It does not pose a problem to our understanding. It just is.

It is obvious that matters will look different if you think, as Plato does, that being is good. And they will certainly look very different if you believe in creation, fall, and redemption. And not only will they look different – they will look much more credible, and plausible, and closer to reality. There is much evil in Thucydides – but what can he tell us about it? That it is there, and that it always will be, and much perceptive detail about its mechanisms and inter-

nal operations. The metaphysical problem, the question *unde malum* – is not even stated.

There is much that deserves attention in the history of theological thought between Homer and Plato. Among other things, it can show what happens when human reason prefers the certainty it can impose, to the truth it ought to acknowledge. Already in Homer, there is the clear sense of *homo capax Dei* – but only if God decides to reveal Himself. We seem to know – and yet we seem to be incapable of knowing. After Homer, Greek theology is more and more concerned with what can be said. The consequences of forgetting to listen while trying to argue are described by St Paul (*Rm* 1, 21): man ignores his creator while trying to control creation.

And yet, this, too, is a chapter in the history of the *Logos*. When human reason turns its back on faith, the result will be pessimism and despondency. And out of pessimism and despondency, out of the inescapable evil of Thucydidean man and the meaningless facts of the natural philosophers, there comes the impulse that makes Socrates καταφυγεῖν εἰς τοὺς λόγους.

Why should all this matter to us? Why should we care about the example of Socrates? It can help us to see (and to say) that the secular language of scientific rationalism is not somehow the natural default option beyond which we must not go. Sometimes, we have to speak it, if we want to begin or to continue a dialogue – but this is inevitable rather than desirable, and it comes at a price. We must be careful not to forget what we know, what we once thought we knew. And when we are in danger of forgetting, we, too, should καταφυγεῖν εἰς τοὺς λόγους – or, in our case, to Him Who is the *Logos*.

Abstract: *The paper shows the existence of a true reflection on the* logos *before philosophy. It proposes to look at the pre-philosophical tradition in Greek literature, and esp. in Greek poetry, from Homer to the time of Socrates, to find the presence of a kind of rational theology even before the properly philosophical one. From this perspective, Homer and Hesiod are regarded as the fathers of Greek theology not only for the contents of their narratives, but also for the form of their argumentations. For them logos was a guiding principle. Through the analysis of two specific examples, from Homer's and in Aeschylus' works, the presence of logos is shown at the very level of the interconnection and the discussions among different positions. The interest of this analysis for contemporary time is manifest through the epistemological impasse in Thucydides' relativistic and sceptical approach.*

Keywords: Logos, *Poetry, Rational Theology, Relativism, Homer, Aeschylus, Thucydides.*