

Homer in Nietzsche's Art of Interpretation

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The main purpose of this paper is to demonstrate the relevance of the aesthetic understanding of the Western culture's development in Nietzsche's thought based on his artistic conception of interpretation. In order to accomplish this, his considerations on the figure of Homer in the production of the classical imaginary of Greek culture are taken as a discursive motif in the comparison between three distinct nuclei of his oeuvres, namely, his *methodological* discussions on philology, his *theoretical* analyses on the rhetorical nature of language—both from the time of his academic activity in Basel—and his *philosophical* reflections on creative interpretation in the 1880s. The fundamental premises raised by such comparison are the following: (a) interpretation as an art is a consequence of language as a pragmatically produced system of references; and (b) language is a practical aspect of the individual's synthetic organic condition as a body in the world. As such, interpretation would be an aesthetic synthesis in Nietzsche's philosophy. As a concluding remark, it should be demonstrated how the interpreter conceived as a creator is as worthwhile for understanding the historical processes of cultural transmission as it is for launching prospects for the future of cultural horizons.

Keywords: Nietzsche, Homer, hermeneutics, philosophical anthropology

Introduction

An essential concept of philosophical hermeneutics, *interpretation*, as a philosophical term, appears historically with three fundamental meanings: *explicatio*, *interpretation*, and ἐξήγησις (Ritter, 1971, p. 666). It is widely known that in Plato's dialogue *Ion*, the term appears when Socrates launches his irony at the rhapsodist Ion, praising him for being a good interpreter of Homer¹ (Plato, 1988, p. 24). The ironic effect consists of the relationship between the explanatory, interpretative and exegetical senses of knowledge in combination with the idea that a specialist in Homer's poetry would therefore be a connoisseur of many things.

In the development of the dialogue, the question arises of examining whether Ion would be endowed with a τέχνη and an ἐπιστήμη skills, common to philosophers, or if his wisdom would have been coming from the gods. A dominant figure in the Greek cultural imagination, Homer appears as a metaphorical motif for the relationships between poetry, tradition, and reflection that occur across the interpretative problem. At the conclusion of the

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¹ In Plato's original text, 530c: γὰρ το ραψωδὸν δεῖ γινεσθαι ἐρμηνεα τῆς διανοίας τοῦ ποιητοῦ τοῖς ἀκουοῦσι.

dialogue, the poets would act as spokesmen for the gods, so that the rhapsodes would be spokesmen for the spokesmen. Thus, Ion's power of interpretation faced the limits of representation as reproduction, when divine action was summoned to the final speech.

The problem of interpretation that advanced philosophically in the sense of a τέχνη, that is, in terms of technical processes aimed at explanation and exegesis, is something found both in Schleiermacher's "art and technique" of interpretation and in Dilthey's "artistic understanding" of lasting and fixed expressions of life (Ritter, 1971, p. 667). Technique, reception, and representation integrate interpretative activity as art, which evokes the problem established between metaphysics, poetry, and interpretation of the rhapsode Ion.

At the end of the preface to the *Genealogy of Morals* (1887), Nietzsche invites the reader to a "Kunst der Auslegung" to understand the aphorism that begins the third dissertation. The practice of reading as "rumination" (*das Wiederkäuen*), as evidenced in the repetition of the fundamental question in the last chapter of the book—"Was bedeuten asketische Ideale?"—implies such an "art of interpretation". More than the object of this chapter, the relationship that Nietzsche establishes between the condition of spectator of every reader and the metaphor of art as an eminently reflexive activity is provocative. When ruminating on received ideas, new ideas are produced by reflection. Thus, he seems to demand a certain creative interpretation from his reader in this writing.

The theme of art is extensively and specifically investigated in different moments of Nietzsche's philosophy. Just as examples of thematic nuclei, specific studies could be cited on the "metaphysics of the artist", from the context of *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872), the "comic ethics" of *The Gay Science* (1882), the poetic plenitude of the writings on *Zarathustra* (1884), as well as on the aesthetic-physiological reflections of his last works from the late 1880s. Taken together, these studies reveal how distinct or even transversal aspects of aesthetic phenomena make up a central "diverse totality" within his thought, full of multiplicities and discontinuities. The analysis of these courses of thought concerning art and related issues reveals cases in which artistic phenomena do not occur as the object of the philosophical aesthetics per se, but rather as illustrations of mechanisms intrinsic to philosophical problems that are usually dealt with in the spheres of other disciplines of philosophy—such as ethical, epistemological, linguistic issues, etc.

This philosophical diversity could raise the question of what Nietzsche fundamentally understands as art, what art would be for him. The essentialist nature of this question, however, does not seem to fit with any of the argumentative nuclei in which aesthetic terms appear in his philosophy. His thinking always seems to focus on identifying forms and expressing modes of presentation. Perhaps this could be pointed out as what is common between writings as different as his phases of thought. His findings are limited to describing forms given in the human consensus on reality; his ideas seem to say what they are without presenting themselves as definitions of phenomena, rather, they express the relationships between phenomena.

Once the elements of art that occur for Nietzsche in different moments are understood, it is necessary to demonstrate how they relate to his conception of interpretation and how such relationships are decisive for his positions on the phenomena of history and culture.

Homer and the Artistic Side of Philology

When Nietzsche immersed himself in the philological discussion about Homer's personality in his inaugural lecture at the University of Basel, entitled *Über die Persönlichkeit Homers*², in the late spring of 1869, the

² Afterward, when it was published in late 1869, the text of the lecture appeared under the title *Homer und die klassische Philologie* (Homer and Classical Philology).

relationship between art and language was still a reflection for him to deepen and refine. Nevertheless, for the purposes of this paper, it is important to highlight the relevance of the aesthetic phenomenon at the very beginning of his academic context as a professor of classical philology, since many of the problematizations of this phase often give rise to important considerations about knowledge and language that permeate his entire oeuvre.

In this sense, the multidisciplinary character of philology was foregrounded by him as follows:

Sie ist ebenso wohl ein Stück Geschichte als ein Stück Naturwissenschaft als ein Stück Aesthetik: Geschichte, insofern sie die Kundgebungen bestimmter Volksindividualitäten in immer neuen Bildern, das waltende Gesetz in der Flucht der Erscheinungen begreifen will: Naturwissenschaft, so weit sie den tiefsten Instinkt des Menschen, den Sprachinstinkt zu ergründen trachtet: Aesthetik endlich, weil sie aus der Reihe von Alterthümern heraus das sogenannte „klassische“ Alterthum aufstellt, mit dem Ansprüche und der Absicht, eine verschüttete ideale Welt heraus zu graben und der Gegenwart den Spiegel des Klassischen und Ewigmustergetüthigen entgegen zu halten. (Nietzsche, 1982, pp. 249-250)

In this regard, for Nietzsche, philology has elements of history, natural science, and aesthetics. From history, there is the aspect of studying the cultural phenomena of people; from natural science, the aim of trying to comprehend through language, under linguistic instincts the deepest understanding and communication between men. As far as the aesthetic itself is concerned, philology works like the art of “painting”, “sculpting” a world of Antiquity, serving as a mirror that “makes visible” a Classical Antiquity exemplary and ideal for a later age, maintained by the great minds of the past. The aesthetic impulse described in this excerpt comes from the historical-temporal impossibility of experiencing the past and the recognition of the memory service of emotions, values, and life experiences provided by artists for posterity with the traces of their works.

Nietzsche therefore presents a shared ground on which Ethics and Aesthetics meet in the work of expressing and recording productions of paragons of excellence from the past for the contemplation and reflection of later civilizations. And on this ground, he lays out for his listeners the philological quarrel of his discourse on Homer's personality: the veracity and authenticity of the Homeric writings. On the one hand, there was a theoretical current that believed that although the Homeric texts were modified in the change from oral to written tradition, this did not prevent these writings from being valid. On the other hand, there was great doubt about this proposition, with the thought that, over time, these texts have disintegrated, casting doubt on the existence of this poet so revered by tradition.

In view of this, Nietzsche took the position that there needed to be genius individuals in the legacy of a culture, because even if the instincts and abilities of a people bring about their universal history, it is impossible for the soul of a nation to generate a project as sublime as the epics were. Then, he highlights that it is necessary to believe that only a genius, a masterful poet could leave this great legacy that under oral tradition was known as Homer. As such, although not everything contained in the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* could not be completely Homeric, he considered that there was a great poet of the epics, but he denied that this poet was *actually* Homer. In fact, this genius project known as the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* had fragments not only from Homer, but from other men in history, whose identity was lost in time. Nietzsche clarifies that the work of German philology consisted of understanding what in the pre-Wolfian period were just big and empty concepts, completely “elaborated” about the poet.

There is something aesthetic about this, something created by expression, according to the tastes and values of the respective eras in which the content was produced. Thus, based on all these reflections on Homer and the different interpretations that his style has received throughout the history of philology and literary studies, a reasonable perspective, in terms of reading and interpretation of aesthetic strategies, is to recognize the

interdependence between poet and tradition, accept variations in formulas and oral technique and, without any certainty as to the path that took a text from oral tradition to written tradition, read Homeric poems as poetry and as narratives that form a unit constituted by verses of a poem with their sound, image, and semantic components, with their meanings. It is noteworthy how the pairs *αἴσθησις*-*fruition* and *expression-creātiō* appear in a conception of philology that acknowledges the sensitive experience of subjects in relation to the stimuli of the physical world, with the immediate articulation of sensitivity and perception of both those who produced the record based on their interpretation of the past and those who receive it in their respective present.

In his conclusion, Nietzsche also emphasizes the relationship between *reflection* and *criticism* aesthetically. He understands that the task of those intellectuals and young people in science required a lot of work to make that dark and misinterpreted world emerge. This more critical-reflexive dimension then reveals the pragmatics of philology as a rigorous science, namely its challenge to bring light to the shadows of the impossibility of knowing the past in its effective reality. Faced with this scientific impulse, the aesthetic impulse arises as an activity of the imagination, in the sense of trying to fill in the gaps of what remains impossible for man to know.

That the unknowable is unavoidable, that dealing with this realization is consequently a creative activity, and that art has an ethic dimension are premises that Nietzsche finds in Friedrich Albert Lange's book *Geschichte des Materialismus und Kritik seiner Bedeutung in der Gegenwart* (1866). Some of this encounter between ethics, art, and tradition can evidently already be felt in the context of *Homer and Classical Philology*. In his lecture, Nietzsche points to philological practice as consoling and embellishing the dusks of the past with narratives concerning a world of gods and heroes. This ethic of consolation and aesthetic of narrative-speculative ornamentation appears in Lange's book under the term *Begriffsdichtung*. For Lange, this concept consists of an aesthetic making of speculation. In his words:

Aber die Aufgabe, Harmonie im den Erscheinungen zu schaffen und das gegebene Mannigfaltige zur Einheit zu binden, kommt nicht nur den synthetischen Faktoren der Erfahrung zu, sondern auch denen der Spekulation. [...] Die Begriffsdichtung der Spekulation ist jedoch noch keine völlig freie; sie strebt noch, wie die empirische Forschung, nach einheitlicher Darstellung des Gegebenen in seinem Zusammenhange, allein ihr fehlt der leitende Zwang der Prinzipien der Erfahrung. Erst in der Dichtung im engeren Sinne des Wortes, in der Poesie, wird der Boden der Wirklichkeit mit Bewußtsein aufgegeben. In der *Spekulation* hat die Form das Übergewicht über den Stoff; in der *Poesie* beherrscht sie ihn vollständig. (Lange, 1875, p. 666)

That this concept was well received by Nietzsche can be seen a year before his inaugural lecture on Homer in a letter written to Paul Deussen in the spring of 1868. So, he writes: "Metaphysik gehört also bei einigen Menschen ins Gebiet der Gemüthsbedürfnisse, ist wesentlich Erbauung; andernseits ist sie Kunst, nämlich die der Begriffsdichtung [...]" (Nietzsche, 2003, p. 269). It is notable in the letter that Nietzsche not only understands the aesthetic meaning of the term *Begriffsdichtung* as art (*Kunst*), but also delves into the practical essence of the term: the aesthetic consists of *making* the understanding of a phenomenon *become* another one in the realm of speculation.

That the notion of art is associated with the field of imagination and speculation is something that will still be felt in the writings about *The Birth of Tragedy* (1872). The metaphysics of the artist, however, progressively loses ground for Nietzsche as philology as a science imposes itself on him. This coincides with the appearance of his courses on rhetoric in the following years.

As part of preparing his lectures on rhetoric, in the first half of the 1870s, Nietzsche was faced with different

sources, including the work *Die Sprache als Kunst* (1871) by Gustav Gerber³, for whom,

was an den Kunstwerken Kunst ist, die Form also, ist Eigentum und Abbild der Menschennatur, der Künstler selbst ist die Seele, das Leben, der Lebenszweck seines Werkes, er selbst nach seinen einzelnen Daseinsmomenten gibt in der Gestaltung des Stoffes sich selbst. (Gerber, 1961, p. 8)

As a property and image of human nature, art means, for Gerber, above all, the perception and reproduction of experiences. From this perspective, the human being would be constituted in a system of references to forms given and produced by man in the world. This constitution would have the same essential attributes as art.

Receiving these ideas as premises, Nietzsche would then radicalize them in rhetorical pragmatics itself, identifying it with language. The similarity with Gerber's conception of art is noticeable: "Der sprachbildende Mensch faßt nicht Dinge oder Vorgänge auf, sondern Reize: er giebt nicht Empfindungen wieder, sondern sogar nur Abbildungen von Empfindungen." (Nietzsche, 1995, p. 426). If once, art was opposed to reality as the full imagination of metaphysical speculation, now it is faced with the impossibility of reality itself "in itself" becoming something knowable.

In such a sense, Nietzsche assumes that in our experiences with the world there are also individual properties of each bodily condition and that, therefore, only superficial aspects of things are captured by our sensory organs. "Statt der Dinge nimmt die Empfindung nur ein *Merkmal* auf. Das ist der *erste* Gesichtspunkt: die Sprache ist Rhetorik, denn sie will nur eine δόξα, keine ἐπιστήμη übertragen." (Nietzsche, 1995, p. 426). There is, therefore, no full knowledge of the thing itself, only opinions arising from images of things made usual by words in language. Thus, "die Empfindung, durch einen Nervenreiz hervorgerufen, nimmt das Ding nicht selbst auf: diese Empfindung wird nach außen hin durch ein Bild dargestellt." (Nietzsche, 1995, p. 426).

As such, what is wanted in the world is what is maintained and conserved by language, once words and their respective aggregations consist of images produced by sensations of things in the world. Such images become transmitted and habitually agreed figures in the common space of language. This is how the ideas in this lecture by Nietzsche on this topic are shown.

And from Rhetoric, he highlights in his fundamental premise, among such figures, the tropes. "Als wichtigstes Kunstmittel der Rhetorik gelten die *Tropen*, die uneigentlichen Bezeichnungen. Alle Wörter aber sind an sich u. von Anfang <an>, in Bezug auf ihre Bedeutung, Tropen." (Nietzsche, 1995, p. 426).

It should be emphasized at this point that now the conception of the aesthetic moves even further away from the metaphysical scope to approach the pragmatic scope. From "work of art" (*Kunstwerk*) to "artifice" (*Kunstmittel*) only the imaginative speculation of opinion is maintained as the solely legitimate way of apprehending the world. But the rhetorical artifice, in turn, is what makes the transmitted work possible: the reality itself perceived naturally is artificially transmitted and aesthetically constituted in a linguistic system of references. That such and such words can be said, that such and such figures of speech can be used, are matters of interpretative choices of reference patterns of the same nature as the elements that constitute such a referential system.

³ Regarding the strengths of these lectures, Guervós explains: "En cuanto a las fuentes, se pueden dividir en dos grupos: un grupo que corresponderá a la *tradición de la filología clásica* (A. Westermann, L. Spengel, R. Volkmann y F. Blass); y otro grupo perteneciente a una *tradición filosófico-lingüística* (G. Gerber y, a través de él, la lingüística y la filosofía del lenguaje del siglo XIX). Estas dos vertientes de la retórica, la histórica y la filosófica, se unen en el *Curso sobre Retórica* de Nietzsche, formando una simbiosis original." (Guervós, 2000, p. 16).

Synthesis, Art, and Interpretation

Among the writings that precede the appearance of the books on Zarathustra, Nietzsche understood the individual as “something” very new (*ganz Neues*), something newly created (*Neuschaffendes*) (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 705; 24[32]). The absolute dimension of the individual, the fact that his actions are “properties” coming from himself, would thus be a creation both as a concept and as an experience: “Das Individuum ist etwas Absolutes, alle Handlungen ganz *sein eigen*.” (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 705; 24[33]). Deeply worked on in the ethical and metaethical spheres in the last years of his *Freigeisterei* (early 1880s), the idea of the individual as a “work of art” (*Kunstwerk*) had until then been examined in its condition as a product, as a result of both the individual who makes himself and the very concept of the individual by philosophies of subjectivity.

Now, in the winter between 1883 and 1884, he seemed to analyze the reflexive nature of this creative activity, putting its ethical dimension on hold in order to return to the idea of the individual as a concept. Here, he elaborates a relationship of identity between the individual as “work” and as “concept”. The concept is therefore a work of art; concepts are *created*. But these creations “from himself” are nothing more than signs, simplified aspects of what has been captured by the individual within the system of references to which he belongs, and which precedes his own appearance in the world. “Unsre Sinnesorgane als Ursachen der Außenwelt? Aber sie selber sind ja auch erst Wirkungen unsrer ‘Sinne’—Unser Bild vom Auge ist ein Erzeugniß des Auges.” (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 705; 24[35]). As an image (*Bild*), what the human being understands as “his” sensory experience is already a result of a work, a product (*Erzeugniß*).

This kind of sensory product is, at the same time, a stimulus for the purpose of the individual’s actions. Here the idea of creation coincides with the physiological synthesis of sensory perception. Synthesis is ultimately creation, production⁴. “Alle Handlungen müssen erst mechanisch als möglich vorbereitet sein, bevor sie gewollt werden.” (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 705; 24[34]). In this sense, there is a new reactive capture of nerve signals that is expressed creatively in the world as purpose and action. This creative expression, however, is not deliberative, fully conscious and decisive, but a mechanical demand for the symbolic relaying of these captured signals. “Oder: der ‘Zweck’ tritt im Gehirn *zumeist* erst auf, wenn alles vorbereitet ist zu seiner Ausführung. Der Zweck ein ‘innerer’ ‘Reiz’—nicht mehr. Es giebt keinen ‘Willen’: das ist nur eine vereinfachende Conception des Verstandes, wie ‘Materie’” (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 705; 24[34]). As a result of a work itself, the notion of man as an individual consciousness endowed with a will remains as a simplification of a dynamic and continuous cycle of capturing, transmitting physiological signals and relaying symbolic signals. This is how he becomes a created work; his reactions to stimuli constitute his actions and his reflections on them constitute his values.

Such a process, so apparently mechanistic, once it removes the speculative “inner charm” of the subject, could be mistakenly understood as a scientific reductionism that seems to empty elements of the human condition in the individual. And what would be most problematic about this perspective would be the immediate epistemological consequence of a universalizing conception of the human as a function of the stimulus-response binomial. But this kind of corporeal organic determinism brings with it the detail that perception is physiologically individual for each body. As a result, purposes and their consequent values also tend to be

⁴ On another occasion, the relationship between *corporeal* organic synthesis and *cultural* synthesis was investigated as follows: “Conceived as an ‘organic being’ (*organisches Wesen*), the corporeal constitution naturally develops a complete process within the framework of culture, which allow us to infer that what is called ‘body’ is in itself a full and integrated process.” (Vieira de Paiva & Feitosa, 2021, p. 559).

individual: "Die Werthe für seine Handlungen entnimmt er zuletzt doch sich selber: weil er auch die überlieferten Worte sich *ganz individuell* deuten muß" (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 705; 24[33]). For Nietzsche, words are the means of materializing the simultaneous process of expression and capture. They consist of the product of a double selective act: the selection of the signal to be captured and the selection of how this selected capture should be transmitted to the world according to the individual's purposes. This is the process of interpretation and its creative essence.

Homer and the Art of Interpretation

As demonstrated above, whether in his linguistic reflections of his youth or in his considerations on knowledge in the mid-1880s, it seems evident that for Nietzsche the corporeal organization gives personality to the construction of understanding through the selection of physiological and unconscious capture of signals in a system of reference by the individual, as well as its consequent transmission to that same system. That this construction is his conception of *interpretation*, and that the aesthetic element in such a conception consists precisely in the unconscious and corporeally conditional nature of this process, is what reveals the historical development of the cultural phenomena tradition in its transitional elements.

It is important to comprehend the similarity of this same mechanism in his considerations about the phenomena of history and culture according to the "organization" of a cultural body: there are such and such bodies, with such and such individual corporeal organizations, which establish and select epistemological and axiological paradigms in this complex system of references. This could be perhaps why the question of values is such an important problem in his writings from the 1880s, his most productive philosophical decade.

Under this understanding, his positioning on the "Homeric question" at the beginning of his career in Basel reveals itself as so relevant to the set of his philosophical thought to be developed decades later. Homer, as the artistic production of many rhapsodes and academics, is the legitimate constitution of the Greek world both in the times in which it was recited, and in all others that followed it.

It is worth now foregrounding the coincidence of thoughts about the poet in Nietzsche's 1869 text and in Lange's work to which he paid so much attention: "Homer hat nicht immer seinen Werth behalten, sondern er hat ihn wieder gewonnen, als ein Geschlecht entstand, das ihn zu schätzen wusste, und die Götter Griechenlands sind mit ihm wieder aufgelebt." (Lange, 1875, p. 622). Therefore, depending on the historical era that received him, different aspects of the legendary poet were organically selected and artistically created by these respective cultural bodies.

For philosophical problems concerning history and cultural transmission throughout the development of civilizations, this conception of art based on the idea of creation and production demonstrates precisely how the spaces between major changes in cultural paradigms are filled by interpreters. "Die *Auslegung* der Formel ist mindestens persönlich, wenn er auch keine Formel schafft: als *Ausleger* ist er immer noch *schaffend*." (Nietzsche, 1977, p. 705; 24[34]). Finally, this understanding demarcates both the importance of the interpreter for the issues of his time, as well as for the goals of his culture in the future.

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