

Imagery of Childhood from the Homeric Poems

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As the first European literary documents, the Iliad and the Odyssey ensure in the cultural history of the West a unique status, assuming itself since Antiquity as the first foundation of philological and philosophical research, and also as superior literary and artistic model. In the framework of their traditional nature, due to the creative elaboration of generations of aedos, both epics, based on a peculiar technique of production and transmission, articulate in an enigmatic poetic plot threads of mythic narratives and historical realities that modern archaeological investigations confirm. From the poetic testimony of Homer, we will try to analyse the references to childhood. While some occur generically as images of a certain extract of human society, marked by peculiar characteristics, functions and needs, others, supported by peculiar mentions, assume a dramatic functionality in the mythical plot of the two poems, which contributes to their symbolic density. These poetic founding references, plastically reflected in the Greek ceramic art of the classical period, will offer us the pretext not only to better understand the ancient worldview, but also to interpret in it the symbolic expressiveness of the childhood universe.

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Homer and the Childhood of Literature

Emerging apparently alone from the mysterious mist of the beginnings, Homer conserves in the cultural history of the West a unique statute: to his authorial responsibility was attributed from antiquity the composition of the first European literary documents, which inaugurated the very rich source of Greek Literature, assuming itself as the superior example for all successive poets, the first foundation of all philological research, the preferred target of all philosophical reflections, and the unavoidable inspiration of multiple spheres of the arts, not only within the narrow borders of Greece, but also in the ever wider circles of her influence. Ever since they were first known, from the Archaic period onwards, their fascination has radiated in such an incomparable way, that from one of the founding pillars of Hellenic unity they have become the most genuine matrix of European cultural identity (Lamberton 1997).

Mediated throughout the centuries by serious controversies (Davison 1963), and today mostly interpreted within the framework of their traditional nature, due to the creative elaboration of generations of *aedos*, both epics, based on a peculiar technique of production and transmission, articulate in an enigmatic poetic plot threads of mythic narratives and historical realities that modern archaeological investigations confirm (Latacz 2003).

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Based on similar heroic ideal, both poems draw on the narrative framework of the Trojan War. The ancient Greek worldview believed that Troy had been the scenario chosen to relieve the excessive weight of the earth, granted by the fortunate gods as a provisional dwelling to the unfortunate mortals. Driven by their own impulses, and often coerced by external forces of which they are only imperfectly aware, men unleash there, in Troy, with their actions, faults and miseries, the crises that precipitate them towards misfortune (Pinto 2017). While the *Iliad* details how Achilles' anger precipitates, after nine years of siege, the violent solution of the armed conflict, the *Odyssey* focuses on the tribulations of Odysseus, the last greek warrior, dragged in a solitary journey from the sacked territory of Troy to his homeland and his family.

In this diegetic framing, the references to childhood particularly caught my attention. I took the initiative to re-read the Homeric Poems through this peculiar angle of approach. Using Dunbar's and Prendergast's *Concordances*, I have constructed for the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* a corpus of words relating to children and childhood, which serve as thematic reference material (Dunbar 1983, Prendergast 1983). Then, through a contextual study of each one, I tried to interpret and classify the types of occurrences, establishing comparisons and interrelationships between them, in order to propose an attempt to explain the Homeric worldview for the universe of childhood. In fact, some of them, merely generic allusions, transport the referential presence of children to the narrative scenario, as representatives of a certain extract of human society, almost always defined by contrast with the troubled world of adults, and marked by peculiar characteristics, functions and needs. Others, sustained by concrete mentions of specific children, endowed with a name and a particular history, already assume in the poetic plot a symbolic functionality, which emphasizes the dramatic density of both poems.

Generic Allusions to Childhood in the Homeric Poems

In the first group of generic allusions, the presence of anonymous children tends to become evident in the discursive testimonies of adults, especially warriors, who evoke them contrastively¹ in the framework of a particular fragility, demanding vigilant protection. All Homeric universe (in particular the warlike one of the *Iliad*) is permeated by the consciousness of the extreme helplessness of children, facing all dangers, but in particular those imposed by the violent siege of enemies. That tormented consciousness, that every warrior has as a major

¹In opposition to the autonomy and physical or mental strength, required as an elementary attribute in the *aristeia* of warriors, small children depend exclusively on others to live and defend themselves: they are afraid and they demand the mothers's lap and affection, the vigilant protection of others to correct daily imprudences, and the responsible defence of fathers to guarantee them a peaceful future. They are, moreover, on the scale of human beings, the most fragile, irresponsible, ignorant of dangers, and indifferent to the demands of life, particularly those imposed by the context of war. For the classic perception of children and childhood, see Golden (1990), and Edmunds (2013).

motivation, justifies the constant concern for the life and safety of women and small children, repeated to exhaustion not only among Trojans, but also among their allies and opponents. Therefore, it occurs as peculiarly touching the prophetic vision with which Priam, patriarch of a hyperbolically numerous offspring², overwhelmed by the intuition of mourning, tries to keep Hector, the bravest and noblest of his sons, away from the fatality of combat (*Il.* XXII 59-71; vd. Richardson 1992, pp. 111–113, Willcock 2001, p. 292).

The weaknesses of children (fear, naivety, ignorance, imprudence) also tends to occur, as a mechanism of censure or exhortation, in multiple discursive manifestations, to condemn warriors for having maladjusted attitudes, or to invite them to behave in a more age-friendly way. Thus, in a speech to Agamemnon, Odysseus compares the perturbation of the Achaeans, eager to return to their homeland, with that of weeping children or widows (*Il.* II 289: vd. Kirk 1985, p. 146, Willcock 2002, p. 201); also Nestor, engaged in the same effort of persuasion, rebukes the conduct of the troops, indifferent to the successes of war like small children (*Il.* II 337-38: vd. Kirk 1985, pp. 150–151, Willcock 2002, p. 202); Hector assures Ajax that he does not allow himself to be intimidated like a frowsy boy or a woman (*Il.* VII 235: vd. Kirk 1990, p. 266, Willcock 2002, p. 255), and insults Diomedes on the battlefield, encouraging him to flee like a fearful girl (*Il.* VIII 164: vd. Kirk 1990, p. 266, Willcock 2002, p. 264); Diomedes spares no insult to Paris, apostrophising him as "vain, and a seducer of virgins", and comparing his ephemeral military glory to that of a woman or a foolish child (*Il.* XI 385; 389; vd. Hainsworth 1993, p. 269, Willcock 2002, pp. 303–304); Idomeneus censures Meriones' loquacity, recommending that they should not extend themselves so much in conversation as if they were children (*Il.* XIII 292: vd. Janko 1992, pp. 83–84, Willcock 2001, p. 211).

Particularly significant, not least because of its prophetic tone, is the scene in which Achilles, moved by Patroclus' copious tears, tenderly teases him with the remark that he looks like a little girl, weeping and seeking her mother's lap (*Il.* XVI 7-11); without carrying any real censure³, the comparison, legitimized by the interlocutors' affection, seems rather to indicate the immediate intuition that Achilles had of Patroclus' deepest intentions in approaching him. In the context of the same duel, after Achilles has reproached Aeneas for his imprudence, more ingrained than that of children, who at least acknowledge the *fait accompli* (*Il.* XX 198), the latter assures him that he will not allow himself to be frightened like a

²The special fortune of a father with many sons, widely recognised in the ancient worldview, can be transfigured in the context of war into a very exceptional tragedy: Priam is precisely the elderly father who loses many sons, and sees the most valiant ones fatally advance in death (*Il.* XXIV 493-501). By comparison, in the *Odyssey*, the theme of unique descent, which lends special drama to Odysseus' life experience - as to that of his father Laertes and his son Telemachus, all fated to face hardship and multitudes of enemies in the most poignant loneliness - lends itself at the end of the poem to a symbolic reading of particular optimism. For more details, see Richardson (1992, pp. 272–273, 320–326), Willcock (2001, p. 317), and Webster (1962, pp. 248–249).

³For more details about the tender combination of friendship and irony in Akhilleus' speech, see Hainsworth (1992, pp. 316–317) and Willcock (2001, p. 245). Among homeric heroes, weeping is recurrent and legitimate, often translated by the comparison of the warrior's weeping with a fountain that pours out copiously.

child (*Il.* XX 201), and insists on the need of not wasting with childish words the opportunity of combat (*Il.* XX 211, XX 244: vd. Edwards 1991, pp. 313–315, 320–321, Willcock 2001, p. 280); also Hector will later remind Achilles that he does not allow himself to be frightened with words like a child (*Il.* XX 430–31: vd. Edwards 1991, p. 337, Willcock 2001, p. 283). In *Il.* XXI 282⁴ (vd. Richardson 1991, pp. 75–76, Willcock 2001, p. 288), Achilles laments the impasse he lives in, swept along by the current of the Scamander, like a little pig-keeper boy who had recklessly tried to cross in winter the current of a river. In an indirect way, Ajax's expression of revolt against the success of Odysseus, supported by Athena, in the running race, avails itself also of this analogy of the child whom a mother constantly helps (*Il.* XXIII 783: vd. Richardson 1991, pp. 75–76, Willcock 2001, p. 309). Sometimes, same register appears in the narrator's indirect speech, when he notes, for instance, that not even in front of Aeneas, who rushes to defend the corpse of his brother-in-law Alcathous, terror takes hold of Idomeneus as of a spoilt boy (*Il.* XIII 470: vd. Janko 1992, p. 107, Willcock 2001, p. 216).

In equivalent contexts, in the *Odyssey* Menelaus reproaches as childish nonsense the squire Etheoneus' doubts about welcoming unexpected guests (*Od.* IV 32: vd. West 1981, p. 324); and Nausicaa further assures Odysseus that the way to the paternal palace is so easy that even a child could guide him there (*Od.* VI 301: vd. Hainsworth 1982, pp. 209–210). Penelope's venting about the childish immaturity of her son, who knows nothing of the occupations of men (*Od.* IV 818: vd. West 1981, p. 381), echoes in the *Odyssey* the awareness of the dramatic transition that Telemachus was forced to live through, deprived of the father figure from the earliest childhood, and raised in a morbid climate of insecurity; the hurtful perception of this traumatic past childhood, constantly surfacing in Telemachus' autobiographical discourse⁵, motivates the affectionate exhortations of the adjutants⁶.

Still within the scope of the generic references, the evocations of childhood assume a relative projection in the recurring structures of the similes. Ornamental expedients of the epic traditional repertoire, these comparisons of medium or great amplitude, made by the extradiegetic narrator, recur in moments of dramatic intensity; thus, when the uncertainties of combat are heightened⁷, similes allow the poet to create descriptive pauses that attenuate the violence of the narration, and simultaneously appease the audience's imagination, through their poetic colouring and by the familiarity of the proposed elements (Cook 1984, Bowra 1968,

⁴*Il.* XXI 281 = *Od.* V 312.

⁵*Od.* II 313, *Od.* XVIII 229, *Od.* XIX 19, *Od.* XX 310: vd. West (1981, p. 268), Russo (1985, pp. 209, 224, 279).

⁶E.g., Athena-Mentes, in *Od.* I 297: vd. West (1981, p. 228).

⁷Thus, for example, after Zeus forbids the gods to meddle in human affairs, at the beginning of the fifteenth book of the *Iliad*, the poetic perspective descends from Olympus to the earth: the unrelenting violence with which the Achaeans and Trojans fight will thus justify the exceptional multiplication of ten close similes, in which the efforts of the anguished heroes are brought close to the instinctive manoeuvres of animals: vd. Janko (1992, 225 sqq).

Moulton 1977). Much more frequent in the *Iliad*, similes also occur, with similar structures, in the *Odyssey*⁸.

Different from the most frequent analogical patterns⁹, analogies arise here several times through the evocation of the figure of children. Some occur semantically sustained by the natural bond of affection of children with their mothers: thus, when Pandarus shoots by divine interference an arrow at Menelaus, the poet notes that Athena hurriedly draws it away from the target, as a mother draws away a troublesome fly from her sleeping child (*Il.* IV 130-131: vd. Kirk 1985, p. 344); describing the concerted warlike strategy of the young Teucer and his half-brother Ajax, the poet also evokes the movement of the child, who run to his mother (*Il.* VIII 271-72: vd. Kirk 1990, p. 322). In *Od.* V 394 sqq. (vd. Hainsworth 1982, p. 178) the relief of Odysseus, seeing dry land, is compared with that of the sons recognising the first signs of improvement in their father, scourged by a long illness. Also the comparison of Odysseus' cry to that of the widow mourning her husband, who can no longer defend her and her children, in *Od.* VIII 523 sqq. (vd. Hainsworth 1982, p. 292), echoes, in the narrator's enunciation, the same despair which, above all in the *Iliad*, the warriors projectively formulate in first person. As a variation of equivalent semantic spectrum, indirectly involving the figure of the children, there is also the simile in which the pains of the pregnant woman are evoked (*Il.* XI 267-72)¹⁰, in the pretext of Agamemnon's injury in combat; another indirect allusion to children appears in *Il.* XII 432-436¹¹, when, in connection with the intermittent hostilities of Trojans and Achaeans, the poet alludes to the untiring efforts of a spinner, who weighs and adjusts the wool on the scales, endeavouring to secure for her children the meagre sustenance. Parallel to these, there occur often in the poetic universe other similes structured on images of animal nature, which demonstrate the peculiar relationship of affection and dependence between offspring and progenitors¹².

A second set of similes evokes the thoughtlessness of children's play. Thus, describing Ajax's *aristeia*, the poet connotes the stubborn obstinacy of the warrior,

⁸E.g., *Od.* IV 335-340 and IV 791-794; *Od.* VI 130-35; *Od.* X 410-417; *Od.* XII 413-419; *Od.* XIII 81-87; *Od.* XVI 216-18.

⁹The most frequent scenes are those in which animals, above all wild animals, decimate or corner harassed victims in manoeuvres of depredation; almost always the attacking warrior is represented as a lion and the pursued as a defenceless and timid animal (or domestic, like the ox or the sheep, or wild, like the deer or the doe, or the defenceless calf). In a second group, also resort scenes describing portentous manifestations of nature, storms, howling winds, sea turbulence, avalanches, and similar prodigies. There is a third and also remarkable group of similes with domestic and craft activities, such as dyeing, cooking, hunting, herding and milking, agricultural work, collecting firewood, naval carpentry, fishing and oyster-hunting and athletic contests.

¹⁰For the peculiar semantic of the simile, in the context of suffering, see Duchemin (1960, pp. 366-367); Hainsworth (1982, pp. 254-255) emphasises, in his commentary, "an inescapable irony at several levels in the comparison.

¹¹For more details, see Hainsworth (1982, p. 362, Willcock 2002, pp. 320-321) (who notes that "the detailed information about the poor woman, how she needs to provide for her children, is of course irrelevant to the purpose of the comparison, which is merely based on the exactness of the balance; in the additional ornamentation we see the poet's sympathy for human troubles").

¹²E.g., *Il.* II 305-30; *Il.* IV 434-35; *Il.* V 540 sqq.; *Il.* XI 113; *Il.* XII 170; *Il.* XVI 265; *Il.* XVII 5; *Il.* XVII 133; *Il.* XVIII 319; *Od.* XV 173-74; *Od.* XVII 126 sqq.; *Od.* XX 14.

approximating it to that of a donkey mauled by the strokes of children (*Il.* XI 558-65)¹³. In an equivalent way, the moment when Zeus, deceived by Hera's seductions, decides to reverse in the battlefield the warrior successes of the Achaeans, supporting the Trojan attack, is charged with drama; in the exceptional sequence of similes, the trampling of the Greek defensive wall by the Trojan militia, supported by Apollo's interference, is compared to the inconsequent joy of children, who tear down by the sea the very constructions they had fun in conceiving (*Il.* XV 360-66)¹⁴. In regard to the Myrmidons' return to the scene of the battle, the narrator also uses an analogy with the wasps which, tormented by the thoughtless cruelty of children, then attack an unwary passer-by (*Il.* XVI 257-67)¹⁵.

Particularly expressive is also the detail that on the shield of Achilles – conceived at Thetis' request by Hephaestus as a dazzling image of the world (*Il.* XVIII 478-608) – the child also unavoidably marks his presence (*Il.* XVIII 514 and 555)¹⁶.

Definite References to Children in the Homeric Poems

More important than the generic references seem to be those which use concrete mentions to specific children, endowed with a name and a story. Most of

¹³A few verses earlier, in *Il.* XI 548-557, he had likened the hero to a lion; the double sequence of similes seems intentionally to combine in its semantic features the expression of the hero's dual personality, brave as a lion, and obstinate as a donkey; simultaneously, the ineffectual efforts of the reckless children evoke the military failure of the Trojans, unable to overcome the resistance of Ajax. For the interpretation of the unparalleled simile, see Hainsworth (1982, p. 284) and Willcock (2002, p. 306).

¹⁴While Janko (1992, pp. 266–268) outlines in the simile “the poet's sense of pathos of vain human effort”, Willcock (2001, p. 245) notes that “Homer sets before us wonderfully clearly the unchanging behavior of children”.

¹⁵Janko (1992, p. 352) underlines in the simile with wasps the persistent mood and brave movement of warriors: “so too the Myrmidons, their ferocity increased by long abstinence since the leaders' quarrel, attack the Trojans who are, in this, innocent outsiders, since their assault has not touched Akhilleus' own ships. In *Il.* XVII 726, the Trojans, determined to snatch from their companions the corpse of Patroclus, are also compared to dogs accosted by youths, charging against a wounded boar.

¹⁶In the artistic representation of the shield, which Hephaestus artistically carves for Achilles (*Il.* XVIII 478-608), there is in fact an excellent synthesis of the whole Homeric poetic cartography: two cities are represented, one in a context of peace, and the other of war; in the war city two armies besiege the city, and from the walls anguished women, with small children (*Il.* XVIII 514), follow the course of the battles, while also incursions of cattle plundering take place; to the side are represented the peaceful labours of ploughing and herding; among the journeymen of the royal estates, young boys are still toiling away, collecting and carrying the pavesias (*Il.* XVIII 555), and the preparation of a sacrifice; lions watch the cattle, they attack and are pursued by men and dogs; and finally there are dancers on a runway, and acrobats, and, in the outer frame, the ocean. For more details about the shield digression, see Edwards (1991, pp. 200–233) and Willcock (2001, pp. 269–272). For the presence of children, see Edwards (1991, p. 219): “The description evokes (...) the sufferings of women, children, and the old at the sack of innumerable cities; these are portrayed in Hektor's words to Andromache (6.450-65), in her lament over his corpse (24.731-8) and in the prediction of old Priam (22.66-76).”

these occur in discursive analepses (by an autodiegetic, homodiegetic or heterodiegetic narrator) which, taking up a temporal link of the past, summoned to memory, revisit the period of childhood of an adult character, for its symbolic relevance. Much rarer in the fictional universe of epics – centred in dramatic experiences of adults in conflict – but also much more intense for its symbolic spectrum, exceptionally references occur in which a particular child assumes in the narrative plot, synchronously, the function of real actor, and the action gains tragic density from this perspective of the radical fragility of the child.

References by Analepses

In the first group of references, the most indirect of these allusions occur as a regular mechanism of epic enunciation in the widespread use of patronymics, which practically all epic characters hold¹⁷. The patronymic formulas associate to a strictly technical benefit a productive symbolic halo: on the one hand, they are used as traditional resources – which allow the extension of the proper name, and adjust it in a convenient way to specific segments of the dactylic hexameter, in order to articulate it effectively with other fixed formulas of the syntagmatic enunciation; on the other hand, they configure a poetic mechanism of alluding indirectly to the original moment of mortal conception, that is, of the first childhood of each epic character. In fact, materialising a remarkable care of dramatic construction, the patronymic titles convey in archaic poetry the conviction that each man is a link in a chain that begins long before his individual birth, and viscerally links him to his parents, grandparents and the multiple ancestors who preceded him, as well as to the future ones to whom he will potentially or actually one day leave his inheritance – genetic, material, and spiritual. Each one of the unfortunate mortals is thus fatally summoned to appear one day among the immense mole of the generations of men, as numerous as the leaves on the trees,

¹⁷Not only the most relevant (such as Peleides Achilles, Laertiades Odysseus, Atreides Agamemnon and Atreides Menelaus, Menoitides Patroclus, Neleides Nestor, Tideides Diomedes, Idomeneus son of Deucalion, Esthenelus son of Capaneus, Euryalus son of Mecysteus, Meriones son of Mole, Ajax and Teucer sons of Telamon, Ajax son of Oileus, Agapenor son of Ancaeus, Meges son of Phileus, Podalyrion and Macathon sons of Asclepius, Eurypylus son of Evaemon, Toas son of Andremon; Enipeus son of Thebeus, Tlepolemus son of Heracles; Priamus Laomedontides, Hector and Helen Priamides, Aeneas son of Anchises, Pandarus son of Lycaon, Sarpedon son of Zeus), but even those who pass ephemerally in the poetic stream, and even the most ignoble of men, as Dolon son of Eumedes (Il. X 314), and Melantheus and Melantho, sons of Dolium (Od. XVII 212; XVIII 322). In cases where the characters have a semi-divine nature, the patronymic formulation, which favours patrilineal reference, may add, in a brief indication, by means of an epexegetical relative phrase, the divine relative (e.g., Achilles son of Peleus, whom an immortal mother begot, Il. X 404, Il. XVII 78; Il. XX 104 sqq.; Aeneas, whom the divine Aphrodite begot to Anchises, Il. II 820; Il. V 313; Il. XX 104 sqq.); unlike the patronymic, which has a technical functionality, this information, known to the public, being a fundamental element of the mythical repository, does not tend to be repeated. Also the women, naturally, if introduced in the narrative plot with diegetic relevance, have genealogical notation (Helen daughter of Zeus, Penelope daughter of Icharius). For more details, see Pinto (2017).

*...the mortals,
those wretches, who like leaves are now
full of vigor and eat the fruit of the fields
now wither and die. (Il. XXI 463-466)¹⁸
and then to fall, like them, sadly, on the mire of the earth.*

The enunciation of filiation¹⁹ and the use of the patronymic epithet occur, therefore, as a notable poetic procedure that not only the poet takes advantage of, pressured by the peculiar circumstances of his compositional art, but also, in the narrative plot, the epic characters, who use it to identify themselves, publicly registering their individual patrimony of honour, not only if summoned to present themselves, but also as a regular means of ostentation of merit, on the battlefield²⁰. Alongside the euphoric statements in which the warrior boasts, in the first person, about his origins, intending to intimidate the opponent with them, there is also the bitter melancholy of testimonies, almost always written by the narrator, in the third person, detailing the lineage, birth and early childhood of men who, staking their lives on the uncertainty of combat, will very soon lie, slaughtered, on the earth²¹. Often associated with the figures of young warriors, they naturally lend themselves to summon to the memory, as special targets of suffering, parents mourning²², and above all those who, endowed with peculiar faculties of divination or proximity to the gods, were not able to foresee, or avoid, the fatal loss of their children²³.

¹⁸The melancholic simile that likens men to the leaves of the trees - numerous and ephemeral - is repeated elsewhere in the Homeric epic (e.g.: Il. II 468; Il. II 800; Il. VI 146 sqq.; Od. IX 51).

¹⁹The first name appears often as a patronymic derivation (e.g. Chryseis, daughter of Chryses, Il. I 143; cf. Il. I 12; Willcock 2002, pp. 185-186).

²⁰Whereas in the essentially peaceful context of the *Odyssey* genealogical utterances recur in the context of the rituals of hospitality in which a man is invited to present himself among strangers who welcome him, in that of the *Iliad*, marked by hostilities between armies, it is in that of the warlike invective, in the scene of battle, that they tend to appear. In Il. X 68-69, Agamemnon recommends to Menelaus that he wake up the men, "calling to each man by lineage and father's name,/ honouring them all". For more details, see Hainsworth (1982, p. 164), and Willcock (2002, p. 286).

²¹E.g. Il. IV 474 (on Simoesius, son of Anthemion); Il. VI 22 sqq. (on Bucolion, son of Laomedon); Il. VIII 302 sqq. (on Gorgithion, son of Priam); Il. XI 221-31 (about Iphidamas, son of Antenor); Il. XIII 176 sqq. (about Imbrius, son-in-law of Priam); Il. XIII 427 (about Alcatthous, son-in-law of Anchises, who brought up Aeneas); Il. XV 333 sqq. (about Medon and Iason, sons of Oileus); Il. XX 407 sqq. (about Polydorus, the younger son of Priam).

²²The poems repeat the taciturn notations about children who, because they die early, do not repay their parents what they spent on them, a strong familiar responsibility (Il. IV 477-478, Il. XVII 301-302; see Kirk (1990, pp. 388-389), Willcock (2002, p. 230) and Edwards (1991, p. 92). The melancholic forecast of the orphanhood of an elderly father from whom the son and joy are to be snatched away, affecting the sphere of human experiences, does not fail to extend its shadow of unusual pain over the regularly frivolous heart of the gods, whom human children seem to endow with some (indirect) tragic awareness of mortality. The theme assumes, moreover, particularly in the tragic ambience of the *Iliad*, a peculiar protagonism through the pairs Thetis/Achilles and Zeus/Sarpedon.

²³Within the topic of the diviner, priest or physician father, who is unable to prevent the death of his own children, recur, e.g., the episodes of the two sons of the priest Dares (Il. V 10 sqq.), of the sons of Eurydamas, interpreter of dreams (Il. V 148 sqq.); of the sons of the diviner Merops of Percote (Il. XI 329 sqq.) and of the seer Polyidus (Il. XIII 663 sqq.).

Still inscribed in the set of references to children brought up by an exercise of analepsis – which discursively transfers, through memory, a temporal sequence from the past to the present – there are several allusions to the childhood period of characters of recognized diegetic or mythical relevance²⁴.

In the *Iliad*, allusions to Achilles' childhood are multiplied, noting sometimes the peculiar circumstances of his conception and birth, or the ambivalence of his semi-divine nature (*Il.* XX 127-128, *Il.* XXIV 539-40)²⁵. There is no lack of allusions to the influence of his mother on his character (*Il.* XVI 203)²⁶, or to his affective attachment to the people with whom he grew up; noteworthy in this respect is the notation of his joint upbringing with Patroclus, son of Menoitius, forced into exile for manslaughter, and lovingly taken in by Peleus (*Il.* XXIII 85 sqq.)²⁷, and that of his attachment to the figures of his father Peleus and tutor Phoenix (*Il.* IX 471-495)²⁸. It is also underlined his warrior precocity (*Il.* IX 438-445 sqq.)²⁹, and we have reference to the responsibility of Patroclus in prudently disciplining his emotional immaturity (*Il.* XI 786-789)³⁰.

The theme of Achilles' extreme youth, which leaps out even from the first book, when the mother comes to comfort her son's grief and wipe away his tears (and will later go to the heavens to intercede for him), is closely associated with the general theme of life interrupted early, and serves a significant intention of the poem, which is to link him to an exceptional destiny, that of the premature and conscious sacrifice of life.

²⁴Alongside the mortal children, recur the allusions to the birth and childhood of gods, as for instance that of the first generation of the gods, born of Rheia and Cronos (*Il.* XV 185 sqq.); that of Hera, created by the Titans Ocean and Thetis (Τηθύς) (*Il.* XIV 201 sqq., *Il.* XIV 301 sqq.); that of Thetis (Θέτις), the Nereid, daughter of Nereus, brought up by Hera, (*Il.* XXIV 58-59), that of Dionysos, brutally persecuted in childhood by his mortal cousin Lycurgus, and welcomed into the protective lap of Thetis (*Il.* VI 132-137), and that of the Cyclops Polyphemus (*Od.* I 70 sqq., *Od.* IX 529), for instance.

²⁵See Edwards (1991, p. 306); Richardson (1992, p. 332); and Willcock (2001, pp. 279, 318). There are several dramatic cases of young men dying early, but Achilles differs from all others by being the only hero who knows that he will die in Troy, and does not harbour, like others, the hope of surviving; in fact, he does not risk his life driven by the hope of escaping the hardships of combat, he sacrifices it in full awareness, and voluntarily, because that was his heroic choice.

²⁶The remark is indirectly transmitted by Achilles, but it corresponds to the widespread reproach of the Myrmidons, who connected his bitter inflexibility with the fact that he was raised by Thetis not with milk but with gall. See Janko (1992, p. 345) and Willcock (2001, p. 247). On the contrary, the Homeric Poems reiterate regarding other characters (e.g., Hector by Hecabe, *Il.* XXII 79-83; Odysseus and Telemachus by Eurycleia, *Od.* XIX 353 and I 435) the human affective attachment to maternal breastfeeding.

²⁷See Richardson (1992, p. 175) and Willcock (2001, p. 300).

²⁸See Hainsworth (1992, pp. 124–125) and Willcock (2002, p. 280).

²⁹Phoenix recalls (*Il.* IX 440-443) that he accompanied him, at the request of his father Peleus, to serve him as master and tutor, because the young man, setting out to fight νῆπιος, while still a child, knew nothing of the fateful war and assemblies. Nine years afterwards, with twelve (cities sacked (*Il.* IX 328), and many assemblies attended, he becomes the worthy representative of his father's wishes, capable of great speeches and unspeakable feats. For more details, see Hainsworth (1992, pp. 105, 121) and Willcock (2002, pp. 277, 279).

³⁰For more details, see Hainsworth (1992, p. 307) and Willcock (2002, p. 311).

Achilles' childhood, to which the epic and tragic traditions have added detail, occurs in very brief allusions in the two Homeric Poems. The first scene, evoked by Achilles in his vent before the corpse of Patroclus (*Il.* XIX 326-333)³¹, allows us to measure, through first-person testimony, the despair of the hero, deeper than he would have felt at the news of the death of his father or of the son born to him in Scyros after he left for Troy, and whom he never expected to see again, for he supposed that one day Patroclus would take charge of his education. In *Il.* XXIV 466-467)³², Hermes advises Priam that, as a propitiatory strategy in the face of Achilles' inflexibility, his approach as suppliant should privilege emotional reference to the aged father, the beautifully braided mother and the son. Priam will follow up the advice by addressing only, as an aged father cursed by endless grief, the analogy with Peleus (*Il.* XXIV 486-506)³³. The third reference occurs in the expressive dialogue entered into in Hades between Odysseus and the shadow of Achilles (*Od.* XI 492-540)³⁴.

Following Achilles' exhortation to his troops (who return to combat accompanying Patroclus, concealed under his friend's armour), the poet enunciates the identity of the commanders of the phalanxes: the lineages of a grandson of Peleus, Menestius, son of Polydora and the river Spercheios (*Il.* XVI 173-178), and of Eudoro, son of Polymela and Hermes (*Il.* XVI 179-92); not recurring again in the narrative, nor serving the dramatic topic of the young man who dies early, one and the other seem to serve as extras who summon to the memory of the auditorium, by their unusual semi-divine genealogy, the figure of the supreme commander of the Myrmidons³⁵.

Also Diomedes, possessor, with Euryalus and Sthenelos, of a very exceptional family heritage, as descendant of one of the Seven against Thebes, evokes his own childhood, when he recognizes, in the expressive episode of the meeting with Glaucus in the fighting line (*Il.* VI 215-231)³⁶, that he only keeps a very vague memory of his father, killed in Thebes when he was very small. Constantly confronted with his father's achievements, who recurs comparatively, evoked by his companions (Agamemnon, *Il.* IV 365-400)³⁷, or by Athena (*Il.* V 800-813)³⁸, Diomedes also delights in presenting his filiation from Tydeus as a sign of genetic identity in the context of the most pressing difficulties³⁹.

In equivalent narrative frameworks, but at different points of the battle scene, Teucer and Aeneas are confronted with the image of the childhood: Teucer, in an appeal by Agamemnon to honour on the battlefield the legacy and the affection given to him by his father, Telamonius, despite being an illegitimate son (*Il.* VIII

³¹See Edwards (1991, p. 273) and Willcock (2001, p. 276).

³²See Richardson (1982, p. 320) and Willcock (2001, p. 317).

³³See Richardson (1982, pp. 324-325) and Willcock (2001, p. 317).

³⁴See Heubeck (1983, pp. 297-301).

³⁵See Janko (1992, pp. 340-343) and Willcock (2001, p. 247).

³⁶See Kirk (1990, pp. 188-190) and Willcock (2002, p. 246).

³⁷See Kirk (1985, pp. 367-373) and Willcock (2002, pp. 228-229).

³⁸See Kirk (1990, pp. 142-144), and Willcock (2002, p. 240).

³⁹As when, contrary to Odysseus' proposed withdrawal, he is ready not to abandon Troy, honouring a noble father whom the heaped earth of Thebes covers (*Il.* XIV 110-130).

282 sqq.)⁴⁰, and Aeneas, in an interpellation from Deiphobus, urging him to rescue the corpse of Alcathous, who had brought him up as a boy, and now had just died at the hands of Idomeneus (*Il.* XIII 465 sqq.)⁴¹.

The episode of *Il.* V 265-266 sqq.⁴² alludes to the childhood of Ganymede, son of Thros, whose abduction earned the enviable gift of divine horses; the mythical motif represents the all-embracing theme of the violence exercised on mortal children, incapable of defending themselves, and of the correlative suffering of powerless parents. In a similar vein, there are other allusions to the abduction of children, such as that which victimized Eumaeus (*Od.* XV 412 sqq., specially 450-453, 465-470), and his nanny (*Od.* XV 427-429), turning them into hostages and slaves of opportunists⁴³.

In the *Odyssey*, the allusions to Odysseus' childhood stand out in the frame of the difficulties experienced in Ithaca; often sustained in very brief allusions, linked to a fate particularly unhappy for those who cherish him (e.g. Telemachus, in *Od.* III 95; *Od.* IV 325; Penelope, *Od.* XIX 353-55; the Phaeacians, *Od.* VII 198) or as glimpses of an interiority overshadowed by despair (*Od.* XXIII 325)⁴⁴, they may also occur as a poetic resource to justify the diegetic relief of certain objects (such as Odysseus' bow, conquered in a plundering enterprise during his childhood, *Od.* XXI 13)⁴⁵. The most relevant of the evocations of Odysseus' childhood occurs diegetically addressed in the digression of the scar (*Od.* XIX 393-466)⁴⁶, and curiously privileges the character's hereditary link with his maternal grandfather, Autolycus, known – and hated – for his cunning and deceitful nature. This marked heredity, confirmed, moreover, a posteriori, in all the epic action (particularly that documented in the *Odyssey*⁴⁷), in the versatility of the hero's character, will lend the episode of the choice of the name a symbolic foundation.

As occurs in the *Iliad*, where the protagonism of Achilles – repeatedly put into perspective, by means of analeptic incisions, from childhood – is reflected in the figure of his son Neoptolemus, still a child, who will honour the prophetic notation of the name, establishing, according to the epic tradition, the renewal of

⁴⁰See Kirk (1990, pp. 322–323), and Willcock (2002, p. 266).

⁴¹See Janko (1992, pp. 106–107), and Willcock (2001, p. 216).

⁴²For more details, see Kirk (1990, p. 87), and Willcock (2002, p. 234).

⁴³See Heubeck (1983, pp. 266–268). The example of Eumaeus allows the poet to underline the generosity of Laertes and Anticleia, who raised the boy as a son (*Od.* XV 361-365). The theme of the bonds of affection that allow one to treat a stranger like a son, recurring in the Homeric Poems under the pretext of the most varied characters, occurs in the context of Odysseus' family as an inheritance of positive values that is transmitted from parents to children; Odysseus appears, moreover, repeatedly connoted, even in the memory of his opponents, with the image of the magnanimous king, who treated the people like a son (*Od.* II 47, *Od.* II 234, *Od.* V 12, *Od.* XIV 140 and *Od.* XIV 151-53). This aspect will justify the justice of the slaughter perpetrated against the criminal suitors.

⁴⁴See Heubeck (1986, p. 323).

⁴⁵On the doubts raised by the episode of Iphitus, see Fernández-Galiano (1986, p. 153).

⁴⁶About the symbolic relevance of the digression of the scar, see Russo (1985, pp. 247–251).

⁴⁷On the poet's differentiated attitude, passing almost silently, in the aristocratic environment of the *Iliad*, the "autolic" inheritance in the hero's behaviour, and exposing it, explicitly and intentionally, in the hostile context of the *Odyssey*, devoid of codes of honour or defined rules of conduct, cf. Stanford's interpretation (Stanford 1963, pp. 12–19).

the honour and the heroic mission of the father, also in the *Odyssey* the diegetic relief of Odysseus⁴⁸ is projected in the figure of his son Telemachus, who, from his absence, fighting in the distance, also drew prophetically his onomastic foundation. Probably contaminated by the inner perspective of the father⁴⁹, Telemachus assumes in the poem the ambiguous status of the eternal child: revealing since the beginning of the action doubts about his own identity (*Od.* I 214-220)⁵⁰, he reproduces to satiety the mechanism of discursive, and dysphoric, return to the time of childhood (e.g. *Od.* II 313, *Od.* XVIII 229, *Od.* XIX 19, *Od.* XX 309-310)⁵¹, tragically marked by the absence of the father figure. Having internalized the notation of orphanhood⁵², which the epic worldview regarded as profoundly pernicious for the security of children, Telemachus will have to rely not only on the testimony of those around him, who will guarantee his resemblance to the paternal value⁵³, but also on the protective dispositions of Athena, validated by the Council of the Gods, in order to conquer, in his own maturing process, the status of an adult on his way to meet his father.

Penelope's despair, deprived of kinship ties that could defend her and her son from the threats of violence latent in the palace, justifies that in her imagetic repository she resorts to the mythical examples of Procne, Pandareus' daughter, who accidentally killed her own son (*Od.* XIX 518 sqq.), and the orphan daughters of another Pandareus, adopted and raised by Aphrodite, and suddenly snatched away, already naïve, by the Harpies (*Od.* XX 66-78)⁵⁴.

While the reference to the childhood of Orestes, strategically removed from the father's palace (*Od.* I 40)⁵⁵, assumes a relevant role in the symbolic interpretation of the *Odyssey*, the very brief allusion to the childhood of Nausicaa, brought up

⁴⁸Note that, curiously, already in the *Iliad*, Odysseus more than once called himself "Telemachus' father" (Il. II 260, Il. IV 354); this means that the relevance of the theme of the *Odyssey* was already known in the context of the *Iliad*, and is not a later development. See, for more details, Kirk (1985, p. 366), and Willcock (2002, p. 234), who underlines in the hero speech his unequivocal strong family attachment.

⁴⁹Forced to leave him still a very small child in Ithaca (thanks to the perspicacity of Palamedes, as detailed in the narrative tradition of the Trojan Cycladic Poems, and in particular that of Cypria), and with serious difficulties in conceiving from a distance his natural growth (cf. *Od.* XIII 360).

⁵⁰See West (1981, p. 214).

⁵¹For more details, see West (1981, p. 268); and Russo (1985, pp. 224, 278).

⁵²This is corroborated, moreover, by the recurrent topic, mentioned by several characters, of the extinction of the lineage (e.g., *Od.* I 222, IV 741, *Od.* XIV 182).

⁵³Cfr. *Od.* I 222, *Od.* II 270-80, *Od.* IV 62-64, *Od.* IV 141; *Od.* XIV 186; *Od.* XIX 86.

⁵⁴For the explanation of the two unexpected episodes, see Russo (1985, pp. 253, 266-267).

⁵⁵See West (1981, pp. 191-193, 295). The allusion of *Od.* III 196 already takes for reference the figure of the mature young man, driven by desire to return home. Note that Orestes, driven away from home by his mother and her lover, to avoid his awareness of the crime perpetrated against his father and the moral duty to avenge it, will be repeatedly enunciated, from the Council of the Gods in Book I, in the poetic plot of the *Odyssey* as a model for Telemachus, raised in the palace in the absence of his father, among enemies who try to annul the expectation of the king's return and even criminally destroy his lineage. The parallel has as points of comparison not only the figures of the two sons, but also of their respective fathers, Agamemnon and Odysseus, of their mothers and wives, Clytemnestra and Penelope, and of their opponents, Aegisthus and the suitors, in a specular network of profound symbolic consequences.

and suckled by the slave Eurymedusa (*Od.* VII 12)⁵⁶ serves to underline the extreme youth of the girl, who cherishes, in her naïve expectation, the dream of captivating the heart of Odysseus. The reference to Penelope's upbringing of Melanthe, with the love given to a child (*Od.* XVIII, 322-323)⁵⁷, like that of the childhood of Eurymachus, nurtured with warmth and affection by Odysseus (*Od.* XVI, 442 sqq.)⁵⁸ evokes, by contrast, the perversion of the slave's conduct, in accordance with the climate of violent criminality of the suitors. The enunciation of the genealogy of Amphinomus (*Od.* XVIII 126-128)⁵⁹, the most cordial and gentle of the suitors, enunciated by the beggar (Odysseus) immediately before the melancholy digression on the accidents of fortune that upset the expectations of men, "the most fragile of creatures that the earth nourishes", seems to obey a peculiar expressive intention.

References to Child Actors

Absolutely exceptional in the fictional universe of the epic, centred on the conflictuality of adult life, occurs the only reference to a concrete character, who in the time of the narrative assumes, as a child, a diegetic function. It is the son of Hector and Andromache – to whom the family had given the name Scamandrius, but was renamed by the Trojan population with the honorific title Astyanax, in homage to the generous warrior endeavours of his father, the defender of the city (*Il.* VI 401-403)⁶⁰. By allowing him to figure the frailties of all defenceless children, for whom the heroes tirelessly fight, the poet has granted him a unique tragic status. The moving episode of the meeting, near the city walls, of Hector – encouraged to leave the scene of war for a short time, in order to solicit women prayers to the gods – with his wife Andromache, tormented with anxiety, and unable to shelter in the tranquillity of home while he sacrifices his life in combat, provides the frame for his only appearance (*Il.* VI 369-502)⁶¹. While his wife pleads with him not to put herself needlessly at risk, because she cannot conceive of life without him, deprived already of parents, all her brothers, and the fellow-citizens of her native Thebes, annihilated at the hands of Achilles, and fears for the future of her orphaned son, Hector can only argue that, having his parents, many of his brothers, and the Trojan fellow-citizens alive in his charge, for none does he fear more than for her and her infant son, if death should overcome him.

He then vows that the boy may one day be praised for far surpassing his father's value, and for being able to render his mother the honours of his unsurpassed military glories. The child's tears, terrified at the proximity of his father's coruscating hoof, ease the couple's sorrow in a little anticlimax of laughter, foreshadowing the coming misfortune, which does not fail to be announced by signs. Aware that her deepest fears have been fulfilled, Andromache will come to

⁵⁶See Hainsworth (1982, pp. 218–219).

⁵⁷See Russo (1985, p. 215).

⁵⁸See Hoekstra (1984, p. 294).

⁵⁹See Russo (1985, pp. 200–201).

⁶⁰Kirk (1990, pp. 211–216) and Willcock (2002, pp. 248–249).

⁶¹Kirk (1990, 208 sqq.) and Willcock (2002, pp. 248–250).

lament the death of Hector, and the gloomy future that will befall everyone in Troy, and in particular the helpless baby (*Il.* XXIV 484-514⁶²). The later poetic production, especially the cyclic and tragic, will confirm, in effect, that the fears of both were very well founded.

The Narrative Imagery of Classical Greek Vases

The Homeric Poems are the most relevant source of information we have on the legendary and historic Trojan War, but other greek artists contributed in Antiquity to the popularisation of these mythical plots, electing the same characters and detailing with a profusion of legendary informations the account of their tormented lives. The *Epic Cycle Poems*⁶³ sought to complement the Homeric accounts, presenting numerous of the pre- and post-iliadic details, and developing the diegetic context of the myth, as a kind of systematisation and fixation of the heritage of the supra-regional Greek legend.

Enriched with many of the extra-homeric details conveyed by cyclic and tragic poetry, the epic tradition will reappear again figured in the greek vase-paintings of the classical period, which constitute our primary surviving visual images of ancient Greek life and myth, almost as a great picture book of Greek myth and life.

Without being a specialist in Greek art, but just an avid appreciator of its charms, I therefore set out to look for figurative echoes of this worldview in greek classical ceramics, which in Homer is manifested by the tender care for the fragile universe of children. Using Beazley's catalogued collection on CARC platform (<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/>), I also built a corpus of images depicting the

⁶²Richardson (1992, pp. 320–328) and Willcock (2001, pp. 317–318).

⁶³Preserved and transmitted orally by an anonymous legion of aedoi and rapsodoi, the Epic Cycle corresponds to a traditional legendary repertoire, which included a vast collection of narrative poems, organised in a chronological succession - in order to form a continuous series, from the origins of the world (inaugurated by the nuptial of Uranus and Gaia) to the end of the Heroic Age (marked by Ulysses' death). After the Titanomachia, a kind of divine prelude, and the three epics of the Theban Cycle, the Oedipodia, the Thebais and the Epigoni, was the Trojan Cycle, in which were developed all the deeds of the Trojan War and the return of the heroes (e.g., Achilles' fabulous childhood, and education, his prodigious strength and speed, his opponents, his sexual adventures before and during the Trojan War, and also Odysseus' perfidy and disloyalty, and his multiple sexual adventures, even after his return to Ithaca, from which resulted numerous children, namely Telegonus, who will kill him one day). This Trojan Cycle comprised the Cypria (with the antecedents of the war, and the successes relating to the first nine years of combat, which preceded the beginning of the Iliad), the Aethiopis (which narrated the continuation of the war, until the death of Achilles), the Ilias Parva (with the narrative of Achilles' funerals, and the dispute for his weapons, and the stratagem of the wooden horse), the Iliupersis (with the episode of Laocoon, the destruction of Ilium and the departure of the the victorious Achaean troops), the Nostoi (with the narrative of the return of the heroes to their homeland, which preceded the Odyssey, a particularized narrative of the νόστος of Odysseus), and the Telegonia (with the poetic treatment of Odysseus' last adventures and death). By analysing not only the few fragments of the six Trojan Cyclic Poems, but also the summaries present in Proclus' Chrestomathia and the indirect testimony of ancient authors, namely the tragediographs, we can strengthen our knowledge about the diegetic context of the traditional narrative that Homer did not retell (Pinto 2017).

presence of childhood and children, as I did for the Homeric Poems. I found them on everyday vases as anonymous, typified figures, starring in common everyday situations. Exceptionally, on more refined ritual vases, I found depictions of some of the mythical figures to which Homer bequeathed a greater symbolic spectrum. I therefore set out to reflect on this narrative similarity.

Replicating in some way the ancient worldview that the Homeric legacy first witnessed, many vases offer the centrality of their scenic space to children. While the simpler vases, of domestic or private sphere, tend to privilege the figuration of anonymous children, the vases of more solemn spheres (such as those of religious ritual or simposia) resort in parallel to the representation of mythical characters.

As in the Homeric models, the innocent fragility of the children stands out as a generic characteristic trait of the infantile figures, who crawl (v. 1369)⁶⁴, attracted by an object or toy, cake or fruit (vv. 1366, 8003, 10226, 11831, 15835, 15887) from afar, or seated on high chairs (vv. 11041, 209536); the fragility is often emphasised by the children's semi-nudity, protected by a string of small amulets; in several instances, these children appear naively playing with balls (vv. 1366, 1369), carts (vv. 10235, 10918, 10919, 11381) or small animals (rabbits or birds and dogs, vv. 1503, 3227, 4199, 4913, 10230, 11383, 14989, 16124); sometimes, they are with other children (vv. 16069, 16174, 16235, 16249), either brought by the hand, or on the lap of their mothers (vv. 8184, 10227, 11271, 207491, 213940), or on the backs of adults (vv. 4799, 209182), who watch over them with affectionate care. In the context of funerary rituals, some *lekythoi* underline the drama of orphanhood, depicting the child approaching the funerary monument, alone or accompanied by his mother (vv. 13449, 15459, 19472, 25910, 212317). The drama of a special *lekythos* (v. 216389) is touching: it represents the innocence of the child, who confidently walks towards the boatman Charon, who saluts him with his outstretched right hand; the vase was probably designed for the funeral rite of a child who died early.

Alongside these anonymous ones, there are also various representations of children referenced by name as characters from tradition. Recognising the notable proliferation of mythical figurations of the childhood of the gods (the scenes of the atypical birth of Athena and Dionysus stand out for their relevance) and of the child-gods (like Eros), and of the multiple heroes referenced in mythical plots (Heracles and Theseus, Jason), it is important here to concentrate on the genealogical lines of Odysseus and Achilles.

While Odysseus' representations figure him without exception in adulthood, assuming warlike responsibilities in the siege and looting of Troy (vv. 204505, 210079, 350504, 9035638), disputing Achilles' weapons (v. 200935, 203901, 205070), or suffering the tormenting homecoming, multiplying the episodes of the descent into Hell (vv. 206954, 9036830), the Sirens (vv. 202628, 351329), the Cyclops (vv. 303287, 305617, 331428, 340284), Circe (300620, 302569, 351593),

⁶⁴Nominal references used in the text and in footnotes are those present in CARC (Classical Art Research Centre) database (<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/carc/Home>), where they can be consulted. In the four examples of vases commented on as examples (below), the CARC's generic classification has been supplemented with references from the catalogues of the respective museum spaces that exhibit them.

and the slaughter of the suitors (vv. 23670; 216788, 217179), Telemachus stands only once in a *skyphos* of red figures (v. 216789), adult, leaning on a spear, but with eyes fixed on his mother (which seems to underline the insecurity that the Homeric model reflected in him), who, melancholically seated, waits, before the web that is being made.

Concerning Achilles, the Greek vases corroborate the poetic testimonies, approaching the theme of his irregular birth (through the tumultuous relationship of Thetis and Peleus, v. 6168), and multiplying as central the traditional theme of his childhood away from his mother, entrusted to the care of the preceptor Chiron (vv. 3412, 6905, 8257, 14007, 24301, 300550, 300588, 301336, 302017, 303372, 306873, 320079, 320452, 330748). In the exceptional reckoning of his figurations, as a young warrior called to the tribulations of war (v. 9203), allusions to the inordinacy of his affections are multiplied, both towards his companion Patroclus (vv. 31726, 200108, 200457, 201713, 300000) and towards conquered victims⁶⁵. Prominent here are also the themes of anger and mourning (vv. 201691, 202656, 203103, 216945), that isolate him and make him the target of diplomatic embassies from the Greeks (vv. 202217, 202832, 205225) and from the maternal care of Thetis (vv. 168, 30230, 203087; 209484, 213512, 213842, 213854, 275252; 21655, 23065), or recipient of Priam's rescue effort (vv. 7276, 14344, 23730, 44246, 200510, 204068, 204333; 310007, 350427, 350209, 350427, 352403, 380848). In the same symbolic context of turbulence, his weapons, designed by the gods and disputed by men, after his death (1580, 3367, 3368, 7721, 7827, 301072) also resort.

The much smaller number of vases depicting Neoptolemus (vv. 206070, 207342) obsessively insist on noting his exceptional status as an extremely young warrior, called by determination of fate to complete the destructive enterprise of the father (v. 205070), and his unspeakable fury, especially exercised against the child victims of the vanquished army⁶⁶.

Conclusions

Ever since they became known, from the Archaic period onwards, the Homeric Poems, the first documents of the West, irradiating in an incomparable way their fascination, have assumed themselves as a model and inspiration for all literary genres, all philosophical debates and all manifestations of the arts. Recognised also as historical testimonies of an early phase of European civilisation, which recent archaeological approaches tend to confirm, they also offer an exquisite field of work for scientific research. In this framework, it

⁶⁵Notably Briseis (vv. 200436, 201661, 204400, 204682, 213821), Hector (vv. 5818, 11078, 11079, 20331, 200058, 201956, 202257, 203796; 204364, 205336, 310005), Memnon (vv. 201941, 202142) and Penthesileia (vv. 3881, 201987, 206941, 211565, 310389; 310390); or very young victims, such as Troilus and Polixene (vv. 42165, 44864; 300381, 310353, 203224, 302023).

⁶⁶The scenes of attack near altars stand out, on Polixena (vv. 310027, 302032), and on Priam and Astyanax (vv. 16776, 44590, 310170; 5042, 13363, 202098, 370004; 2756, 202461, 202641, 203900, 300496, 301645; 310315, 320398, 320429).

seemed useful to us to revisit the poetic testimony of the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, recovering in a detailed analysis of the present references the most ancient image we have of the childhood universe.

The analysis made allowed us to notice that some of the homeric notations, assuming a mere value of generic allusions, transport to the narrative scenario the referential presence of children, as representatives of a certain extract of human society, almost always defined by contrast with the troubled world of adults, and marked by peculiar characteristics, functions and needs. Others, sustained by concrete mentions of specific children, endowed with a name and a particular history, seem to assume already in the mythical plot of the two poems a specific dramatic function, which contributes to the peculiar symbolic density of the narrative.

The regular traditional recourse to similes and patronymic titles tends to convoke, in the poetic enunciation, the theme of the bond between children and parents, recurrently articulated on the complementary notations of affectivity, inheritance and emulation. The generalized concern of fathers for sons and sons for fathers is registered as a central motif in the Homeric universe, emphasizing the peculiar consciousness of the legacy of values that the memory of the sons tributes to the action of their fathers. Often, above all in the context of battle, yearning is manifested in each new generation to honour, equalling or surpassing it, the merit of the previous one.

The divine Achilles opts for the certainty that he will die in Troy, leaving a heritage of immortal glory to his son who never even knew him. Hector's human situation, devoted to his closest family, and at the same time responsible for the defence of the city, inspires in him the pungent suspicion that he will not survive the very harsh hardships of combat, nor be able to save his little son and his wife. The astute Odysseus, forced to stay away from his wife and little son for twenty years, will suffer with incomparable patience until, vilified in his palace, he can restore the family to safety.

Despite Hector's wish (*Il.* VI 475 sqq.), Astyanax will not one day provide his mother with happiness, nor will he be recognized among his peers as much better than his father, who sacrificed his life in defence of the city and the family. Even Telemachus, raised from earliest childhood in the dramatic absence of his father, will relapse into the pathological pattern of doubt about his own identity (*Od.* I 214-220), and the constant need for the reinforcement of interlocutors who guarantee his resemblance to the paternal value. These images of the fragility of childhood, both absolute symbols of families torn apart by the tragedy of war, illuminate us with particular expressive force.

The protection of women and small children, an effective rhetorical resource of the leaders to stimulate the discouraged spirit of the troops, reiterated as a vector of meaning throughout the poems, occurs dramatically figured in the concrete characters of Scamandrius, the small son of Hector (to whom the Trojans tributed the honorific name of Astyanax, as son of the greatest defender of the city, *Il.* VI 402-03), and of Telemachus, coerced to grow up insecure among enemies in the absence of the father: in the complementary frame of the two poems, each of the boys, Astyanax and Telemachus, will lend concretely to the anonymous figuration

of childhood, peculiarly targeted in war scenarios, the human density, deeply tragic, of the most fragile of beings that crawls on earth (*Od.* XIX 130-131).

These notations, permeated by the drift proposed by other narrative traditions, from which the Cyclic Epic stands out, appeared reflective in the storytelling of the Greek vessels, and in their pedagogical functionality.

In the Berlin Museum's classic collection, there is an athenian *lekythos* on a white background (v. 209215)⁶⁷: the delicacy of the stroke represents a grief-stricken woman tenderly holding a bandaged child in her arms and presenting it to a warrior, who is leaning on his spear and has in his right hand the helmet removed from his head; despite not having any referential inscription, the image unmistakably echoes the tragic farewell of Hector and Andromache, smiling through tears, in *Iliad* VI.

This moment of luminous pause precedes, as a narrative piece, the extraordinary proliferation of paintings in which, in vessels of the most varied types and artistic techniques, through the exceptional refinement of the stroke and the brilliance of colour, the sombre moments of the Trojan War were figured. Embodied in the model of the later literary tradition, this war figuration seems to have debased to a level of ethical discredit the Homeric model. After presenting the anomalous circumstances of Achilles' life, favoured by the Olympian Zeus, as an expedient of destruction capable of relieving the overcrowded earth of unfortunate mortals from excess weight, and detailing, with refinements of perversion, his irrepressible barbarity in plundering cities and decimating armies, classical vase paintings did not fail to note how the seed of Achilles' inordinacy – genetically transmitted in a little more than sporadic encounter at Scyros – was exceeded in the savagery of Neoptolemus, taken at a very young age to the plains of Troy to fulfil his father's ominous efforts at barbarism. Brilliantly reproducing the literary narratives, many Greek vases (see n. 66) of the classical period display the horrors of war, depicting, with a cruelty beyond all limits, the figure of Neoptolemus, who beats to death, on the altar of the gods, Priam, whom ten years of war had already stripped of an incomparable offspring. The belly *amphora*, in the British Museum's Classic Collection (v. 310315= BM 1842,0314.3)⁶⁸, the *lekanis*, in the Museo Archeologico Nazionale of Naples (v. 300496 =MAN: 132615)⁶⁹ or the *pyxis* in the Schloss Charlottenburg's Antikensammlung (v. 360 = F3988)⁷⁰, in Berlin, stand out as fascinating examples. In each of them, by the same athenian pattern of black figure technique, is depicted the barbaric conduct of the young Neoptolemus, killing the powerless old king, who had approached the sacred space as a suppliant. But the height of savagery, which would repulse the gods themselves, manifests itself in an repeated astonishing detail: the throwing weapon there is no sword or spear (as one would expect of a valid warrior in attacking another valid and armed warrior): the mortal weapon is none other than the corpse of Asthyanax, the little son of Hector. On either side of the vases are currently presented in despair two figures of women, possibly

⁶⁷<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/XDB/ASP/recordDetails.asp?recordCount=1&start=0>.

⁶⁸<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/xdb/ASP/recordDetails.asp?recordCount=33&start=0>.

⁶⁹<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/xdb/ASP/recordDetails.asp?recordCount=25&start=0>.

⁷⁰<https://www.carc.ox.ac.uk/xdb/ASP/recordDetails.asp?recordCount=1&start=0>.

Andromache, widow of Hector, and mother of the baby, and the old queen Hecabe, wife of Priam, mother of many sons decimated by the fury of the Greeks, and grandmother of the dead baby.

It is possible that the paintings show a mechanism of expressive concentration, bringing together into one two scenes that the narrative separated in time and space (and even in agents), that of the brutal episode of the throwing of the baby and that of the death of the defenceless old king. But it is also possible that, without written record, a narrative version of this execrable excess ran. A terrible version in which the son of the irascible Achilles, following, in a paroxysm of barbarism, the model of his father's fury, but much more savage than him, thus mercilessly decimated, at a single blow, the past and the future of Troy.

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