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ODYSSEUS: A MODERN DISCOURSE OF AN EPIC HERO

If Odysseus is considered in symbolic terms, i. e. as a traditional mythical image, it will appear as a static statuesque type of character whose actions are to be described by the well-known Caesarean phrase: *veni, vidi, vici* – with one small addition essential for the *Odyssey* – *reverti*. In fact, Odysseus came to Troy, acted, won and returned home. This is Odysseus' story in a nutshell.¹ In the epic text, Odysseus undergoes epic treatment – the mythical symbol is transformed into a multilevel metaphor. On the other hand, it acquires extremely individual traits, characteristic of a particular literary character. In the Homeric *Odyssey*, different levels of analysis enable us to distinguish between Odysseus as a symbol, Odysseus as a metaphor and Odysseys as an individual. This comprehensiveness is exactly what inspires incessant interest in the hero. I will dwell on the causes that may account for the vitality of the epic character. Specifically, my immediate concern can be set forth as the following question: What fosters the interest in Odysseus nowadays, in the 21st century?

It is no exaggeration to claim the Odysseus has been among the most popular texts since it was created. A great number of works has been devoted to the influence of the epic poem on European literature.² The

¹ Aristotle writes in his *Poetics*: "Thus the story of the *Odyssey* can be stated briefly. A certain man is absent from home for many years; he is jealously watched by Poseidon, and left desolate. Meanwhile his home is in a wretched plight-suitors are wasting his substance and plotting against his son. At length, tempest-tost, he himself arrives; he makes certain persons acquainted with him; he attacks the suitors with his own hand, and is himself preserved while he destroys them. This is the essence of the plot; the rest is episode" (17. 1455b 11-22).

² Here are several of the works: Stanford W. B., *The Ulysses Theme: A Study in the Adaptability of a Traditional Hero*, Oxford: Blackwell 1968 (2nd edition); Stanford W.

quest for causes underling the popularity of the Odysseus leads us back to antiquity. In fact, Odysseus differs even from its contemporart mythical characters. If the central quality of other characters – Achilles, Ajax, Agamemnon, Diomedes, Idomeneus and others – is their physical power, stamina, belligerence, fervor, etc., the dominant feature of Odysseus is shrewdness, foresight and infinite will to survive. This by no means suggests the impudence of the other heroes or the coverdliness of Odysseus, but only reveals their respective priorities and the qualities that set Odysseus apart from other heroes. This is attested by one of his permanent epithets “πολύτροπος”. I will not give an account of the episodes illustrating Odysseus’s versatility and cunningness – they are well-known enough. I will only foreground several relatively less discussed aspects.

Odysseus resorts to all possible means to survive – deception, perfidity, cruelty, simulation, etc. Among these tricks is *transformation*. We could recall several episodes when Odysseus transforms into various individuals (a beggar in Troy, Noman with the Cyclops, a Cretan in Ithaca). Transformation (fitting on masks) is a unique trait that distinguishes Odysseus from other heroes. The analysis of the phenomenon leads us to the origins of ritual, drama and performance in general. On the other hand, performance (from where ritual and drama stem) became a universal that remains relevant even nowadays and presumably, will be relevant throughout human existence.

In this respect, I will dwell on Proteus, which is among the popular mythical names entered the literary ‘circulation’ owing to the *Odyssey*. Proteus is an archetypal versatile character – the herd of seals. Scholars interested in shamanic teachings are well aware that seals, as a mamals, resemble humans in voice, size and the faculty to cry with tears. The animal is duly recognized in the metamorphic tradition of various cultures.³ Proteus is a source of special information for Menelaus: the king

B. and Luce J. V., *The Quest for Ulysses*, London: Phaidon 1974; Rubens B., & Taplin O., *An Odyssey round Odysseus: The Man and his Traced through Time and Place*, London: BBC Books, 1989; Boitani P., *The Shadow of Ulysses: Figures of a Myth*, translated by A. Weston, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1994; Hall E., *The Return of Ulysses (A Cultural History of Homer’s Odyssey)* I. B. Tauris, London. New York 2008.

³ For example, in the Celtic myth seals turn into handsome male guests who become sexual partners for the widows of sailors lost in the sea.

learns from him about his relatives and his own future.⁴ Proteus is an emblematic character for the whole *Odyssey* as he holds a central position in terms of transformation. It should be noted that in post-modern theories of theatre, Proteus established as a set metaphor of the plasticity of actors.⁵ Odysseus himself is an excellent actor. Helen recalls how he entered Troy: „Marring his own body with cruel blows, [245] and flinging a wretched garment about his shoulders, in the fashion of a slave he entered the broad-wayed city of the foe” (*Od.*, 4,244-8). Later he demonstrated his acting skills on the Ithacan „stage”. As mentioned, in the world where Odysseus belonged it was believed that a visitor could be a god as „the gods in the guise of strangers from afar put on all manner of shapes, and visit the cities” (*Od.* 17, 483-7). The Best Actor Award would definitely go to Athena from the very instance she appeared in front of Odysseus’ palace disguised as Mentos, the leader of the Taphians (*Od.* I, 103-5) and afterwards, appeared as Mentor (*Od.*, I, 268). Athena is not only a great master of parody, but her role also consists in the protection of young Telemachus. She can turn into Nausicaa’s best friend (*Od.*, 6,22), acquire the form of various birds (*Od.*, I, 320; III, 371-372), be „Mentor’s voice” (*Od.*, XXIV,548), etc. Thus, *transformation* was considered to be a divine sign and a person endowed with such a faculty was regarded as select. Athena mentions this faculty of Odysseus: when Athena the herd listened to the story invented by Odysseus, she said: “Cunning must he be and knavish, who would go beyond thee in all manner of guile, aye, though it were a god that met thee” („καὶ εἰ θεὸς ἀντιάσειε” – *Od.*, XIII, 292). Then Athena continues half-joking: („σκέτλιε, ποικιλομήτα, δόλων ἄτ’ – *Od.*, XIII, 293) „Bold man, crafty in counsel, insatiate in deceit, not even in thine own land, it seems, wast thou to cease from guile and deceitful tales, which thou lovest from the bottom of thine heart.” (XIII, 293-294). However, Athena admits Odysseus was fond of telling deceitful tales already as a child (from the bottom of thine heart): „λήξειν ἀπατάων μύθων τε κλοπίων οἳ πεδόθεν φίλοι εἰσίν” (*Od.*, XIII, 294-295). ἀπατάω means „deceive”, „mislead” – thus Athena analyzed and most accurately designates one of Odysseus’ essential character traits – trickery, which enables him to transform into another person. Moreover, Athena does not

⁴ In particular gods settle him and Helen in the Elysian Fields. Menelaus is made immortal because of his being Zeus’ son-in-law. What Menelaus learnt on the earth prompted Odysseus to travel to Hades.

⁵ Lada-Richards I., *The Subjectivity of Greek Performance*, in *Greek & Roman Actors*, Cambridge University Press 2002, 411.

seem to be annoyed with this; just, the oposite, she continues with the following words: "... But come, let us no longer talk of this, being both well versed in craft, since thou art far the best of all men in counsel and in speech, and I among all the gods am famed for wisdom and craft" („εἰδότες ἄμφω κέρδε" - 296-297). „ἐπεὶ σὺ μὲν ἐσσι βροτῶν ὄχ' ἄριστος ἀπάντων βουλήν καὶ μύθοισιν, ἐγὼ δ' ἐν πᾶσι θεοῖσι μήτι τε κλέομαι καὶ κέρδεσιν." (*Od.*, XIII, 297-299). Hence, Athena's appreciation of Odysseus' trickery, which he has had from an early age, is not negative (she regards it as a prank). Moreover, ἀπατάω acquires the sense of ingenuity and „giving excellent counsel various excellent pieces of advice". The dialogue reveals Athena's special fondness for Odysseus (as compared to other heroes), which exceeds her appreciation of other heroes – she and Odysseus are alike.

I share the opinion that tragedy could not allot a central place to Odysseus. However, this does not mean that he does not appear in tragedies. The 5th century BC tragedians present Odysseus as a person playing a special role in others' lives (*Ajax*, *Philoctetes*, *Iphigenia*, *Hecuba*, *Polixena*).⁶ He is an important character in three tragedies: Euripides' *Hecuba* and Sophocles' *Ajax* and *Philoctetes*. All the three plays highlight Odysseus' brilliant eloquence (he became the symbol of a skilled Sophist demagogue) and his ability to find ways to achieve his goal. His political instinct and talent is more foregrounded in the tragedies than in the *Odyssey*. He personifies a matter-of-fact, cold-blooded politician in a force majeure scenario. Odysseus as a character of tragedy invariably attests that the fittest survive and it is useless to go against a fact.

Among the reasons why Odysseus could not become the protagonist of a tragedy is that he is not the murderer of his family members, or a partaker in incest. He was allotted to die at an elderly age. Moreover, his pragmatism, self-discipline, unerring shrewdness and most of all, his never-failing success in all kinds of conflict did not comply with a plot necessary for a tragic drama where *fall* and *mistake* are indispensable.

In my opinion, for the very reason that prevented Odysseus from appearing as the protagonist of an ancient drama he became an acceptable and exemplary character for the following generations. The post-Homeric as well as modern writing abounds in „Odysseuses" – characters „endo-

⁶ Some believe that Odysseus's 'non-involvement' in tragedy (which developed under the aegis of Athens) can be explained by his not being an Athenian hero. Moreover, he supported the Peloponnesians in Troy. In the Classical period (5th century BC), Athens opposed Sparta of the Peloponnesians, waging a long war against it.

wed" with one or a few qualities of Odysseus. These are the traits that can easily be recognized and identified with their prototype. Moreover, modern psychiatrists have observed that Odysseus is obsessed with psychosis. In the epic, the climax of this condition is believed to be the scene of slaughtering the suitors.

When considering Odysseus, Shay foregrounds the behaviour and the psychic state of a demobilized soldier. The main challenge for a warrior to overcome after the completion of warfare is his adjustment with peaceful life. Odysseus' wrath was incurred by the very first city after Troy – Ismarus, the city of the Cicones. There were no motivations for destroying the city. It was undermined under the impact of the „destruction syndrome“, developed as a result of the ten-year warfare. Then follows the episode with the Lotophagi – ecstasy with narcotics and alcohol, which likewise is a postwar syndrome.⁷ In the episode with the Cyclops, Odysseus himself provokes the danger: he enters the cave and makes fire. Then he boasts being Odysseus. Shay paid attention to the hero's paranoid state after leaving the island of Aeolus: he does not sleep for nine days and nights (*Od.*, X, 50-51). When Odysseus heard that his men loosed the sack and let the winds go forth, he wanted to kill himself: war veterans are often prone to suicide.⁸ Calypso's and Circe's abuse of Odysseus can also be associated with veterans' hard experience. Odysseus' actions described in Book XIII is likewise interesting in terms of psychiatry: the hero is disoriented and cannot recognize Ithaca.⁹ When he meets a strange lad, who in fact is goddess Athena in a lad's shape, Odysseus starts fabricating

⁷ *Ibid.*, 36.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 43.

⁹ I will add that Odysseus returns from an unreal world by unreal means. Alcinoos asks Odysseus to say precisely where the ship is to take him "For the Phaeacians have no pilots, nor steering-oars such as other ships have, but their ships of themselves understand the *thoughts* and minds of men" (οὐ γὰρ Φαιήκεσσι κυβερνητῆρες ἔασιν, οὐδέ τι πηδάλι' ἔστι, τὰ τ' ἄλλαι νῆες ἔχουσιν ἀλλ' αὐταὶ ἴσασι νοήματα καὶ φρένας ἀνδρῶν VIII, 557-559). They themselves can find "the cities and rich fields of all peoples" (VIII, 560). Alcinoos remembers his father's, Nausithoos' prophecy that Poseidon would become angry with them for taking everyone safely over the sea and "would one day wreck a Phaeacean ship ... and bury our city under a high mountain". Odysseus, asleep aboard the Phaeacean ship, is described in the following way: [Ἀνδρὰ φέρουσα θεοῖς ἐναλίγκια μῆδε' ἔχοντα, δὲ πρὶν μὲν μάλα πολλὰ πάθ' ἄλγεα ὄν κατὰ θυμόν, ἀνδρῶν τε πολέμους ἀλεγεινά τε κύματα πείρων, διή τότε γ' ἀπρέμας εἶδε, λελασμένος ὅσσ' ἐπεπόνθει (XIII, 89-92) ("one who was as cunning as the gods, but who was now sleeping peacefully, forgetful of all that he had suffered both on the field of battle and by the waves of the weary sea").

lies. Before joining his son, father and wife, Odysseus is cold-blooded and callous. Then he again runs away.¹⁰

Odysseus has something that sets him apart from others, that makes him a hero of a new style. This is his intelligence, which distinguishes him from the unyielding and powerful but „simple“ warriors of the *Iliad*.¹¹ His wile and crafty intelligence („metis“) is encoded in his epithet „poly-metis“, which is partly associated with the inner side („the inner“), secret operations and darkness. According to C. J. Mackie, Odysseus closely resembles a modern superhero Batman¹² – he mainly employs his craftiness in the cave of Polyphemus, in the wooden horse, in Book X of the *Iliad*, *Dolonia*, while Achilles and Heracles always act in the daylight.¹³ We could also add that when washed up on the isand of the Phaeacians, Odysseus tells his adventures at night. It is likewise night when he relates an invented story to Eumaeus. Before slaughtering the suitors, he turns his home into an enclosed space and fights with his enemies standing on its threshold.

There are two more points that distinguishes Odysseus from others: one of these is *self-control*. Since Plato’s times, Socrates and Odysseus have frequently been compared on the grounds of strong self-control, characteristic of both. According to Xenophon’s *Memorabilia*, Odysseus was not turned into Circe’s swine only owing to his self-restraint (2.6.10-12; 1.3.7). In Plato’s *Republic* (4.440e-441c) Socrates refers to Odysseus’ example to substantiate his idea that sound judgement and passion (rage) stem from different nooks of soul. He refers to an episode when Odysseus discovers that his maids sleep with suitors, but manages his emotions until an appropriate moment offers itself.

Odysseus’ second characteristic feature is expressed by his epithet “polytropos”. One of the meanings of the word is “able to turn his hand to many things” or “versatile.” This epithet resembles “polymetis” – “capable of many kinds of cunning”. Odysseus has many various faculties; he is a versatile person. He is an archetypal “man of the Revival” and may even feel quite at home in the 21st century. Odysseus is a gifted carpenter,

¹⁰ Shay J., *Odysseus in America: Combat Trauma and the Trials of Homecoming*, New York: Scribner 2002, 125.

¹¹ Frankel H., *Early Greek Poetry & Philosophy*, Translated by M. Hadas & J. Willis, New York: HBJ, 1962, 85-93.

¹² Odysseus attracted interest in popular culture. He combines the aspects of social and political myth (Hall E., 103).

¹³ Mackie C. J., *Men of Darkness*, in W. Haslem, C. J. Mackie and A. Ndalians, *Super/Heroes*, Washington, DC: New Academia 2006.

capable of building a raft in four days (*Od.*, V, 228-62). Once he even crafted a bed for Penelope and himself (*Od.*, 23, 184-204). He is an excellent navigator and can sail a ship by stars (*Od.*, V, 269-75). He is an expert in agriculture, fruit gardening and can overdo Eurymachus in ploughing (*Od.*, XXIV, 340-2; XVIII, 366-75). Along with these physical abilities, he has been given a nobleman's training: he is a fine athlete – a victorious wrestler (*Od.*, IV, 341-5), discus thrower (*Od.*, VIII, 186-98), lancer (*Od.*, VIII, 215-33), boxer (*Od.*, XVIII, 88-107) and an excellent swimmer.¹⁴

Odysseus is a modern type of man in terms of wealth accumulation as well. His is primarily concerned with the outcome. On the way back to Ithaca he acquires countless riches (the gifts of the Phaeaceans), which he cautiously hides in the cave of nymphs in Ithaca. Odysseus' "business activities" were commented upon by professors specializing in management.¹⁵ According to them, Odysseus is the archetype of management by objectives (MBO). Naturally, this is a strategic management technique. Especially remarkable is the Scylla and Charybdis episode, in which Odysseus can be credited with classical management skills: choosing the lesser of two evils, the one that would incur a smaller loss.¹⁶ The Scylla and Charybdis episode, which has already become classical, has been employed not only in fiction and figurative speech, but also in films (in the popular television series *Break Prison* the mentioned passage from the *Odyssey* is one of the puzzles that need to be solved). Every time Odysseus' men go ashore, they are exposed to danger.¹⁷ Eurylichus' accusations of Odysseus sound rebellious (*Od.* X, 431-7). In terms of companions' security, Odysseus is a poor leader. The death of his companions can be justified at the level of mythopoetic tradition: the warriors fallen at different times in different places are "surrogate sacrifices". They were to die at the time and in the place they did, so that Odysseus could be rescued. The will of gods is stern but this is the providence of the immortals. If we adopt a deeper insight and follow Vidal-Naquet, whose opinion is shared by other scholars, Odysseus

¹⁴ Hall E., 102.

¹⁵ Clemens J. K., Mayer D. F., *The Classic Touch: Lessons in Leadership from Homer to Hemingway*, Revised edition, Chicago, IL: Contemporary Books 1999, 18-30.

¹⁶ Hall E., 102.

¹⁷ He initiated a raid into the city of the Cicones (where he lost six men). He was boastful with the Cyclop. His eleven ships were destroyed by the Laestrygonians. Drunken Elpenor broke his neck as he fell from Circe's roof. Scylla devoured his other six men. He sent to Circe's island his twenty-two men led by Eurylochus, who returned and reported that all of his companions were turned into swines.

transcends into the other world from the land of the Cicones. This unreal place is a different spatial dimension, presumably the other world (or something of the kind). Not all return from it. Only Odysseus returns home, owing to his personal qualities and to Hermes the Psychopomp. He is twice helped by Hermes – in his escape from Circe and from Calypso.

Americans call an “American monomyth” a story of a devoted and honest hero who rescues society from evil all alone.¹⁸ The idea for this type of hero was first proposed by Joseph Campbell, who called it “the universal archetype of hero” or “the classical monomyth”. The cornerstone of Campbell’s concept is the initiation of a hero. Campbell’s concept of hero, based on ancient religious practice, proved to be acceptable for Young, who called it the universal model of human soul. However, according to E. Hall, there is a difference between Campbell’s “classical monomyth” and the American monomyth: modern story is oriented to redemption rather than initiation. According to this viewpoint, the pagan model of heroism was modified as the story of Judaistic and Christian redemption. A selfless hero with strong social consciousness, having denounced his own past sins and taken the moral path of righteousness, comes to the foreground. Odysseus tends to fit this very model.

¹⁸ Ibid., 153.