

# Introduction to Odyssey, Exile, Return

IN THE FIRST YEARS of the new millennium, the experiences of odyssey, exile, and return, which form the common topic of this issue of *Comparative Literature*, seem as urgent as they were in the Greek Archaic Age, when they assumed canonical form in Homer's great epic of wandering and homecoming. The fluidity of the sea, the contact between foreign cultures, the rapid circulation of report and rumor, and the porousness of identity that are such prominent features of the *Odyssey* resonate in a world of global positioning systems where communities far removed from one another speak instantaneously across distances, bringing us into face-time with those who are oceans and continents away. Although it sometimes appears to erode the immediacy of human bonds by focusing us on our instruments, digital interconnectedness sets in motion a circulatory energy that returns us to orality—not ancient orality but, as one of our contributors, Haun Saussy, suggests, a new orality of language, rhythm, and gesture that captures the instant messaging of people in time and space. Despite the antiquity of dactylic hexameter, the oral formulaic character of classical epic, providing as it does both an encoded form for human experience as well as a flexible medium capable of ingesting other genres around it, bears a family resemblance to what we now call network mediation.

Preoccupied with the rhetorical contexts of its own modes of expression, the *Odyssey* presents us with storytellers who must constantly adapt their tales to new environments and exercise an open-minded skepticism toward the received tradition and the need to rework it. When in Book 2 of the epic Telemachus chastises Penelope for trying to silence the court bard from singing tales of the Greek homecomings after the Trojan War, he does so by observing that “τὴν γὰρ ἀοιδὴν μᾶλλον ἐπικλείουσι ἄνθρωποι, ἢ τις ἀκούωντεςσι νεωτάτη ἀμφιπέληται” (Monro 1.351–52; “it’s always the newest song / An audience praises most,” Lombardo 1.371–72). The heroic age is gone; we live with epigones, and they are more attractive for their belatedness. From this perspective, Homer’s epic may be said to perform an early version of “crowdsourcing” its narratives and the characters that inhabit them—perhaps most notably, Penelope herself, who, as Wai Chee Dimock argues in her contribution to this volume, forms an enigmatic crux of female motives and points toward a diverse collective to resolve the problem of her highly ambiguous marital status. Moreover, as I suggest in my own essay, the androgynous qualities of

character we encounter in the *Odyssey* open the way for modernist explorations of sexuality and desire, such as those of C.P. Cavafy, who uses tropes of odyssey in his poems at the same time as he marginalizes Homer's epic.

As an ancestral text, Homer's poem has become shorthand for a physical journey that incorporates psychic transformation. Odysseys are life changing. They involve shape shifting, masks, and the metamorphic potential of passage. But, as Homer's treatment of *nostos* reveals, homecoming is not always teleologically structured. Once Odysseus arrives in Ithaca, he will have to set out again on yet another voyage to a land where people do not know salt (the sea) and mistake his oar for a winnowing fan (Monro 11.119–34; Lombardo 11.117–31). Second odysseys are already built into the epic, and their effect is to qualify the notion of an achieved homecoming. Odysseus, of course, exemplifies journey in this sense, but Penelope's stake is vital as well, and without her, return is inconceivable. Her perspectives, often opaque but always consequential, differ from those of her spouse, and they, too, underlie the paradoxical implications of *nostos*. They remind us that those left behind watch an uncertain horizon from a hopeful yet doubting interior. Between the husband's geographical mobility and the wife's domestic seclusion the epic draws complex arcs of correspondence, which unite the two in a likemindedness that Homer calls *homophrosyne*. The most important of them is cunning, that characteristically Greek ensemble of mental attitudes that combines wisdom, vigilance, and opportunism with flair. Cunning, however, is an imperfect translation of *metis*, which is apparent in actions as different as Penelope's weaving, Odysseus's passing as a beggar in his own home, and the ruses both work upon the suitors. Around this complex of narrative elements, the canonicity of Homer's epic has taken shape. Later writers, including those working in the twentieth-century European tradition that Nicoletta Pireddu examines in her essay, have looked to the poem for ways of reimagining a "nomadism without Ithaca" on a continent liberated from old nationalisms and geographical divides, haunting as they remain.

Like all classics, the *Odyssey* has been both paragon and lightning rod. Over the past five decades or more it has become a narrative to read aggressively against the grain. We find this particularly in the literature that has emerged from the Caribbean and the Indian Ocean, where Homeric adaptations have involved complex negotiations with a text embedded in the history of Western imperialism. In the essay by Françoise Lionnet in this volume, works by Amitav Ghosh and J.-M.G. Le Clézio bear witness to a struggle with a master text that is both ally and enemy. Whether one thinks sympathetically of the epic (as the storehouse of a mythic tradition whose deep roots are in the ancient Near East) or oppositionally (given its nascent colonialism and gender inequality), its exploration of itinerancy and return remains deeply evocative.

Numerous recent monographs and edited collections have engaged with these revisionary odysseys. The wide-ranging essays in *Homer in the Twentieth Century: Between World Literature and the Western Canon* (2007), edited by Barbara Graziosi and Emily Greenwood, not only explore literature from around the globe, but also demonstrate the need for more diffuse and heterogeneous models of reception. Edith Hall's much needed intellectual history, *The Return of Ulysses: A Cultural History of Homer's Odyssey* (2008), provides us with a rich archive of literature, music, and the fine arts inspired by the ancient poem. Justine McConnell's *Black Odysseys: The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora Since 1939* (2013) focuses on postcolonial

literature, and Sheila Murnaghan and Hunter Gardner's collection, *Odyssean Identities in Modern Culture: The Journey Home* (2014), broadens the debate by exploring the ironies of *nostos* in post-Homeric odysseys, especially those involving female perspectives and experiences of forced exile.

The essays in this issue of *Comparative Literature* thus advance an already lively discussion. Having evolved from a panel organized in 2013 for the American Comparative Literature Association annual conference, the volume engages authors from Europe, the Mediterranean, the Caribbean, and the Indian Ocean, as well as new interpretive frameworks that have been brought to bear on the subject of odyssey and return. Prominent among the theorists represented, Jean-Luc Nancy emphasizes the "world forming" power of literature—or what he calls *mondialisation*. Zygmunt Bauman offers a related conceptual model by re-thinking Europe as "an unfinished adventure" driven by the dialectic between actuality and potentiality and reminds us that working toward universality does not require cultural consensus. The "nomadism" of Michel Maffesoli, as Pireddu demonstrates, is a good fit for this critical vocabulary, because it is identified with "an apprenticeship in the art of openness to others" ("l'apprentissage de l'errance"). The same is true, as Lionnet points out, of Seyla Behabib's "interactive universalism," which treats difference as a starting point for thinking about identity and approaches the other as both embedded and embodied. As this brief sketch suggests, the *Odyssey* has become a trope that facilitates the expression of philosophers, anthropologists, and historians, who use it as a point of departure for thinking about frontiers and the paradoxical meaning of home in a world complicated by global displacements. Coalescing with these bodies of thought are the dynamic intellectual projects that have grown up around Caribbean literature, including Aimé Césaire's *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*, Derek Walcott's *Omeros*, and Édouard Glissant's exploration of a "poétique de la relation," which looks back to "négritude" and forward to "créolisation." All have had an important impact on comparative literary studies, and they inform the contributions to this volume.

My own "Reflections on Skepticism in Homer's *Odyssey* and the Poetry of C.P. Cavafy" underlines the epistemological dimensions of the epic quest as a form of nascent skepticism, which involves suspension of judgment, a fluid notion of identity, and an awareness of the rhetorically provisional situation of storytelling. In the essay I read the *Odyssey* alongside several divided-line poems by the Greek-Alexandrian writer C.P. Cavafy, who participates in Homer's imaginary Mediterranean world and embarks upon odysseys of homoerotic self-discovery informed by skeptical strategies that resonate with Homer's narrative of impeded *nostos*. Through a style that combines revealing while concealing, the *Odyssey*, like the poems of Cavafy, tends to prolong the search rather than end it, postponing return in the process of enacting it.

In "European Ulyssiads: Claudio Magris, Milan Kundera, Eric-Emmanuel Schmitt," Nicoletta Pireddu relates contemporary philosophical debates about the possibility of an ideal European cohesiveness to the ways in which Magris, Kundera, and Schmitt address Europe from the perspective of borderline spaces: "Mitteleuropa and the Danube in Magris, the fracture between Eastern and Western Europe in Kundera, and the liquid Mediterranean frontier between the Middle East and the Old Continent in Schmitt." She explores "ironic *nostoi*" that recodify the relation between exile and return, underlining what is problematic in

a Eurocentric perspective and questioning established notions of center and periphery. Drawing on Derrida's concept of "destinerrance," she argues for the possibility of a European destiny without "a predetermined path" and open to "multiple and unpredicted possibilities."

Françoise Lionnet's contribution, "World Literature, Postcolonial Studies, and Coolie Odysseys: J.-M.G. Le Clézio's and Amitav Ghosh's Indian Ocean Novels," is simultaneously a commentary on decentering fictions by two very different award-winning novelists and a contribution to debates about the definitions of postcolonial, francophone, and World Literature. Inspired by Nancy, Lionnet replaces those concepts with the idea of "world-forming literature" (*littérature mondialisante*). Recounting the history of slavery and indenture in Mauritius, she analyzes transversal representations of the republic with the help of Torabully's concept of "coolitude," a useful addition to studies of the Indian Ocean. Benhabib's interactive universalism, which she modifies, helps her describe a multicultural Mauritian society, created by early globalization, in which women are the guardians of memory and descendants of both perpetrators and survivors of past injustices work together.

In "The Return of Orality" Haun Saussy identifies the *Odyssey* as a work enacting return in a triple sense: first, the elementary one of sound as recurring rhythm in the poetic line; second, the narrative one of homecoming; and third, the performative one rooted in bardic recitation. These converging points of return stimulate reflections on our own situation on the cusp of a media revolution as profound as the one associated with Homer. But Saussy wants to couch this contemporary revolution as a return itself—to orality. Our electronic age envelops us with voices that reach us across the global village, embedding us in networks of exchange that dissolve "individualism and the analytic habit of mind" associated with the typographic age. Saussy sketches the return to orality in three paradigmatic moments marked by Marshall McLuhan's media theory, the anthropological inquiry of French politician Louis Marin, and Marcel Jousse's influential linguistic exploration of oral song. While McLuhan envisaged a second orality, Marin and Jousse were drawn to the trope of return as it is embedded in the primal rhythms of labor and practices of speech, both of which provide the building blocks for the higher order operations of art, particularly the art of song. In fact, Jousse motivated Adam Parry's seminal work on Homeric epic. Return for them—and for us—is a return to orality.

In "Crowdsourcing Penelope: Margaret Atwood, the Coen Brothers, Richard Linklater" Wai Chee Dimock invites us to consider "low epic" from the perspective of contemporary media studies. She offers a framework in which language is mass circulated, input is user generated, and crowdsourcing is the main stimulus for exchange. Her essay updates concepts that readers of earlier literature, including classicists, will find familiar from rhetoric and the Aristotelian triad of logos, ethos, and pathos. Dimock first addresses Atwood's *Penelopiad* in terms of how a collectivity, nebulous in number and identity, can be disguised as a single speaking subject. Her Penelope is no more than "a receptacle for words." Although this insight comes via a reading of the *Penelopiad*, Dimock achieves similar critical results in her treatment of two contemporary films that use tropes drawn from the *Odyssey*: the Coen brothers' *Inside Llewyn Davis* and Richard Linklater's *Boyhood*. Just as Atwood's Penelope is crowdsourced, the Coen brothers' plot is outsourced

to the Homeric plot, which it diminishes. Homecoming, Dimock observes, is reserved for cats—nameless ones, at that—and the main character, although not a Nobody, is also not much of a Somebody. His wandering is a dwindled version of the ancient quest. Linklater's *Boyhood*, adapted from J.M. Coetzee's fictionalized memoir, is "an epic of the intimate." Minor characters displace a potential hero and often appear more than once. Network mediation, according to Dimock, might be one of the most enduring features of Homeric epic.

In his interview with François Raffoul and Adelaide Russo, Jean-Luc Nancy reconsiders some of his ideas in the works upon which critics in this volume draw. When asked to comment on his own rapport with Homer's *Odyssey*, he refers to Chilean novelist Roberto Bolaño's posthumous *2666*. Nancy concurs that while the fable has disappeared in Bolaño's work, the epic tone remains—a mere resonance of a world that exists in its telling. We no longer have the bard whose *muthos* conjures a *kosmos*, and homecoming does not entail inhabiting in the sense of dwelling, but the adaptation of one's ways and customs to changes of time and place. The figure of an Odysseus who continuously undermines his own legend in the retelling of his story exemplifies the process of creative renewal through impossible return. Instead of Heidegger's *Wohnen*, Nancy substitutes a notion of dwelling as a porous site in which we enact ever-changing rappings. These are not new concepts, but re-articulations of ideas with which Nancy and our contributors have long engaged. It is no surprise, perhaps, that they already appear *in status nascendi* in Homer. As Nancy concludes in his post-scriptum, "That which counts is that here and now some of us speak to each other once again."

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### Works Cited

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