

Psychotherapy in the footsteps of Homer's Ulysses

“Odyssey” is a familiar English word. According to Webster’s dictionary is “a series of adventurous journeys usually marked by many changes of fortune.” The Greek word *Odusseia*, the form from which the English word is derived, originally meant “the story of Odysseus”, a Greek hero of the Trojan War who took ten years to find his way back from Troy to his home on the island of Ithaca, off the western coast of mainland Greece. Today of course it is used in the same metaphorical way as in English. Robert Fagles, one of the most renowned translators of *The Odyssey*, writes that Homer’s *Odyssey* “does indeed present us with “adventurous journeys” and “change of fortune”, but it is also an epic tale of a hero’s return, to find at home a situation more dangerous than anything he faced on the plains of Troy or in his wanderings over uncharted seas.”

Aristotle, writing in the fourth century B.C., describes in the *Poetics*, what he considers to be the essence of the plot. “A certain man has been abroad many years; he is alone, and the god Poseidon keeps a hostile eye on him. At home, the situation is that the suitors for his wife’s hand are draining his resources and plotting to kill his son. Then, after suffering storm and shipwreck, he comes home, makes himself known, attacks the suitors: he survives and they are destroyed.” This terse summary is the armature of an epic poem that consists of 12,109 lines of hexameter verse composed, probably, late in the eighth century B.C., or early in the seventh, by a poet known to later ages as Homer, for whose life and activities we have no trustworthy information. It is even unlikely as a numbers of scholars argue that this man known as Homer ever existed. But the text does, and the history of how it was composed and arrived in our hands, does not concern us here.

After being shipwrecked and tortured for days by Poseidon, God of the sea and God of the earthquake, Odysseus has lost all his men and lands at Calypso’s island. It is an island at the end of the world, it is beyond the borders of the world, it lies at the twilight zone between the world of men and the world of gods. This island is nowhere. Its beauty is described as being an idyllic paradise. Calypso takes care of Odysseus. He will stay at the island for a long time, it seems to him an eternity. He lives outside space and time. He lives with Calypso, both in love, without anyone else to distract them, alone in an endless but joyful loneliness. Everyday resembles the previous day. Calypso loves and cares for Odysseus, however, at the same time, as her name reveals (it derives from the Greek verb ‘καλύπτειν’, which means to hide, to conceal, German: ‘verborgen’),

she hides in a place that even the Gods have trouble in finding, and with her she hides also her lover. Odysseus lives in a state of limbo, his endless and tiresome wanderings seemed to have found an end, he lives parenthetically, hedonistically and sedated.

The goddess Athena, who protects Odysseus, sends Hermes to demand from Calypso to free Odysseus. She resists at first, claiming that the gods are jealous of their bond, a bond between a divine creature and a human being, but finally cannot endure the will of the gods.

The following dialogue between Calypso and Odysseus (Book 5: Odysseus- Nymph and Shipwreck verses 220- 250) demonstrates her resistance and seductive powers.

Calypso: “So then royal son of Laertes, Odysseus, man of exploits,/ still eager to leave at once and hurry back/ to your own home, your beloved native land?/ Good luck to you, even so. Farewell!/ But if you only knew, down deep, what pains/ are fated to fill your cup before you reach that shore,/ you’d stay right here, preside in our house with me/ and be immortal. Much as you long to see your wife, / the one you pine for all your days... and yet/ I just might claim to be nothing less than she, / neither in face nor figure. Hardly right, is it? / for mortal woman to rival immortal goddess? / How, in build? in beauty?”

Odysseus: “Ah great goddess,” worldly Odysseus answered, “don’t be angry with me, / please. All that you say is true, how well I know. / Look at my wise Penelope. She falls far short of you, / your beauty, stature. She is mortal after all / and you, you never age or die... / Nevertheless I long- I pine, all my days- / to travel home and see the dawn of my return./ And if a god will wreck me yet again on the wine- dark sea, / I can bear that too, with a spirit tempered to endure. / Much have I suffered, labored long and hard by now / in the waves and wars. Add this to the total- / bring the trial on!”

Odysseus is and always has been nostalgic of his previous life, nostalgic of Ithaca, of his wife Penelope, his son Telemachos, his father Laertes, his countrymen. Calypso tried, as did Circe (goddess and enchantress, who changes men to swine) to free him from his longing for “nostos” (for his return home) and to make him forget who he was, but to no avail as we know.

Homer makes our hero visit Hades, the world of the Dead. In Book 11, one of the most moving and heart-breaking of the epic poem, Odysseus is going to meet his dead mother, his companions, the seer Tiresias.

The question that concerns us here is: why is this journey to Hades necessary? Why does the poet consider it crucial? What is this man, who “many cities of men he saw and learned their minds, many pains he suffered”, going to learn?

Konstantinos Arvanitakis psychoanalyst at the Canadian Institute is preoccupied with this question, and points out that this journey to the world of the dead, this different road, is like a dream. It might even be a dream. People believed in ancient times that dreams carry a prophetic message and Odysseus goes to Hades to discover what the future holds for him. Death and Sleep are closely related since they are both children of the Night according to Hesiod. (*Theogony*, 76- 761)

Let me remind you that Hermes, messenger of the gods, was leading the souls of the dead to Hades by putting them to sleep first with his golden cane.

The central scene of Odysseus' descent to Hades is the encounter with his mother. What concerns our hero most is that his mother does not recognize or look at him at first. He asks the seer Tiresias, "I see the ghost of my long- lost mother here before me...she cannot bear to look me in the eyes- her own son- or speak a word to me." (Book 11, verse 160- 64) "Recognition and non- recognition is one of the central themes in the *Odyssey*. Here we see it in its most tragic dimensions, a chasm that divides mother from son." (Arvanitakis, 2008). Other recognition will of course follow: between Odysseus and his father Laertis, his wife Penelope, his son Telemachus, even his dog Argos.

Odysseus, cannot embrace his mother: "three times she fluttered through his fingers", writes Homer, "sifting away/ like a shadow, dissolving like a dream, and each time/ the grief cut to the heart, sharper..." . To his crying out for her, his mother replies: "My son, my son, the unluckiest man alive!...this is just the way of mortals when they die./ Sinews no longer bind the flesh and bones together—/ the fire in all its fury burns the body down to ashes/ once life slips from the white bones, and the spirit,/ rustling, flutters away...flown like a dream". And she ends this terrible description of the dead with these words of advice: "But you must long for daylight. Go quickly, / Remember all these things/ so one day you can tell them to your wife".

To pick up the question again why Homer leads Odysseus to Hades, one possible answer would be to say that the poet gives his hero the possibility of coming to terms with his past, to confront his guilt, to face mortality, and thus gain the strength necessary to leave behind the world of the dead and return once again to that of the living. In some ways, Odysseus' (re) turn to his mother and his past can be seen in the light of his desire to (re) animate mother and past. However, he has to face the unbridgeable gorge that separates past from present, i.e. death. The past seems to "flutter through his fingers" because it has no fixed or static character but is reevaluated continuously. Therapy invites people to look at this fluidity, at the constant state of flux. Therapy could offer the possibility to accept and detach oneself from rigid notions and

conceptions about self and others, that can be asphyxiating for the individual and therefore move on to the “daylight”.

Odysseus meets the dead hero Achilles who tells him how terrible it is to live among the dead, to become a ghost without conscience, an anonymous shadow: “By God, I’d rather slave on earth for another man—/some dirt-poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—/ than rule down here over the breathless dead”. Calypso on the other hand, as we have seen, offers him, in this “κεκαλυμμένος κόσμος” of hers, in this “veiled world”, the possibility to become immortal, to stay forever young, and not to fear death and aging.

Why do I insist in juxtaposing Calypso’s realm with that of the dead, that Odysseus has visited? The essence of Odysseus identity and wanderings lies in my opinion in this very dilemma that he is facing. He saw what death is, he went to Hades and spoke to the dead. His mother urged him to return to the light. Achilles, the most valiant hero of the Iliad told him that he preferred to slave as an anonymous commoner than to be lying as a King among the dead. Calypso on the other hand offers him to bypass death, to live like a god, forever young, forever immortal. But there is a prize that he has to pay: he will have to forget his home, his identity, his name. He will be forever an «Ούτις» a “Nobody”. In the episode where he meets the Cyclop Polyphemus, the son of Poseidon, he escapes, from his cave (after having blinded him) by telling him that his name is «Ούτις», but then once he has boarded his ship, he changes his mind and proud of his name and his inheritance he shouts to him that he is “Odysseus”. Odysseus puts himself in the position where he can tell the monster who he is, can cry his name aloud to the Cyclops’s face. This cry of defiance is thought to be foolish of the wily Odysseus but in reality it is a case of deliberate self-exposure for the purpose of being somebody rather than nobody. If he remains with beautiful Calypso, however, the man who dared to challenge even the mighty Poseidon, will have to hide, to live without a name, without a destiny, to be an immortal with no beginning and end, a human with no personal history (biography).

Odysseus dilemma in other words is to choose between anonymous immortality, to be a living dead, to become what Achilles says, “someone who lost his conscience and self” and ultimately his Dasein, or to choose mortality and by his death, through acceptance of his finality, give meaning to his voyage through life. And Odysseus chooses the second. To blind Polyphemus and then to defy him, is both to challenge nature to do her worst, and to demonstrate her ultimately impotence to crush human identity. Her most hostile efforts, like the rocks thrown by Polyphemus, are as likely to wash the hero to safety as to drive him into danger. Thus, the power of the elements does not render Odysseus’s identity meaningless. Rather he makes sense, and the elements do not.

This I think, is the significance of the general assumption of the *Odyssey* that to pass from the darkness of the cave into the light, to pass from being “nobody” to having a name, is to be born. But to be born is to cast one’s name in the teeth of a hostile universe. (inside and outside)

Freedom does not consist of a ‘magical’ change of fate or a bypassing of the laws of nature but as I have already implied by a direct confrontation with them. And the ultimate confrontation with the laws of nature of course is the acceptance of one’s own nature, his mortality. As Heidegger notes in *Being and Time*, “death shatters all one’s tenaciousness to whatever existence one has reached” [p. 308]. Insofar as man find himself exposed to the indefinite and constant threat of death, all of his ordinary ties and attachments cease to offer him any security and they thus lose their hold over him. Furthermore, death, to quote Heidegger again, offers man “freedom which has been released from the illusions of the ‘they’ ” [p. 311]). The ‘they’, *das Man* as Heidegger defines it is Janus-faced. On the one hand, *Dasein* draws its possibilities for self- understanding and action from the way things are interpreted by the “they”. On the other hand, this involvement in public forms of life can have a pernicious effect. It restricts “the possible options of choice to what lies within the range of the familiar, the attainable, and the respectable— that which is fitting and proper.” [p. 239] There is an inveterate tendency, to go along with the flow, content with “satisfying the easily handled rules and public norms of the ‘they’ ”, and thereby being disburdened of all “responsibility” of ourselves. [p. 334]. (*Odysseus* again and again could have relinquished his responsibilities as captain of his crew and King of his land by choosing an easy way-out. The temptations were certainly there.) For Heidegger, feelings and beliefs are defined only through the ways they show forth in the course of one’s actions. For this reason, Heidegger locates human existence not in the mind, but in the unfolding “happening” or “event” of a life: as he says, “being-a-self is... only in the process of realization” [*The Metaphysical Foundation of Logic*] Understood as a “happening” that unfolds throughout a lifetime, a person’s identity can be grasped only in terms of his or her life story as a whole. The temporal unfolding of life, as Ricoeur has pointed out, has the structure of a narrative, in the case of *Odysseus* of epic dimensions. We can understand who a person is only in terms of where that person is coming from and where he or she is going. In that sense “*Ithaka*” as the final destination of the voyage is as important as the voyage itself and in this sense Cavafy’s famous and much-quoted poem can be read in a quite different light. The poet places his emphasis on the journey and wishes it to be “long” so that the hero (daring presumably to listen to the song of the Sirens, as indeed in our case he does) can “gather stores of knowledge”. *Ithaka* as Cavafy concludes “gave the splendid journey./

...She hasn't anything else to give." Presumably Heidegger, and Ricoeur following him, would have said that it does. Because only in the light of the final arrival in Ithaca does the previous journey gain its meaning. The point that Cavafy drives in this poem is an obvious one (and that is the reason why despite its popularity I don't consider it to be one of his most profound). "Live your life to the fullest and pray that your journey "lasts for years" so that when you finally get there "you are old and rich with all you have gained". But only in the light of the completion of the journey can a life be appraised. "Home" is the completion of a wondering. Wondering and home are notions that are interdependent. Home gains its meaning by an act of surrendering to the strangeness of the world, to all that is unfamiliar and alien—to the "Laestrygonians" (legendary clan of giant cannibals) to quote Cavafy again. This surrendering casts upon the world a different light, which transforms all its parts into a familiar home. To return to Heidegger: Dasein's thrownness in the world consists of the need to be faithful to truth, against the other "need", the physical one (survival). A need that might be destructive to life, as we saw when Odysseus cried out his name to the Cyclop oblivious of the consequences of his or his father's (Poseidon) reactions. It is characterized by an openness and readiness to what the present brings. And what purpose does this 'blind' exposure to the things serve? It ultimately leads to death, to what "nostos" will entail.

You might ask yourselves why did I choose to speak about Odysseus and his wanderings? What relevance does all this have for our therapeutic practice?

What is striking about the Odyssey is that Odysseus is a hero, one of the most striking in the poem, and although he is "protected" by Gods, Zeus and Athena are always by his side, he has to face the life of a human, a life full of obstacles, hardship, dilemmas and suffering. His travels entail difficult choices. As Heidegger notes, we take a stand on our own being whenever we choose a particular possibility or project. Every purposive, future-directed choice expresses an understanding, in Heidegger's sense, of what it is to be a human being.[BT 185- 6]

Odysseus is committed to his values, i.e. to return to Ithaca, to claim back his kingdom, his wife, etc. We can understand who we are, writes Rollo May, only through a "search for our values and purposes... Without values there would be only barren despair." Commitment, he adds is a "decisive attitude toward existence." In that sense, values make possible freedom and maturity.

Odysseus seems to be a man with a solid character and drive. He is clever and crafty. He knows the ways of the world. Nevertheless, again and again, he finds himself in need of help and advice. This help takes various

forms: divine intervention (when goddess Athena urges him through her emissary Hermes to leave the island of Calypso), parental (when his dead mother tells him to depart from the world of the dead and return to “the light”), or prophetic (when the seer Tiresias advises him to accept his mortal nature). The therapeutic work is similar to these various forms of assistance or guidance. The role of the therapist is to help the client navigate through the dire straits of life.

A small case vignette:

A man, 45 years old, was complaining about his growing need for cleanliness and order in his everyday life, which repressed him. He had learned early on in life from his authoritarian and abusive mother that he had to be meticulously clean and orderly otherwise he would be punished. In his early adulthood and as soon he left home, he believed that he had escaped from these suppressing demands by his mother and lived like a “bohemian” without constraints. In the last five years however (a period in his life that was marked by great changes, i.e. promotion in his job, girlfriend moving in, etc), he became growingly uneasy and upset with untidiness. He reported being outraged when his girlfriend was untidy or left his flat in a mess. He would become furious, not able to control his rage, he would get into a fight with her and often split up for short periods of time. He was extremely upset with his uncontrollable anger and often felt guilty about his outbursts. He felt that other areas of his life were also affected, like his work—he was a neurological surgeon—being extremely upset by mistakes that colleagues would make and felt uneasy about cooperating with them. Furthermore, he was repelled more and more by bodily deformities or abnormal bodily functioning. His work became progressively a burden and his ‘problem’ seemed to interfere a great deal with it and influence his performance.

One day, he came to his session very confused about a dream he had the previous night: he saw himself and his girlfriend in a small boat off shore. They were both naked and his girl’s right leg was amputated from the knee down and there was a horrible wound at the end, and nerves and sinews were “hanging out of it”. The boat was rocking pleasantly and he felt aroused and made love to her. He felt very content and happy and looked at this amputated leg with love and affection.

This dream felt very strange to him: how could he have been so aroused and at the same time content with such a horrible wound that his girlfriend had? It seemed so “messy” and “disgusting” to him. Was it really him in the dream? He felt estranged from this self that appeared in the dream. He had only a vague memory of himself being ‘open’ to an open wound.

Another possibility was unfolding, one that he hadn’t considered for a long time or was somehow buried. He was at ease with an imperfection

and not only that, it did not interfere with his pleasure or his 'job'. The dream allowed him to see another road, one that seemed to have been "grassy and wanted wear", as Robert Frost says in one of his most famous poems, "The Road not Taken", which ends with these memorable lines: "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I—/ I took the one less travelled by,/ And that has made all the difference". And that difference, to return to my client, was that the "other road" that he had travelled, albeit in his dream, revealed to him a new part of himself, that, as it happened, he could endure.

We all know through our work that most of our clients are not "blessed by birth" as Odysseus was, let alone endowed with the qualities of a hero. We know how difficult it is for them to go through the Scylla and Charybdis of life (man-eating monsters that live in a Cliffside cavern), defeat Polyphemus, resist the tempting song of the Sirens. The therapist's role is to assist the client not to lose sight of his/her track, to enable him/her to listen more clearly and truthfully to what drives them on, to understand what form of action is appropriate under the circumstances. Understanding implies choices, and these are not simply tied to subjective needs, but to worldly situations. Polyphemus could represent, for example, a very abusive boss/ partner who one has to face. The Sirens could represent the various temptations of modern life and the demands it makes upon us. How easy it is to lose our sense of self succumbing to the voices of others, to their enchanting callings. What Heidegger calls *das Man*, "the they", that I have referred to before, the drawing in of others' values and needs.

Medard Boss envisions the ideal of an "authentic" individual who "accepting all his life- possibilities" can "appropriate and assemble them to a free, authentic own self no longer caught in the narrowed- down mentality of an anonymous, inauthentic 'everybody'"[the they].

Heidegger words come into mind again: when we choose to interpret our being by accepting the "songs" of others- living, that is, in the world of *das Man*, doing "what one does" because it is either the "right", "accepted", or the "comfortable" thing to do- we "fall" into the inauthentic way of being. [BT 221-4]. We often find in a therapeutic session that a client is not in tune with what he or she is saying, we can detect this by a change in the tone of voice, the posture, the rhythm of the speech, etc. When this occurs a therapist should ask the client: 'who is speaking now?' As we know most of the times the voice that comes out belongs to the mother, the father, others. It has been adopted by the client without him realizing so but his/her "discomfort" is nevertheless revealed through the way he/she structures his/her speech, his/her bodily movements, etc.

Our clients live in a “veiled” world. The one that Odysseus lived, when he succumbed (temporarily), to the luring beauty of Calypso. Inauthentic, would be the word that the philosopher would use. This inauthenticity can take, as we know, many forms. An urge to consume for the sake of consuming, an urgent need to gratify our desires instantly, to escape the hard facts of reality through the taking of drugs, pills, alcohol, To attain eudemonia at any price seems to be the motto of our times. And yet this uncontrollable urge has a price. Call it alienation from the self, call it boredom if you prefer. It all leads to the same effect. To the same symptoms.

My reading of the Odyssey comes down to this: the return to Ithaca is a dangerous, risky enterprise. Even a hero needed a helping hand to show him the way forward, to remind him of who he truly was. What was his name and what it meant. I do not pretend to have the divine knowledge of Athena or the mystic powers of Tiresias. But in my work I have discovered that together with my client we can try to read the stars, measure the winds, and sail in the direction of the harbor. Whether we will ever get there is another matter. But sailing we must.

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ⁱⁱ Κείμενο ομιλίας στο VII διεθνές συνέδριο της Διεθνούς (IFDA) στις Βρυξέλλες, 9/10 Οκτωβρίου 2009