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“Tinder Glance” - Generic Shifts and the Reception of Homer’s *Odyssey* in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century

In this paper I focus on the recent reception of Homer’s *Odyssey*. More particularly, I introduce Rosanna Warren’s *Odyssey* (*American Poetry Review*, Nov/Dec 2006), a collection of nineteen lyric poems retelling the ancient poem. Warren’s collection, I argue, represents a generic shift that is taking place as poets, many of them women, rewrite the *Odyssey* in lyric form. After briefly retracing the history of the modern reception of Homer’s *Odyssey*, I focus on Warren’s use of lyric form as the means to create a thoroughly new *Odyssey* centering on death, violence, and moral despair. While she thus departs from her ancient counterpart in the emphasis she places on violence and conflict, Warren also returns to two elemental motifs we already find in the ancient epic, fire and music.

While much attention has been given to the cultural shifts in 20<sup>th</sup> century receptions of Homer (Graziosi and Greenwood 2007; Hardwick 2007; Hall 2008), little has been said about the question of genre. In the first part of the paper, I provide a very brief overview of the generic shifts in the recent reception of Homer: starting with James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Homer’s poem has remained a source of inspiration for 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century artists, but, with the important exceptions of Derek Walcott’s *Omeros* and Nikos Kazantzakis’s *The Odyssey: A Modern Sequel*, few have followed Joyce’s attempt to write a monumental work inspired by the *Odyssey*. Towards the turn of the last century, a new crop of leaner reworkings started to appear in the works of Louise Glück (1996), Judith Kazantzis (1999), and Margaret Atwood (2005), which all use the *Odyssey* as a framework to revisit the themes of marriage, homecoming, and identity in a modern context. Warren’s *Odyssey* has much in common with these predecessors, and like Glück and Kazantzis, she is interested in the expressive possibilities of transposing Homer’s narrative into a distinctly modern lyric idiom, a generic shift that allows each poet to explore and emphasize marginalized aspects of the ancient epic.

Yet Warren’s work goes further than her forerunners’ and differs from them in two important aspects: first, her version, although indirectly inspired by her reading of the *Odyssey*, is mediated by a series of nineteen drawings by the artist James McGarrell (shown in Powerpoint). As McGarrell himself presents the drawings, they derive from close study of Mediterranean olive and a rereading of Homer’s *Odyssey* “although they were not made from direct observation of the former, nor are they to be viewed as illustrations of the latter” (*American Poetry Review*, Nov/Dec 2006). Thus the link between the source poem and Warren’s lyrics is shaped through McGarrell’s visual interpretation of the ancient poem.

Second, Warren goes further than any of her predecessors in her transformation of the Homeric poem into something at once new and faithful to its ancient roots. Warren focuses not so much on characters and deeds, but on the elemental forces at work in human life. Homer indeed is a “catalyst” (Harwick 2004) for Warren’s alchemical vision of the *Odyssey* as bodies in motion: Warren’s poems (as well as McGarrell’s drawings) are dominated by images of nature: trees, water, fire.

Warren’s *Odyssey* reverses the ancient paradigm and starts with recognition (“that we live inside and outside”) and ends with an invocation (“Tell me...”), thereby stressing the cyclical nature of life (and poetry) and inviting the reader to start all over again. In Rosanna Warren’s poems, life is both fire and music: to live is “to step into a pyre,” and human life by definition is violence to be transmuted into music and dance. Odysseus is left unnamed and his cunning plays no role in Warren’s lyric *Odyssey*, where elemental nature becomes preeminent: olive trees still send messages, but “something indecipherable.”