

Zara TORLONE

Odysseus Ancient and Modern: Juxtaposition as a Pedagogical Tool

One of the main challenges I have experienced when teaching the *Odyssey* is students' skepticism regarding Odysseus' steadfast devotion and dedication to his homeland and family for twenty years. In my talk I discuss how I use an example of modern reception of the ancient epic to address students' disbelief and to bridge the gap between ancient heroic values and modern sensibility.

In all of my classes that include the *Odyssey* (both in Greek and in translation) I use the 'Odyssean' poems of Joseph Brodsky to present to the students the modern poetic reception of Homer's *Odyssey* and to illustrate to them that the modern poets also experience difficulty with the plot and the main message of the Greek poem.

Brodsky first turned to the Homeric epic in his early (1972) striking poem-letter "Odysseus to Telemachus" in which Odysseus was presented as a weary traveler and an indifferent man who surprisingly referred to the proud point of Greek military achievement without remembering who had won the Trojan war and more importantly what part he himself had played in its outcome. Brodsky's Odysseus, unlike his Homeric predecessor, had succumbed to the Sirens' song or tasted the sweet flowers of Lotus. He stated thrice in the poem his loss of memory indicating his confusion both in space and time. The most poignant moment of this disorientation was Odysseus' inability to remember the age of his own son, whom he viewed as fortunate to have grown without his father and thus free of any Oedipal anxiety. In this inversion of the Homeric hero there was more a deflation of the literary Odysseus than an aggrandizement of Brodsky's own.

In 1993, some twenty years after "Odysseus to Telemachus" Brodsky wrote "Ithaca", a poem about Odysseus whose spirit had now degenerated into blind cynicism. Homer's nostalgia was transformed into a radical denial of it. The great "destroyer of the cities" had gone to seed; restless longing devolved into rejection of any attachment. The key recognition scenes of the *Odyssey* became in Brodsky's rendition the opposites of themselves: Penelope became a whore, Eurycleia was dead, Argus had gone wild, and Telemachus, although grown tall and a traveler like his father spoke another language and viewed his father with disdain. The Oedipal worry of the earlier poem-letter had been realized. The extension of mythological allusion was taken to its extreme: Odysseus, the sacker of the cities, the man of intense and obsessive curiosity (emphasized both by Homer and in modern times by Constantine Cavafy), the devoted husband and protective father, the proud king of Ithaca, now had become a pariah, an unwelcome stranger. The journey back became not only impossible but also ultimately undesirable.

By juxtaposing these two poems to Homer's *Odyssey* I initiate class discussions on detrimental effects of a long war, price of heroic accomplishment, family ties, role and significance of memory in the *Odyssey*, and lead the students to understanding of the poem from a modern perspective full of not only Homeric but additional intertextual and intercultural tiers and meanings.