

ODYSSEUS AND THE SELF-INFLICTED WOUND

MYTHICAL TALE AND TEMPORALITY

CLAUDIO CALABRESE

Universidad Panamericana (México)

ccalabrese@up.edu.mx

ETHEL JUNCO

Universidad Panamericana (México)

ejunco@up.edu.mx

ABSTRACT. In our work, we show that Helen's recollection of Odysseus' self-inflicted wound places us in an eternal present, emerging "from" and disappearing "in" the nature of the Homeric hexameter, *et retour*, to create and recreate semantic spaces that make possible the return of the hero and the heroic action, giving the temporal correlation an unexpected meaning through the past-future / future-past correspondence.

KEYWORDS: Odysseus. Self-inflicted wound. Poseidon. Helen. Mythical Temporality.

Introduction

In our work we study one of the stories in which Odysseus modifies, without divine help, his appearance so as not to be recognized, when he enters Troy in the middle of the conflict; we refer to Helen's speech¹, at the moment when Telemachus and Pisistratus arrive at the palace of Menelaus, just when royal weddings are being celebrated. During the banquet, after the scenes of recognition of both young people, the warlike events of Troy, the dead companions and the special case of Odysseus are evoked, who remains missing. In this context, Helen recalls the surreptitious entry of the son of Laertes to Troy, in order to recognize its ramparts, since the Greeks had already decided to execute the ruse of the Horse, to put an end to the long siege of the city of Priam.

In order to make an indicative presentation of the semantics of the wound, we begin by pointing out that in the *Odyssey* we find two types of wounds: some that tear the skin and flesh and others that lacerate the spirit (usually an absence, of the husband, of the son or of the companions who have fallen fighting in Troy); we know of the latter from the tears shed by the characters at different times in the poem. The terminology for injuries caused by hand or throwing weapons is

¹ 4. 235-264.

varied: the noun ἡ ὤτειλή has the double meaning of “open wound”² and also of “closed wound”³; the term ἡ οὐλή properly designates “scar”, like the one that triggers the Eurycleian *anagnorisis*.⁴ Auerbach deals with this passage in his seminal essay on wounding and, in substance, continues to offer guidance in the approach to analysis, as we shall see later.⁵ The verbs whose semantics delimit the actions of “cutting”, “killing” and “throwing” are obviously related to the subject of the wound: δηϊώω, “to kill by cutting”⁶; βάλλω expresses the wound produced by a spear, as when it is told that Neoptolemus ended the war unscathed, “not struck by the sharp bronze” (the perfect middle passive participle βεβλημένος makes us think of a spear)⁷; the same verb reveals the insolence of Antinous, who has wounded Odysseus-beggar, throwing a footstool at him that hit him on the back.⁸ We note, in this passage, the most brutal form of the laceration: Odysseus-beggar curses Antinous (we know that, in reality, he anticipates his death) and he

² 10. 165; here it is referred to the wound of a deer and produced by a thrown weapon.

³ 19. 456

⁴ This is the famous passage (19.349-502) of the recognition that the nurse Eurycleia makes of the hero, who had been wounded by a wild boar in his adolescence, on Mount Parnassus, when he was visiting his maternal grandfather Autolycus; he had given the name to the newborn and promised him many presents, when he, already grown, would come to visit him. This passage (19. 405 - 412) gives rise to the popular etymology of the name Odysseus: “the son of hatred” or “the hated one” (19. 407 ff; also 1. 62 and 5. 340). As P. Chantraine (1999, 775-776) points out, we do not have elements to reliably establish its etymology, although the variations in the form of the word suggest a loan of Anatolian or Aegean substrate. With W.B. Stanford (1952, 209-13), we keep in mind that the fact that the popular etymology of Odysseus comes from a middle-voice verb places our hero, at least in the linguistic perception of his remote audience, in the double perspective of suffering, as a cause and as a condition. On the “Nordic” origin of the character, Duichin 2013, 267-297 (“im großen und ganze”, as the author writes on p. 268).

⁵ Auerbach 1949, 5-29 („Die Narbe des Odysseus“). Only at the moment when the scar on his thigh (19. 455-527) becomes visible, so intimate and secret that not even Athena's transformation, carried out precisely to avoid recognition, could conceal, does the story of all his wounds, since his adolescence, some real and others acted, those that give unity to Odysseus's life and that can only be shown in the *anagnorisis* or in the last act, prior to the consummation of revenge. For E. Auerbach's procedure and its consequences on the interpretation of classical culture as a whole, Lentini 2015, 375-385.

⁶ 4. 226.

⁷ 11. 535.

⁸ 17. 473-474.

threatens to drag him, taking him by the foot throughout the palace and then ripping off his skin completely.⁹

In this context, we support the following thesis: the wound, ἡ πλῆγῃ, that Odysseus inflicts himself in order not to be recognized, is etymologically and compositionally linked to the verb πλάζω (“to go from here to there”, “to be lost”, “to be wounded”), one of the semantic pillars of the *Odyssey*, as it expresses the anger of Poseidon, who wishes to punish Odysseus's act of *hybris*, after blinding the cyclops Polyphemus. Establishing the correlation πλῆγῃ – πλάζω, based on Helen's story, implies presenting the idea of time that is specified there, since we assign a certain causality (not logical, but mythical) to a linearly prior event (it belongs to the last epoch of the Trojan War) which contains *in nuce* the conditions in which Odysseus returns to Ithaca. This means that we must present the temporal relationships established by myth, as a way of understanding human experience, since the past inhabits the present, not in the psychological sense (the now of a consciousness), but mythically, as an action that it emerges perfectly from the *physis* and returns to it, making life an eternal present in intensity, with respect to a concrete experience.

The orientation of the bibliographic repertoire consulted on "time" in Homer¹⁰ expresses, as a whole, a perspective that we have called cosmological, since, in it, time is confronted with a space: a subject is in motion and crosses a space, that is to say, takes a tour,¹¹ thus showing that there is something that has happened and is past, or what is happening now and is present and the end of the road (in this scheme, "always" represents the only possible link with no-time or eternity). Our proposal to interpret Helen's story faces a notion of time that is structured in a clearly different way, since the future lies ahead and behind (going and coming back, both within the framework of "duration") of the first person who tells the story.

In order to support an argument of this nature, we establish the following steps: a) the wrath of the gods; b) Poseidon and the storms; c) understanding the

⁹ 17. 479-480 with use of the aorist subjunctive of ἀποδρῦπτω.

¹⁰ A.T. Zanker 2019, 61-102 has guided us in considering this conceptual framework. This text has given us a very broad theoretical horizon and, at the same time, has offered us very varied materials to reflect on; however, we have taken a certain distance from the conclusions, since we have focused on a mythical conception, different from the cosmological one, on which the author concentrates; his treatment of time in Homer takes root in the contribution of Fränkel 1953, 1-22. At this point we have also taken into account, in addition to the just mentioned Fränkel: Hellwig 1964; Bergren 2008.

¹¹ McGlone – Harding 1998, 1211-1215.

story of Odysseus's self-inflicted wound; d) mythical ambiguity and interpretation; e) conclusions.

The wraths of the gods and the storms

The Proem goes between vv. 1. 1-21 and, in them, we can distinguish two clearly differentiated parts: the first presents the context of the events, that is, the time immediately after the Trojan War, the characteristics of the hero, the events that he had to face and finally, the reason why he had to suffer so many adversities¹²; the second, parallel to the first and with the same number of hexameters,¹³ warns that Odysseus is the only one of the Greek heroes who has not yet reached his homeland, Ithaca, nor has he been reunited with his family, as he has been arrested by the nymph Calypso. It immediately reveals that the gods have decided that Odysseus return to his island, with the exception of Poseidon, although such a decision does not imply the end of the works. The verb *πλάζω* is fundamental, throughout the *Odyssey*, to understand one of the essential aspects of divine hostility, since the word illustrates the direction, the form and the sense in which the gods seek revenge as the restitution of a broken order¹⁴; however, in this epic expression, both realities (revenge and restitution of order) should not be interpreted as discordant or overlapping forms in the different levels of historical elaboration of the *epos*, but as the front and back of the same plot. In other words, for this mentality, revenge is the way to restore a sullied order, which transforms that action into an act of justice. In an immediate sense, the verb *πλάζω* expresses the punishment of a divinity to the Greeks who offended it; the elements of nature are the privileged instruments of this punishment, especially the sea and the storms. Poseidon represents, in the case of Odysseus, the elements mentioned as a manifestation of anger and punishment. Also, Pallas Athena unleashes on the Greeks who return after the destruction of Troy, the storm, as revenge and repair. After the goddess presents herself to Telemachus to lead her transformation and then disappears like a bird, the story is interrupted with a reference to the singer that, among the Suitors, sang:

τοῖσι δ' αἰδὸς ἄειδε περικλυτός, οἱ δὲ σιωπῇ
 ἦατ' ἀκούοντες: ὁ δ' Ἀχαιῶν νόστον ἄειδε
 λυγρόν, ὃν ἐκ Τροίης ἐπετείλατο Παλλὰς Ἀθήνη.¹⁵

¹² 1. 1-10.

¹³ 1. 11-21.

¹⁴ Louden 1999, 71.

¹⁵ 1. 325-327

That is to say, the disastrous return that Athena arranged for the Greeks, when they left Troy; this punitive and restorative storm anticipates, at the same time, the end of the Suitors. From the story that Proteus tells Menelaus and that this, in turn, refers to Telemachus,¹⁶ we know that a storm opened the return that Athena wanted for the Danaus; Poseidon is not strange to this divine action, but actively participates in it. We cannot find the word *πλάζω*, because this verb manifests a punishment, deviating from the route taken due to an unexpected storm, and not a death sentence. Indeed, when Ajax fell from his ship, Poseidon brought him close to the great rocks of Gyran and pulled him out of the sea unharmed; and he would have escaped death, if he had not fallen into *hybris* by affirming that he could have been saved without the help of the gods. Poseidon heard it and, with his trident, struck the rock of Gyran and broke it in two: one remained firmly in place, but the other sank into the sea, dragging the hero to the bottom.¹⁷ The superb expressions that Ajax uttered, as well as the entirety of this passage, can be interpreted in the light of the words of Zeus, that men add evils not decreed by the fates.¹⁸ Although this model will not have the formative preponderance that the myth of Aegisthus will display, we can observe that the fragment is arranged with a double purpose: on the one hand, to foreshadow -as mentioned above- the punishment and death of the Suitors, whose essential feature is pride; on the other hand, to contrast the mood of both heroes, since Odysseus will almost always keep in mind that, without the help of the deities, nothing is possible. When this is not the case, the son of Laertes also suffers the wrath of the gods; in this sense, we are dealing with the verb *πλάζω*, which, in its active forms, expresses a way in which the gods repair the affront of a human being and, consequently, highlights the dynamic relationship between Poseidon-Odysseus.¹⁹ Throughout the poem, the sea god represents water in its terrifying and punitive condition,²⁰ while the deities who live in rivers, and who therefore personify them, have a predominant bond of protection. At the moment of pointing out what the common feature of divine wrath consists of, we present the following synthesis: an enraged deity unleashes a storm in the ocean, in the midst of whose destructive fury only the righteous survive.²¹

¹⁶ 4. 370-490

¹⁷ 4. 499-511

¹⁸ 1. 30-35

¹⁹ Foley 1991, 10. Walsh 1995, 385-410; Nagler 1990, 335-356.

²⁰ Loudon 1999, 71.

²¹ Loudon 1999, 70.

In order to support these considerations, it is necessary to return to the term *πλάζω*, since it is the setting of each of the expressions of Poseidon's anger. As we have already pointed out, its basic meaning rests on the idea of hitting / being hit hard or being swept away by the force of the elements, especially by a storm at sea; Poseidon will represent this elemental power in the poem. When the verb is presented in the active voice, the subject is a deity²²; on the contrary, the passive voice makes present the perspective of a mortal.²³ The verb *πλάζω* expresses, in each case, the connection between the storm at sea and the divine action; Indeed, the three storms, which Poseidon unleashes and Laertes' son suffers, articulate, as a whole, his difficulties in crossing the sea.²⁴ The composition of the poem rests on the fact that, in each of the passages in which the voice *πλάζω* appears, it is possible to verify a reminiscence of the proem; this is the function of the verb that we find in Eumaeus' answer to Telemachus about the unknown host (one of the occasions when Odysseus hides his true identity²⁵). As in the case of the Proem, we find the verb in the same encircling position at the beginning of the verse; the rhetorical figure places a strong emphasis on the semantics of the verb: the ability to unleash problems for Odysseus. Although he does not recognize his master, Eumaeus is not indifferent to the traveler's narrative; in fact, in the long Cretan apologue that is told by a disguised Odysseus, the verb *πλάζω* appears, although there is portrayed a sailor beaten at sea, after a violent storm sent by Zeus. Other elements indicate the continuity between the words of Eumaeus and the Proem; in both we find passive forms of *πλάζω*, both mounted, which, as we have already pointed out, express the human perspective: *πλάγχθη*²⁶ and *πλάζόμενος*.²⁷ The use of *ἐπέκλωσεν*,²⁸ while carrying the expectation of divine action in a state of latency, also warns us about the close association of this passage with the second part of the Proem.²⁹ We can follow this model, although with less precision of details, on the end of the eighth canto; there Alcinous, in the last dialogue prior to the long apologue, energetically insists to know the name and the journey traveled, to an Odysseus who tenaciously resists revealing his name.³⁰ This interpellation of Alcinous makes possible the narration of cantos ninth to twelfth, an epic

²² 1. 75; 2. 396; 9. 81; 19. 187; 20. 346; 24. 307.

²³ 1. 2; 3. 95; 3. 106; 3. 252; 5. 389; 6. 278; 13. 204; 13. 278; 14. 43.

²⁴ 9. 79-81.

²⁵ 16. 62-64.

²⁶ 1. 2

²⁷ 16. 64.

²⁸ 16. 64.

²⁹ 1. 17. Louden 1999, 75.

³⁰ 8. 572-574.

narrative framed in the totality of the poem. For all that we have worked so far, the presence of the passive form of the compound of *πλάζω* is not surprising, and its immediate reference to the cities through which Odysseus was led; again, the compound contains the idea of crossing the sea in difficult circumstances. In canto XIII, according to the same economy that we have been following, Odysseus narrates the episode of Polyphemus and the responsibility of a deity in his accident through the sea, as a result of the three storms unleashed by Poseidon, which make him lose his way³¹. After Odysseus concludes his extensive narration, Alcinous uses the verb *πλάζω* also in close association with the Proem.³²

Poseidon and the storms

Although Poseidon plays a key role in the development of the poem, his appearances are sporadic, but deployed to achieve maximum effect in action. He is the first of the Olympian gods to be mentioned³³ and dominates, through his absence, the opening of the poem: the first mention of Zeus or Athena takes place to explain the absence of Poseidon.³⁴ As we pointed out when presenting the council of the gods, the god of the sea is one of the central themes, since Zeus must explain his anger with Odysseus.³⁵ When Poseidon first appears, Odysseus finds himself crossing the ocean; it is the only moment in the poem that the two are, in some way, close. From the first moment, the relationship between the two is defined: Poseidon's first monologue shows that he knows Odysseus's intimate resolution and his ability to endure suffering. He is near the land of the Phaeacians and there it is his destiny to escape the web of pain that surrounds him, but he does not have to arrive unscathed: Poseidon produces a terrible storm to make him the object of his harassment.³⁶

In parallel with other storms, the mast breaks and Odysseus is thrown from the raft.³⁷ The goddess Leucothea helps him by throwing the veil that will allow him to survive, while Poseidon, with a huge wave, has broken the hero's raft. In this state, the narrator pauses for a moment on the vulnerable figure of the shipwrecked man: "Two days and two nights he wandered on the tight waves, and his

³¹ 9. 67-82; 10. 47-55; 12. 405-425.

³² 13. 4-6.

³³ 1. 20.

³⁴ 1. 20-26.

³⁵ 1. 68-69.

³⁶ 5. 288-294.

³⁷ 5. 315-318.

heart many times foretold death."³⁸ This passage is a reduced-scale model of the relationships between Poseidon and Odysseus; for this reason, *πλάζω* acquires the specific value of recalling for the audience what is really happening, underlying the tangle of events.³⁹ Poseidon's anger sheds some light on his cause and his deepest meaning; unlike the crew of Odysseus or the Phaeacia or the Suitors at Ithaca, the son of Laertes has not broken a divine interdiction; those who offend the gods in this way die immediately, as in the case of Ajax Oileus. After blinding the Cyclops, Odysseus goes with his crew to the island, where his fleet awaited him; there the cattle stolen from Polyphemus are distributed and Odysseus immolates a lamb to Zeus, who rejects the sacrifice, that is, Odysseus and his companions are no longer able to achieve his favor.⁴⁰

Poseidon's wrath is not unleashed because Odysseus and his companions have blinded the Cyclops Polyphemus, since, in the epic perspective, revenge is a legitimate option to restore order. We must also bear in mind that, although the Olympians make up a Pantheon, each of them has their own reactions; Poseidon, for example, possesses a completely different sense of benevolence than Zeus; this is because the god of the sea is an elemental force, always ready for prompt vengeance. This is the framework for the next question: what has Odysseus done to be pursued by the god of the sea and to have the acquiescence of Zeus? The gods are irritated that Odysseus has engaged in *hybris*⁴¹; from the beginning of the Polyphemus episode, he makes excessive demands to obtain the gift or present that corresponds to the guests from the Cyclops.⁴² In concomitance with the *hybris* and more serious than this, in what offends the gods, Odysseus falls into *asebeia*, in an offense against piety. This impiety does not occur in the very fact of blindness or in the bravado of victory in which it subsequently erupts, but in these words: "... but he who shakes the earth will not cure your eye ..."⁴³ While

³⁸ 5. 388-389. Calabrese 2007, 37-39.

³⁹ Louden 1999, 83.

⁴⁰ 9. 551-554. Friedrich 1991, 16-28.

⁴¹ Mathieu 2004, 27-29. Nestle 1942, 52-53.

⁴² 9. 266-269; Friedrich 1991, 16-28.

⁴³ 9. 525. Reinhardt 1948, 52-162. There the author points out: a) Zeus rejects Odysseus' offering, because the hero unduly assumed a divine mandate (to blind Polyphemus in his name), thus making Poseidon's anger his own; b) *hybris* proper, that is, affirming that the sea god could not cure his blindness; c) Odysseus reaches the highest degree of excess, at the moment that he expresses moral superiority over Polyphemus. We especially take into account points a and b; we consider that the latter is foreign to the archaic world and very typical of the concept of "pride", as understood in Christian morality (The expression "Die Hybris als moralische Bewusstheit" -p. 85- fully accounts for its position).

Odysseus has reasonable motives for revenge upon whom he has devoured his friends and permanently humiliated, our hero succumbs to the passion of his own heart; this attitude not only brings him the wrath of Poseidon, but also triggers the temporary enmity of Zeus. We are facing one of the rare occasions in which Odysseus loses his characteristic self-control, which distinguishes him both from his companions (Ismarus and the sheep of the sun) and from his Suitors⁴⁴. In an attitude opposite to the one we observe here, Odysseus himself contains Eurycleia, whose celebration of the victory over the Suitors threatens to go into excess; he recommends to her the necessary piety and reminds her that those deaths are a sign of the gods.⁴⁵

Meanings of Odysseus's self-inflicted wound

In the fourth song, Telemachus, accompanied by Peisistratus of Pylos, visits Menelaus, in Sparta, in search of news of his father; both young people arrive when, in the palace, a feast was celebrated for the wedding of Neoptolemus, son of Achilles, and Hermione, daughter of the royal marriage of Sparta, and a bastard son of Menelaus, Megapenthes, with a Spartan, daughter of Alector (her name is not mentioned). This festive opening culminates with the mention of a singer and his zither and gymnasts jumping to the sound of music.⁴⁶ The young men are introduced to the palace by indication of Menelaus, since he deduces, by the nature of both, that they belong to a royal family. Since, in the Homeric context, food, and especially the banquet, makes ritual sense, Nestor entertains the young people by serving roast meat himself, thus complying with the sacred rule of hospitality.⁴⁷ The first somber tone of the celebration is due to the memory of his brother Agamemnon, murdered on his return to Mycenae; in the mythical time frame it is a very recent event, which is moving for those closest to it and instructive about the fate of the Greeks after Troy.⁴⁸ This memory inevitably brings up other of the many Greek heroes who fought under the walls of Troy; he stops especially in his beloved friend Odysseus, of whom he knows nothing.⁴⁹ Because of all these dead

We have taken into account the reply of Fenik 1974, 216. Friedrich 1991, 17-18 expresses his disagreement with Fenik, in favor of Reinhardt.

⁴⁴ Louden 1999, 84.

⁴⁵ 22. 413. Calabrese 2007, 35-37.

⁴⁶ 4. 60-64.

⁴⁷ Beck 2012, 107-118.

⁴⁸ 4. 90-94.

⁴⁹ 4. 107-110. Here he speaks as if he did not know the story of Proteus, which he will reveal a little later.

"I cry and I am saddened", ὀδυρόμενος καὶ ἀχεύων.⁵⁰ Before the story of Menelaus, Telemachus can no longer contain his tears ὥρσε γόοιο⁵¹; whoever receives him as a guest notices the emotions that overwhelm the young man, who has covered his face with his cloak; while Menelaus is doubtful about the situation, all the attention falls on Helen, who enters the room from her rooms and asks her husband about the identity of the young people; before hearing the answer (Menelaus suspects who they are, but she does not know yet), she points out the extraordinary similarity of one of them to Telemachus (it is understood that she has seen him during childhood). In her response Menelaus notices his profound resemblance to Odysseus and the fact that she shed "bitter tears", πικρὸν δάκρυον,⁵² when she referred to him.

Peisistratus of Pylos presents both and Menelaus remembers Odysseus⁵³. Everyone cries after these words; the verb κλαίω is repeated to name each of the interlocutors: Helen, Menelaus and Telemachus.⁵⁴ Menelaus asks those present to stop crying (κλαυθμός⁵⁵) and think about dinner; for this it is necessary to stop remembering the comrades lost in the war. However, ἔνθ' αὖτ' ἄλλ' ἐνόησ' Ἑλένη Διὸς ἐκγεγαυῖα⁵⁶: Helen ignores Menelaus' indication and decides to continue talking about the Greeks who died in Troy, but first, discreetly, pours a potion (τὸ φάρμακον⁵⁷), which dissipates tears and grief, into the crater from which the wine was poured and begins the story of Odysseus' surreptitious entry into Troy.⁵⁸ The potion has two essential capacities: on the one hand, as we have already said, to dispel pain and affliction and, on the other, to calm the bile, that is, anger; these possibilities are expressed by two adjectives νηπενθές τ' ἄχολόν τε. *Νηπενθής*, ἔς is one of the epithets of Apollo,⁵⁹ as a god linked to healing; inasmuch as he had the ability to cause pain and damage, Apollo could also cure the diseases that he caused; in this sense, the laurel that Apollo carries inextricably represents the divinatory and healing arts (the laurel has been used as a stomach tonic since ancient times). Likewise, music has a strong therapeutic sense, as it restores internal harmony. If the basic meaning is "that dispels pain or affliction" (τό πένθος,

⁵⁰ 4. 100.

⁵¹ 4. 113.

⁵² 4. 154.

⁵³ 4. 169-183.

⁵⁴ 4. 184.

⁵⁵ 4. 212.

⁵⁶ 4. 219.

⁵⁷ 4. 220.

⁵⁸ 4. 253-264.

⁵⁹ The Online Liddell-Scott-Jones Greek-English Lexicon sv.

"mourning", literally "without mourning"), the potion that Helen has poured acts on the diners, detaching the story from the physical consequences of it. Under the effect of wine and narcotics, diners can follow the speech about those who have died or whose whereabouts are unknown, as is the case of Odysseus. Helen ensures the time that the potion requires to take effect by taking her word for it: she asks the diners to sit down and delight in the conversation, as she will say, in turn, "opportune things".⁶⁰ At the time Plutarch noted, when interpreting this passage symbolically (*Quaest. Conv.*, 614 bc), that his understanding cannot be separated from the effect of the narcotic poured into the crater, from where the wine is poured for the diners, since his words effects start. The consort of Menelaus temporarily assumes the task of the epic vate, although without the omniscience that is proper to her, because it is a past; thus, a first link between the pure present and the past.⁶¹

The memory of Helen places us at the moment when the Greeks have decided on the stratagem to shorten a war that had been going on for ten years; to them we must add the years engaged in the return, for which reason it is convenient to return to the structure of the story. The twenty-four songs of the *Odyssey* take place in forty days; according to this model, between days 1 to 6, Telemachus travels from Ithaca to Sparta and Odysseus, for his part, remains inactive. Between the days 7 to 36 Odysseus undertakes the return from Ogygia to Ithaca. Between days 36 to 40, father and son meet and carry out their revenge on the suitors.⁶² This description allows us to understand how Homer has elaborated the poem action. The forty days pass through three well-defined scenes, which take place in different settings: the first is in Ithaca with Penelope, the Suitors and Telemachus, plus the latter's trip to Pylos and Sparta. The second is found in the sea and in Scherie, where he has come from Ogygia; finally, the return of Telemachus from Sparta to Ithaca, where he concentrates the development of the last actions. It is possible, therefore, to discern a very precise plan, which we will call the compositional design.

This "compositional design" of the narrative structure expresses the artistic decision not to leave anything in the background; indeed, everything that is related is found in the core of the story as "happening now", as a present that is not exhausted. What, then, does this passage mean in the whole story? Where our mentality only sees a delay effect of the action to increase the interest, the Homeric tradition considers perhaps a deeper motive: the will not to leave any as-

⁶⁰ 4. 240.

⁶¹ 4. 235-264.

⁶² Delebecque 1980, 4-9.

pect of the action in gloom; Helen's story, in effect, stresses the importance of detail, as a vocation for the sensible modulation of phenomena.⁶³ In order to understand the aesthetic impulse and the understanding of the reality of Homeric poetry, we have to be aware of his decision that everything must always be in the light, which means, in the narrative, each scene is completely found, defined in its spatial and temporal relationships. In her account, Helen dominates the action⁶⁴: she kept Odysseus at her mercy, but she did not betray him, because she had come to see the folly of her desertion and longed for a Greek victory. Menelaus replaces this favorable view of Helen with an opposite one, for he tells how she later had all the Greek leaders in her power, when the Horse was taken to Troy, and her madness almost destroyed them. The story seems to assume that her audience has some familiarity with the circumstances of Odysseus' surreptitious entry into Troy. In Proclus' summary of Lesches' *Little Iliad*, the event occurs between the construction of the Horse and the theft of the Palladium.⁶⁵

We can divide Helen's remembrance into four parts; A) the exhortation to listen to his words to Menelaus and all the diners (we suppose that the narcotic has begun to take effect, because shortly before the king of Sparta, at the request of Pisistratus, decided to stop remembering, during the feast, to the dead in Troy⁶⁶). B) the invocation to Zeus, dispenser of goods and evils,⁶⁷ who can do everything without exception; we consider that the attribute ἀπαντα⁶⁸ establishes one of the connections of this passage with the Proem, when the god of the firmament is presented in his provident character, exercising his power to guarantee the stability of the cosmos, which confirms the Homeric religious attitude: that which manifests behind the phenomena cannot be known and is attributed to Zeus⁶⁹. C) In this context Helen, calls to taste the delicacies already prepared and enjoy the myths.⁷⁰ D) According to the procedure of Homeric art,⁷¹ the consort of Menelaus cannot say all the things that she knows,⁷² assuming from this moment the triple

⁶³ Auerbach 1949, 6.

⁶⁴ Murnaghan 2011, 27-50.

⁶⁵ Heubeck – West – Hainsworth 1988, 208-209. Bravo 2001, 65-67.

⁶⁶ 4. 195-206. Currie 2016, 105-146, where he presents the epic meaning of tears, comparing the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*.

⁶⁷ 4. 237.

⁶⁸ 4. 237.

⁶⁹ Friedrich 1991, 16. Fenik 1974, 216.

⁷⁰ 4. 239: μύθοις τέρπεσθε.

⁷¹ Currie 2016, 105-146; we make our own the materials gathered by the A. on the subject of tears.

⁷² Friedrich 1991, 16. Fenik 1974, 216.

condition of belonging to a divine lineage, of bard and magician (subject also linked to her lineage)⁷³; she evokes Odysseus with the epithet *ταλασίφρονός*,⁷⁴ which expresses his ability to cope with suffering.⁷⁵ E) Development of the story.

As for point E), the passage is in line with the composition of the *Odyssey*, since we know, in advance, the nuclear elements of the action: Odysseus infiltrates Troy because the Greeks have already decided to build the stratagem that will lead them to victory, but for this the hero must know for himself how solid the Trojan defenses were, beyond the main walls; Homeric narrative economics simply says: "He told me in order all that was on the minds of the Achaeans".⁷⁶ We have previously said that Odysseus inflicted wounds on himself, which we consider to be defensive, as he seeks not to be recognized by the Trojans, and rags on his shoulders, which have the same dramatic function, since it is not only about deforming his appearance (many knew him on the battlefield), but to hide (*κατακρύπτων*⁷⁷), his heroic nature, which consists of a certain "shine in the gaze", *τὸ φάος*, which leads to the meanings "splendor", "glory", as it is assiduously translated⁷⁸; for this reason, he looks like someone else, a beggar,⁷⁹ that is, nobody recognizes him, except Helen,⁸⁰ who washes him and anoints him with oil. After having deceptively entered the city of Priam and fleeing from it by killing Trojans, Odysseus is characterized as "knowing many things".⁸¹

The resource of disguise and transformation are not only frequent in the *Odyssey*, but fundamentally it establishes that the milestone between reality and appearance is never clear; in this sense, anonymity is one of his most common Odysseus devices. With the help of Athena, he also achieves the metamorphosis that allows him to achieve, in key moments, greater enhancement of his figure both in vigor and in seduction, as those moments require. In the passage that occupies us, both the transformation and the disguise occur, although with the fol-

⁷³ Stockdale 2018, 19-33. As the author notes, Helen is the only woman in the series to return from Troy.

⁷⁴ Condition sustained also in v. 242, with the aorist form of *τλάω*.

⁷⁵ 4. 241.

⁷⁶ 4. 256: *μοι πάντα νόον κατέλεξεν Ἀχαιῶν*. Currie 2016, 53-54. Atienza 2009, 62.

⁷⁷ 4. 247.

⁷⁸ IV, 247. Bailly 1963, 2053-5: from the generic use of "light", it also indicates "light of a star", a living being as a shine in the gaze, and, finally, the properly heroic sense of "splendor" and "glory". Regarding this last word, we consider that, just as *τὸ κλέος* designates "what is heard", for its part *τὸ φάος* expresses "what is visible to the eye".

⁷⁹ 4. 247.

⁸⁰ 4. 250.

⁸¹ 4. 250.

lowing peculiarities: the metamorphosis is not directly linked to the transformation power of a god; Athena is the goddess most closely linked to this process in the *Odyssey* as an expression of her *metis*, whose reflection we undoubtedly see in Odysseus, the expert in tricks or *polymetis*. On the other hand, the fact that Odysseus entered Troy in a mendicant condition and that he killed many Trojans in flight is a preview of the fate that awaits the Suitors. Finally, the passage expresses the correlation between the hero and his protector, to the point of not being able to fully distinguish whether Odysseus imitates the actions of Athena or whether the goddess is faithful to the procedures of her protégé.⁸²

Mythical ambiguity and interpretation

Telemachus' journey to Pylos and Sparta was inspired and organized by Athena-Mentes, under the excuse that she was gathering information about her father. Underneath this decision there are two deeper reasons: an immediate one, which consists of saving the young man from a plan of the Suitors to assassinate him, and another mediate and more complex one, which sought to train and prepare Telemachus so that, knowing of illustrious characters the heroic nature of his father, awakened in him the transition from an underdog before the Suitors to a warrior who could fight alongside Odysseus to recover Ithaca.⁸³ For this training to take shape, it was necessary to go back over the long years of the Trojan War and its sufferings. Previously, both in the palaces of Pylos⁸⁴ and Sparta,⁸⁵ it was necessary that there be evoked the physical resemblance with his father, which left latent, in the conceptual framework of a warrior nobility that had fought in Troy, to equal him in prudence and courage; we consider that, for this reason, the recollections of Odysseus have this formative function. The story that Helena chooses is especially dedicated to celebrating cunning, courage, the ability to endure suffering and the willingness to establish links with the feminine world that characterized Odysseus, thus laying the foundations of that educational ideal that we mentioned earlier.⁸⁶

Let's see the scope of the story; the *Odyssey* begins where the *Iliad* ends, yet where does the *Odyssey* begin? In principle we must affirm the evident structural and poetic continuity between both works; thus, Athena reminds Zeus of the sac-

⁸² Atienza 2009, 62-64.

⁸³ 3. 14-15.

⁸⁴ 3. 120-124.

⁸⁵ 4. 60-64 (words of Menelaus); 138-146 (Helen's Words); 146-154 (Again Menelaus).

⁸⁶ Delebecque 1980, 132-133.

rifices that Odysseus offered him in Troy, as, in the *Iliad*, Apollo himself remembers those that Hector made to him; there is, between the two works, a dense proximity that, however, does not annul originality, but rather deploys a procedure for the evocation of compositional models, but which creates a personal language for experiences of its own that are not transferable.⁸⁷ The notion of the current past as a significant totality is present at the heart of the mythical narrative, as it condenses the resources of Homeric poetry to approximate the intuition that the past sustains the future, in a sense different from what could be established in the framework of the philosophy of nature; indeed, it is not only a matter of a past that comes into being until it becomes present, but, on the contrary, of what remains of it in the now. We are facing a mythical creation, which means that language specifies the ability to create tensions between images and action, insofar as it places us in the light of an absolute present; in this mythical sense it is possible to affirm that what happened is now happening. This is the insight that the Homeric story shows us and what remains lucid in its perception, since it does not create a "world", in the metaphysical sense of the term, but rather names things in such a way that the action of its verb is a past that is happening. In this way we understand that the wound that Odysseus inflicts on himself, ἡ πληγή, is etymologically and existentially linked, in a sense that is prior to experience, to the verb πλάζω, as semantics that interprets man in his relationship with the divine, through the convergent, albeit in tension, nuclei of Homeric art: distance and familiarity with the divine, based on remembrance; Therefore, this interpretation does not result in a data less than Helena, from the beginning she is equated with Artemis,⁸⁸ since her words are framed in this Apollonian context of discernment. Odysseus's wound announces both the act of hubris that we find in Polyphemus's apologue, as well as the purification of that act: from his first monologue, Poseidon is aware that he will not be able to kill Odysseus, since he knows that he will reach Scherie,⁸⁹ although not stop harassing him. In these circumstances the verb πλάζω acquires a form value, since it recalls, before the audience, what is really happening: Odysseus is the only hero who survives divine wrath, contrary to what happens with the rest (Ajax, the Suitors or their own companions⁹⁰); Laertes' son is always aware of being wandering, of drifting: πῆ δὲ

⁸⁷ Di Benedetto 1999, pp. 195-202. The author asks himself this same question within the framework of the concept of "second grade literature"; we make these elements our own to face the question of the functionality of this particular story on the horizon of myth.

⁸⁸ 4. 123.

⁸⁹ 5. 291-296.

⁹⁰ Louden 1999, 85.

καὶ αὐτὸς // πλάζομαι.⁹¹ The model of behavior implied by the verb articulates the Poem, from the opening, when Athena presents her complaint, because Odysseus has not yet returned to Ithaca and Zeus attributes all the responsibility to Poseidon, using the form πλάζει.⁹²

Conclusions

The wound that Odysseus inflicts on himself articulates the whole of the work through the semantic field that expresses travel, knowledge and sorrow and that, as such, opens and closes worlds of meanings that remain in the validity of language. The fact that ἡ πληγή, with which Helen refers to Odysseus' laceration, is in functional correlation with the verb πλάζω places the audience (or the readers) in front of the Proem, where Zeus expresses his designs. Thus flows an eternal present in which everything happens. For this reason, we have sought to sustain the ambiguity of interpretation in the temporal relations established by the myth: the past that is present in the now, not in the psychological sense in which it breaks into consciousness, but mythically, as an action that emerges perfectly from the physis and returns to it. This is possible because there is an interpretation of the hero insofar as he has the ability to link himself with the divine, since this is precisely what gives the possibility of his own understanding of him. In this perspective, the divine does not entail - in Homer - a beyond physis and this places it in the light of a present that is considered eternal in its intensity: its heroes live elevated to the life of mythical time, whose causality does not it is other than the ambiguity of past-future / future-past co-belonging. Raised in this light and penetrated by it, the Homeric language expresses that physis from which everything arises and to which everything returns, in an exercise of paradoxical permanence.

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⁹¹ Louden 1999, 85.

⁹² 1. 75

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