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re-imagining worlds

&

re-thinking ideas

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— Ulysses's Mast¹

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While Odysseus's original landscape is that of an untraced sea explored by someone capable of orientating himself by re-conducting to their being the appearances he comes across in his wandering through it. It is, therefore, a landscape very different from – in fact one inversely proportional to – that of Joyce's *Ulysses*, whose characters prove unable to orientate themselves in the overdetermined space of a modern city.

Half of this book turns around this difference. As for the other half, I shall introduce it in due course.

For I should now like to make two preliminary points.

My first point is that the characters of Joyce's *Ulysses* must be seen not just as modern characters, but as the modern characters par excellence. Why? Because, if Baudelaire was the first to vindicate the term “modernity” in connection to the experience of “the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent,”² it can be affirmed with no exaggeration that such experience is echoed and explored in Joyce's *Ulysses* to an elsewhere unparalleled extent, or at least in a paradigmatic way.³

My second point is that if, Leopold Bloom's roaming about the city must be linked⁴ to Nietzsche's invitation to plough through the “seas”⁵ (re-)opened by the “death of God”⁶ (read: of the Jewish-Christian God), it can also be read, paradoxically, as a transposition of “Abraham's [and Moses's] journey[s]” in a “nowhere land,” albeit one flanked by two negativities: the irretrievable loss of “myth”⁷ understood as the “magical sphere”⁸ of a pre-

¹ This is the first chapter of a book currently in preparation, which is provisionally titled *Ulysses's Mast: Prolegomena to a New Critical Philosophy*. A synopsis of the book is available here: <https://polymorph.blog/reimagining-homers-legacy-i-on-the-counter-odyssean-background-of-contemporary-philosophy/>.

² Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, 13.

³ See further Beebe, “Ulysses and the Age of Modernism”; Culligan Flack, *James Joyce and Classical Modernism*.

⁴ Slote, *Joyce's Nietzschean Ethics*.

⁵ Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*, 3 (§1), 161 (§283), 163 (§289), 172 (§302), 199 (§343), 234 (§370), 243 (§377), 258 (“Toward New Seas”).

⁶ *Ibid.*, 109 (§108), 119–20 (§125), 199 (§343).

⁷ Bielik-Robson, “The Jewish Ulysses,” 28.

⁸ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 53.

rational “faith”⁹ where “identity” (being) and “positivity” (plenitude) would coincide,¹⁰ and the painful uncertainty brought about by any present and/or future “hope.”¹¹

It is not my intent to examine in this essay the para-Jewish background of Joyce’s *Ulysses*, which does not go unnoticed to Derrida.¹² Yet, since it cannot be overlooked either, I should like to recall at its very outset that Leopold Bloom and Stephen Dedalus (i.e., the novel’s protagonist and Joyce’s own alter-ego *qua* portraitist of modernity’s labyrinthine qualities) end up singing – “drunk and tired,”¹³ as Agata Bielik-Robson underlines – Psalm 113: *In exitu Israel de Aegypto*.

One is led to wonder, then, whether it is due to the tiredness allegedly provoked by the mythical coincidence of “identity” and “positivity,” that philosophy can only draw legitimacy from the “negative,” as Adorno famously claimed in the mid-1960s¹⁴ and is still repeated today, however diversely.¹⁵ I shall leave this issue unresolved for now, though. For I want to formulate now a different question, namely, in what proportion is Odysseus’s Homeric adventure comparable to that of Joyce’s *Ulysses*?

As it is well known, Horkheimer and Adorno respond to this question in the affirmative. They identify modernity with “enlightenment,”¹⁶ and they identify enlightenment, in turn, with an ongoing yet never achieved¹⁷ “disenchantment” of reality,¹⁸ or, what amounts to the same, with the overcoming of the aforementioned “magical sphere” of “myth.”¹⁹ Such too, they claim, is Odysseus’s original vocation and the reason why he “sails past” the “Sirens.”²⁰

For, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s conceptual imaginary, one can only “win [one]self” by “throwing [one]self away,”²¹ i.e., by breaking the spell of any transparency between being

⁹ Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 135.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 141.

¹¹ Bielik-Robson, “The Jewish Ulysses,” 28.

¹² Derrida, *Writing and Difference*, 412, n. 92.

¹³ Bielik-Robson, “The Jewish Ulysses,” 28.

¹⁴ “It is from the negative that philosophy draws whatever legitimacy it still retains” (Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, 52).

¹⁵ See, e.g., *inter alia*, Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, esp. 27–73; Laruelle, *Principles of Non-Philosophy*; Badiou, “Destruction, Negation, Subtraction”; Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*; Magun, *Negative Revolution*; Cisney, *Deleuze and Derrida* (despite Deleuze’s rejection of the “negative” in *The Logic of Sense*, 68, 123, 136, 172–4, 229, 296, 300–1!).

¹⁶ Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 1–34.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 1.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 53.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 26–7, 35.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 38.

(identity) and being's positive knowability (thought). And is not that too, they ask, what moves "the heroes of all true [modern] novels,"²² beginning with Joyce's *Ulysses*?²³

Notice that *Exiles* is the title of Joyce's only extant theatre play; and that his *Ulysses* reflects (like all of Joyce's works)²⁴ the experience of a prolonged *cum* unfinished exile. There is a first contrast here with Homer's *Odyssey*, and a rather eloquent one for that matter. Put differently: Odysseus's return to Ithaca is absent in Joyce – Molly Bloom's "yes" to her husband in the concluding lines of Joyce's *Ulysses* is merely a flashback which brings no conclusion, therefore, to the novel's rhizomatic "wander lines."²⁵

After all, Joyce's *Ulysses* is the affirmation of a disoriented roaming without beginning and without end. Lacan: Joyce's equals the (psychotic) "undoing" of the Borromean "knot" that keeps together the "Real," the "Imaginary," and the "Symbolic" – whence the elimination of its two inherent "pleasures":²⁶ the pleasure of the "phallus" that results from linking the "Real" to the "Symbolic" (I, Odysseus, am a king returning to my land and my wife in Ithaca), and, more importantly perhaps for the purpose of this book, the pleasure of "meaning" that results from linking the "Imaginary" to the "Symbolic" (I, Odysseus, am an Achaean traversing the sea with Athena by my side).

In short, Joyce's *Ulysses* does not only sail past the Sirens' island – whose meaning we must still to decipher, as, *pace* Horkheimer and Adorno, Homer's Sirens' island quite different from the island of "myth." He actually sails past (any) Ithaca. With this, moreover, Joyce's modernism prefigures our late-modern shipwrecked condition, as not do we only seem to have sailed past any Ithaca: we seem not to be in position to sail anymore – not even, alas!, to tell where our shipwreck occurred in the first place. For it has been claimed indeed that if, today, only the trace of our shipwreck can be evoked, it is to make the surface on which such trace might be located vanish at the beating of a siren's tail.²⁷

In other words, there is for us – or so we are told – no chance to win ourselves back anymore, not even to win ourselves otherwise. Badiou: modernity is "the acceptance of exile without return."²⁸ *Contra* Hölderlin, he says.²⁹ *Contra* Homer too, I dare add.

²² Ibid.

²³ Where, anticipating today's Object-Oriented Ontology, Adorno writes that "the assertion that the world is unknowable [...] become[s] a moment of knowledge, knowledge of the gulf between the overwhelming and unassimilatable world of objects, on the one hand, and experience, which glances helplessly off that world, on the other" (*Notes to Literature*, 1: 227).

²⁴ Gillespie, *James Joyce and the Exilic Imagination*.

²⁵ The expression "wander lines" is Fernand Deligny's in *The Arachnean and Other Texts*, *passim*. On the term "rhizomatic," see Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 3–28.

²⁶ See further Lacan's seminar on Joyce: *The Sinthome*. See now also Soler, *Lacan Reading Joyce*. On the question mark accompanying the term "psychotic" (i.e., schizophrenic, in Lacanian parlance), see once more Soler, *Lacan Reading Joyce*, 39–52.

²⁷ Meillassoux, *The Number and the Siren*, 17.

²⁸ Badiou, *Théorie du sujet*, 185.

²⁹ Ibid.

For the *Odyssey*'s diegetic purpose is to bring "life" (ψυχή)³⁰ to a meaningful "closing loop" (νόστος),³¹ i.e., to provide an individual's life with a *definable* – in both the usual sense and the etymological sense of the term definable: recognisable and concluding – "form" or "figure" (ψυχή).³² One finds a similar idea in Pasolini, applied to the manner in which one's death – i.e., life's absolute closure – gives one's life an otherwise missing relief, and thereby meaning:

It is [...] absolutely necessary to die, *because, so long as we live, we have no meaning*, and the language of our lives (with which we express ourselves, and to which we therefore attribute the greatest importance) is untranslatable; a chaos of possibilities, a search for relations and meanings without resolution. *Death effects an instantaneous montage of our lives*; that is, it chooses the truly meaningful moments (which are no longer modifiable by other possible contrary or incoherent moments) and puts them in a sequence, transforming an infinite, unstable, and uncertain [...] present into a clear, stable, certain, and therefore easily describable past [...]. *It is only thanks to death that our life serves us to express ourselves.*³³

Interestingly, Odysseus is only able to gain his ψυχή by undergoing a dual experience: that of "roaming" (πλάγχθη, v. 2) and "suffering" (πάθεν, v. 4) – notice the phonetic wordplay between both Greek verbs, which compose what Aude Priya Wacziarg Engel calls a "phonic anagram."³⁴ Or, rather, he gains his ψυχή in virtue of that twofold experience, but also *against* it, which is, I think, what Joyce and Badiou similarly overlook.

How does Odysseus manage to succeed in his endeavour? With the help of his νόος or "intelligence," understood as the ability to doubt, inquire, ponder, devise, resolve, trace, design, and/or compose something, be it material or immaterial, adequate to the specifics of each particular situation, and thus capable of allowing the hero a way out of it – i.e., with the help of θεὰ γλαυκῶπις Ἀθήνη ("Athena, [the] goddess of\with clear sight"),³⁵ on whose "pale blue/[greyish] eyes" Odysseus "lingers on..." to draw freely on Lou Reed.³⁶

Excursus: the ancient Greek gods were (are) not supernatural beings or persons, but name the brightness and the shadow of everything that is, i.e., the all-powerful, immanent forces

³⁰ On the term ψυχή (*psyche*), see Jeremiah, *The Emergence of Reflexivity in Greek Language and Thought*, 61–4.

³¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.5.

³² Cf. Míguez Barciela, *La visión de la Odisea*, 13–14: "In the proem to the *Odyssey* the word ψυχή (which is usually rendered as 'life') does not denote the mere keeping alive, but life as an image or figure for which one strives [*Od.* 1.4–5], i.e., life as that which remains when living is already finished. [...] [In this sense] a return produces virtually the same thing as death does: it concludes, fulfils, defines, delimits life's figure. Ψυχή, therefore, is not something that lives on 'afterwards' or 'elsewhere'; it is purely and simply the life that one no longer lives because it has ended, the life that remains when there is no life left; the image that remains defined" (my translation).

³³ Pasolini, *Heretical Empiricism*, 236–7 (emphasis original).

³⁴ Wacziarg Engel, "Introduction," 14, n. 1. Assuredly phonic resonances, whether explicit or implicit, play a crucial part in the recitation of any poem, especially if the poem in question is – like all Homeric poems are – intended to be performed rather than read.

³⁵ Homer, *Odyssey*, 1.44; 13.329. On the role of Athena in the *Odyssey*, see further Míguez Barciela, *La visión de la Odisea*, 25, 66. On her parallel role on the *Iliad* and the relation between Athena's clear, i.e., defined vision and Plato's εἶδη, see Segovia, *La inmanencia y lo sagrado*, 20–7.

³⁶ Reed, *I'll Be Your Mirror*, 57–8.

of the earth whether positive – e.g., “love” (Aphrodite) and “clear sight” (Athena) – or negative – e.g., “darkness” (Nyx) and “discord” (Eris) – that make and unmake the world, that is, any world. Hence they were (are) experienced, not believed in.³⁷ *End of the excursus.*

To forge a figure despite all, then: that is all the *Odyssey* is about. To gain figure, one may infer, vis-à-vis an otherwise indifferent, undefinable ground; put differently: vis-à-vis the “chaos of possibilities” (Pasolini) in which any non-delimited life consists. For, as Guattari puts it, being is “modulation of consistency,”³⁸ and thus “chaosmosis.”³⁹

Now, to forge a figure against an otherwise indifferent ground, equals to what Roy Wagner calls “first attention.” With the “first attention,” he says, we “pick out” the forms and “figures” (people, places, things) which allow us to “look” at and “think” reality;⁴⁰ conversely, with the “second attention” we “feel” their “background.”⁴¹ While these two “attentions” oppose one another, Wagner goes on to say, they also change into one another, so that, “[c]aught in a play of light and shadow between one extreme and the other,”⁴² our perception of reality oscillates between two dimensions which shift into one another in a permanent “figure-ground reversal,”⁴³ this is to say, in a constant “reciprocity of perspectives”⁴⁴ – those of Apollo and Dionysus.⁴⁵

To vindicate Apollo’s “first attention,” which is also that of Athena,⁴⁶ can be deemed to be today’s greatest philosophical sin; just like the opposite vindication, i.e., that of the ground against any representable figure, was, apparently, the greatest philosophical sin back in the

³⁷ Otto, *Theophania*, 8–9.

³⁸ Guattari, *Schizoanalytic Cartographies*, 107.

³⁹ Guattari, *Chaosmosis*. That is to say, it is transition from chaos to cosmos. On how this fully takes place, precisely, against death’s backdrop and Pasolini’s intuition thereof, see Zigaina, *Hostia*, 77–99. On it implies a transition from Hades (the possible) to Poseidon (its affirmation) and to Zeus (its determination), see Schelling, *Sämtliche Werke*, 12.577–86, 625, 634, 663–4, 667. On how it simultaneously implies a transition from ἀνάγκη (“necessity”) to μοῖρα (“destiny”), see Segovia, “Dionysus Mirror/Mirage.”

⁴⁰ Wagner, *Coyote Anthropology*, 14.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*

⁴² *Ibid.*, x.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁴⁴ Cf. Wagner, *The Logic of Invention*, 1–18.

⁴⁵ Segovia and Segovia, *Dionysus and Apollo after Nihilism*.

⁴⁶ Apollo’s eye procures the thought-vision (the “thinking,” νοεῖν) of what “is,” i.e., of “being” (εἶναι), as both Homer (*Il.* 1.69–70) and Parmenides (DK B3) have it; for it brings all beings evenly into what Heidegger calls their “unconcealed standing-there” (Heidegger, *Heraclitus*, 14; cf. Heraclitus, DK B30) and “gathers” them up as their λόγος (Heraclitus, DK B1, B2, B50). Therefore, Apollo’s eye is, as Plutarch suggests (*Mor.* 386d–387c), the very eye of philosophy – in addition to being the eye of divination and the eye of poetry, since, in their own way, the words of the αοιδός (“singer,” “poet”) bring forth all things into the open. In turn, Athena’s clear vision is needed to determine when is the time for, and the wise way of dealing with, something. Hence, if Apollo can be said to be the god of pure reason – to use an otherwise suggestive anachronism – Athena, in turn, can be said to be the goddess of practical reason. On Apollo’s and Athena’s political alliance, see further Shapiro, “Athena, Apollo, and the Religious Propaganda of the Athenian Empire,” 101–4; Kennedy, *Athena’s Justice*, 33.

1960s, when Deleuze wrote *Difference and Repetition*;⁴⁷ and, allow me to add it quickly, just like the dual affirmation of ground and figure – for nobody wants anymore to subsume Dionysus under Apollo without simultaneously subsuming Apollo under Dionysus, lest their twinnedness be fatally erased— amounts to redraw today’s philosophical chessboard *in toto*.⁴⁸

Odysseus thus symbolises the aim to forge figure despite all – an aim that proves remarkably uncanny (*Unheimlich*) in a time in which the emphasis is no longer put, as it was still put by Joyce with some undeniable dose of irony and even sarcasm, on how, despite our aspirations otherwise, the figural⁴⁹ eludes us, but, somewhat more resentfully, on how all figures are ultimately made of scum; since, we are told, “chaos is “omnipotent,”⁵⁰ “our lives are MALIGNANTLY USELESS,”⁵¹ and hence philosophers “would do well to desist from issuing any further injunctions about the need to re-establish the meaningfulness of existence, the purposefulness of life.”⁵²

The problem with the absence of figure is that, what I have called the indifferent ground that reigns there where *no* figure is achieved, presents, as it were, *two* distinct but complementary configurations.⁵³ On the one hand, it is made of the grey, positive anonymity of a life lived in total immanence (I lack a name, I am like a leaf) without any aspiration to glimmer above the given. On the other hand, it is made of a dark, negative anonymity, since life is finally covered by death’s opaque veil, which dissolves everything into non-being (I, Odysseus, am no longer).

Odysseus confronts the former configuration in Ogygia, which Brueghel the Elder lucidly portrays semi-surrounded by myst, and Böcklin covered by clouds.⁵⁴ Odysseus rejects the immortality that Calypso offers him, and Gilles Courtieu rightly speaks of Odysseus’s “founding decision” (*décision fondatrice*)⁵⁵ thereof. For her part, Aida Míguez Barciela equates

⁴⁷ “There is no sin other than raising the ground and dissolving the form” (Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 29).

⁴⁸ Segovia, “Rethinking Dionysus and Apollo.”

⁴⁹ By which I mean exactly the opposite to what Lyotard means when he employs the terms “figure” and “figural” in *Discourse, Figure* to denote the unrepresentable.

⁵⁰ Meillassoux, *After Finitude*, 71.

⁵¹ Ligotti, *The Conspiracy against the Human Race*, 119 (emphasis original).

⁵² Brassier, *Nihil Unbound*, xi.

⁵³ Cf. the two “aspects” of “indifference” in Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition*, 28: a “black nothingness” and a “white nothingness,” an “undifferentiated abyss [...] in which everything is dissolved” and a “calm surface” upon which “unconnected determinations” just happen to “float.”

⁵⁴ Jan Brueghel the Elder, *A Fantastic Cave with Odysseus and Calypso* (c. 1616, available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Odysseus_and_Calypso.jpg); Arnold Böcklin, *Ulysses and Calypso* (1882, available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arnold_Böcklin_008.jpg). (Hereinafter, all images are in the public domain.)

⁵⁵ Courtieu, *L’Odisseus*, 49.

the hero's decision with the separation from φύσις ("nature" *qua* unconstrained "emergence"),⁵⁶ which is only partly exact I think (see below).

As for the latter configuration – well, the aspiration to gleam, as Pindar says,⁵⁷ so as to avoid lapsing into oblivion after relapsing back into the earth, vertebrates both the *Iliad* and Heraclitus's frag. 29, with its reference to the "immortal fame among mortals" (κλέος ἀέναον θνητῶν). Yet it also vertebrates – this might have amused Odysseus himself, for it challenges his judgment on the alleged indolence of the inhabitants of the ὕλη ("forest")! – most extramodern worlds, as I have argued elsewhere⁵⁸ after Robert Gardner's cinematographic study of the Ndani of Papua New Guinea;⁵⁹ because in the Ndani's φύσις-oriented world there is room for anything except one's grey anonymity; in fact, the Ndani have become anonymous when they have become modern.⁶⁰

Not that Odysseus's rejection of pure immanence paves the way to Christian transcendence (humans, in the image of God, are entitled to rule over nature) or to modern transcendence (having escaped from nature, humans have granted themselves control over it). Admittedly, Aeschylus prevents against subduing φύσις on behalf of Prometheus's self-referential μῆτις,⁶¹ which differs from Athena's wise μῆτις.⁶² For, if Athena and Apollo stand side by side – about which Aeschylus's *Eumenides* supplies a luminous example, and there is no better commentary on it perhaps than Pasolini's *Notes Towards an African Orestes*⁶³ – Apollo cannot be dissociated from his twin sister Artemis, the goddess of φύσις, i.e., of the autopoiesis or unconstrained shining forth into unhiddenness of all non-human-made things. Indeed, Αἰδώς ("Pure")⁶⁴ and Φωσφόρος ("Light Bringer")⁶⁵ are two of Artemis's names, while Apollo's epithet, Φοῖβος, means both "Pure" and "Bright,"⁶⁶ and αἰδώς ("purity") is not only that which

⁵⁶ Míguez Barciela, *La visión de la Odisea*, 70–1, in connection to the recurrent use of the term φύω (to "raise," to "emerge") in *Od.* 5.63, 238, 241.

⁵⁷ Pindar, *Pythian*, 8.95–7.

⁵⁸ Segovia, "Rethinking Death's Sacredness," 10–11.

⁵⁹ Gardner, *Dead Birds*.

⁶⁰ Gardner, *Dead Birds Re-encountered*; Segovia, "Rethinking Death's Sacredness," 11.

⁶¹ Severino, *Il giogo*.

⁶² Brown, "The Birth of Athena."

⁶³ Pasolini, *Appunti per un'Orestiade africana*.

⁶⁴ Otto, *Theophania*, 72.

⁶⁵ Heidegger, *Heraclitus*, 15.

⁶⁶ Otto, *The Homeric Gods*, 62–3.

Apollo awakens against the dangerous spread of ὕβρις (“excess”),⁶⁷ but also that with which Artemis nurtures Athena right from the start.⁶⁸

Besides, Apollo’s bow – which is the reminder of Apollo’s famous motto: μηδὲν ἄγαν (“nothing in excess”), as well as one of Artemis’s distinctive features – is the weapon with which, upon returning to Ithaca, Odysseus – who is guided in his adventures by Apollo’s other motto: γνῶθι σεαυτὸν (“know yourself”) – kills Penelope’s pretenders. Here again, then, it is difficult to see how Odysseus can be deemed an anti-Apollonian character – the very figure of the negative from which “philosophy” can only draw “legitimacy” today, to quote Adorno again.

Odysseus – I should like to venture – is rather, together with Achilles, one of the two legs on which *philosophy* itself stands. For, just like Achilles’s withdrawal before Agamemnon’s ὕβρις prefigures Anaximander’s saying, which makes of the negative the condition of possibility and the limit of the positive without substituting the negative for the positive (Heraclitus and Parmenides elaborate variously on it), (a) Odysseus’s determination to find ways – in his quality as πολύτροπος ἀνὴρ (“*vir* of many tricks”) assisted by Athena – through the realm of the ψεῦδος (“falsely apparent”) prefigures Plato’s quest for “truth” (ἀ-λήθεια) à travers the realm of δόξα (“opinion,” “appearance”), whereas (b) Odysseus’s strife to extract from one’s “life” a defined “figure” (ψυχή) prefigures Plato’s wish to know things by means of that which brings to/in us limit and figure (again, ψυχή, “soul”),⁶⁹ and hence through their (parallel to it) eidetic (from εἶδος [“idea”], which in Homer denotes the defined “aspect” by which something makes itself perceptible)⁷⁰ delimitation\definition.⁷¹

This said, and stepping back from the metaphysical sea into the existential shore on which the beginning of this chapter and much of the discussion in it has focussed, it is obvious that, with Odysseus, one must distinguish two kinds of mortality and two kinds of immortality: the forgettable mortality obtained after an anonymous while perhaps happy lifetime *and* the memorable mortality obtained through a life-long strife for the best;⁷² the immortality gained beforehand by remaining in the womb of life’s eternal φύειν (“emergence”) *and* the immortality

⁶⁷ Heraclitus, DK B43: “excess must be extinguished more than a fire” (“ὕβριν χρηὴ σβεννύονα μᾶλλον ἢ πυρκαϊήνα”). See further Segovia, “Fire in Three Images, from Heraclitus to the Anthropocene,” 507. The assimilation of ὕβρις to “fire” is also found in Sophocles’s *Ajax*, vv. 196–7. (Unless otherwise indicated, all Greek translations are mine.)

⁶⁸ Otto, *Theophania*, 72.

⁶⁹ From the German Seele (“mind,” “spirit”), after the Middle High German *sēle*, the Old High German *sēla*, and the Proto-Germanic **saiwalō* (“life force”), on which see Kroonen, *Etymological Dictionary of Proto-Germanic*, 423.

⁷⁰ Segovia, “Εἶδος\Utupē.” Cf. Felipe Martínez Marzoa’s “figural” interpretation of Kant’s concepts in *El decir griego*, 25.

⁷¹ On the dimensional (i.e., non-substantial) nature of the term ψυχή in Plato (which thus resembles Kant’s later notion of a “transcendental subject” which accompanies one’s representations without being any-thing, i.e., something in turn), see Martínez Marzoa, *Ser y diálogo*, 113–23.

⁷² Heraclitus, DK B29: “One single thing above all others the best choose: immortal fame among mortals, while the many are glutted like cattle” (“αἰρεῦνται γὰρ ἐν ἀντι ἀπάντων οἱ ἄριστοι, κλέος ἀέναον θνητῶν· οἱ δὲ πολλοὶ κεκόρηται ὄκωσπερ κτήνεα”).

achieved by tracing a figure on its surface – a figure susceptible of being sung, which is what the ἔπος (“epic”) is all about.⁷³

The Sirens’s role in this context, then, is not difficult to ascertain: by singing the “stories” (αἶνοι) that turn the “fame” (κῦδος) of the heroes into “immortal fame” (κλέος), for that and no other is the purpose of any “sweet-voiced” (μελίγηρυς) song,⁷⁴ those whom the ἔπος calls σειρῆνες (i.e., “sirens,” and notice that Odysseus is ready to listen to their song, he is simply not willing to give up sailing to listen to it) dazzle the hero who strives to give form and meaning (i.e., meaningful form) to his life, insofar as they offer him the taste of “peace” (ἐιρήνη) *beforehand* – their island thus represents a mirage: the delusion of fame gained all too quickly, i.e., without the need to achieve it through a life-time struggle, for Odysseus has neither fallen in Troy, nor has he returned home victorious – not yet). Add to this what I have mentioned regarding both Calypso’s island (in spite of the nuances I have made about it) and Odysseus’s permanent interrogation of the ψεῦδος, and it will become apparent that Homer’s *Odysseys* revolves around the *problematic* nature of what is taken for granted, i.e., assumed beforehand in various ways.

And yet, over the past four hundred years, Homer’s Sirens haven been primarily represented as eminently seductive creatures, following more or less closely the seductive-Eve

⁷³ Bacchylides, 3.88–92: “man is not allowed to escape / the old age and to recover the plentiful youth. / Yet excellence gleams not less / when mortals’ bodies do: / it is nourished by the Muse” (“ἀνδρὶ δ’ οὐ θέμις, πολὺν π[αρ]θέντα / γῆρας, θάλειαν αὐτίς ἀγκομίσσαι / ἦβαν. ἀρετᾶ[ς] γε μ[ὲν] οὐ μινύθει / βροτῶν ἅμα σ[ώμα]τι φέγγος, ἀλλὰ / Μοῦσά νιν τρ[έφει]”).

⁷⁴ Cf. Diano, *Forma ed evento*, 60; Redfield, *Nature and Culture in the Iliad*, 30–9. The view that what the Sirens offer Odysseus is “knowledge” in the sense of information goes back to Cicero’s comments on the *Odyssey* in *De finibus* 5.18, whereas Dante’s portrayal of the *Odyssey* as a quest for “knowledge” (on which see *Divina Commedia*, “*Inferno*,” 26.97–8; “*Paradiso*,” 26.115–17) is both dependent on Cicero and the transposition of a Biblical motif (namely, the legitimacy of human knowledge and its discrimination from the disobedience of God’s will). It is, however, not historical knowledge (as we conceive of it today) but the “comely knowledge” (εἰδοί/εἶδη, sing. εἶδος) of poetry (understood in its Pindric, Hölderlinian, and Rilkean sense) that the Sirens relate and give voice to. They do not communicate data relative to the Trojan war, that is: they have knowledge of the deeds of those who fought in it, whose *aristeia* they sing. The Sirens’ mesmerising voices thus echo that of the Muse(s), and hence, too, that of the “poet” (ἀείδω, which forms with εἰδοί another, if this time tacit, “phonic anagram,” just like σειρῆνες and ἐιρήνη do). Yet, at the same time, the Sirens bring perdition to whoever listens to their voices, for they are neither Muses nor poets, but chthonic creatures (daughters, as per Sophocles’s frag. 861, of Phorcys, a primordial sea god which Hesiod depicts as the offspring of Gaia and Pontus). No one perhaps has captured their dangerous ambivalence – which evokes the everyday experience of the Greek sailors, who knew that rocky shores produce a melodious wind but prove highly dangerous on account of the many shipwrecks they cause – better than Gustave Moreau in his painting *The Poet and the Siren* (1893, available at: <https://wikioo.org/paintings.php?refarticle=7YSCSG&titlepainting=%C2%A0的%20诗人%20和%20%60siren%60&artistname=Gustave%20Moreau>), where, oddly enough, the former appears to be in equal measure vivified and tyrannised by the latter.

prototype.⁷⁵ The most notable exception is Waterhouse's *Ulysses and the Sirens*,⁷⁶ which replicates instead the iconography of a 5th-century-BCE Attic *stamnos* now at The British Museum.⁷⁷

Furthermore, nobody seems to have noticed that, with his permanent questioning of everything, which enables him to forge his ψοχή, Odysseus anticipates Heraclitus's aphorism: "ψυχήs ἐστι λόγος ἑαυτὸν αὐξῶν"⁷⁸ (literally, "the *logos* of the *psyche* increases itself"), which I am tempted to translate thus: "*psyche* = *logos* increasing itself."⁷⁹ For λόγος ("logos") is not only the "speech" (or the "thinking") that "brings (things) together" (λέγειν), and hence something "common" (κοινόν) to all things,⁸⁰ but also the "speech" (or, again, the "thinking") that shows A as A and B as B according to their φύσις,⁸¹ and, therefore too, the "speech" (the "thinking") which shows that A (say, the "day") is A ("day") precisely because it is not B ("night"), and vice versa.⁸² (Thence the well-known dual quality of Heraclitus's λόγος.⁸³)

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What then, we can now ask, is the relevance of Odysseus's *mast* in all this? Allow me to risk a hypothesis. In lieu of being the object, as it was originally conceived by Homer, on which Odysseus has himself lashed so as not fall under the spell of a song which is inopportune only because it comes to soon, Odysseus's *mast* has been transformed – in concurrence with the transformation of Odysseus's himself into the modern Joycean Ulysses – into the symbol of contemporary philosophy's most characteristic feature: the preference for *indetermination* over *being*, i.e., the rejection of any "coincidence" between "identity" and "plenitude," and thereby,

⁷⁵ See, e.g., Gérard de Lairese, *Odysseus and the Sirens* (17th century, available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Lairese,_Gérard_de_-_Odysseus_und_die_Sirenen.jpg); Freidrich Preller the Elder, *Odysseus's Cycle* (1834–6, available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Preller-Odysseus-Zyklus_DSC8867.jpg); William Etty, *The Sirens and Ulysses* (1837, available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/Category:The_Sirens_and_Ulysses_by_William_Etty,_1837); Léon Belly, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1867, available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ulysses_And_The_Sirens_by_Léon_Belly.jpg); Karl von Blaas, *The Sirens and Ulysses* (1882, available at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carl_von_Blaas_-_Ulyssus_and_Sirens_\(1882\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Carl_von_Blaas_-_Ulyssus_and_Sirens_(1882).jpg)); and Herbert James Draper, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (c. 1909, available at: https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Draper_Herbert_James_Ulysses_and_the_Sirens.jpg).

⁷⁶ John William Waterhouse, *Ulysses and the Sirens* (1891, available at: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_William_Waterhouse_-_Ulysses_and_the_Sirens_\(1891\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:John_William_Waterhouse_-_Ulysses_and_the_Sirens_(1891).jpg)).

⁷⁷ With museum no. 1843,1103.31 (available at: https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/G_1843-1103-31).

⁷⁸ Heraclitus, DK B115.

⁷⁹ Cf. Edward Jeremiah's interpretation of Heraclitus's λόγος here as being ψοχή's "own principle" or "*facultas legendi*" (Jeremiah, *The Emergence of Reflexivity in Greek Language and Thought*, 84)

⁸⁰ Heraclitus, DK B2.

⁸¹ Heraclitus DK B1.

⁸² Cf. Manuela Carneiro da Cunha's formula of the extramodern *cogito*: "I am that which I am not is not" (Carneiro da Cunha, *Os mortos e os outros*, 143).

⁸³ In fact chiasmic, as Roy Wagner says apropos frag. DK B62, comparing it to a Möbius strip or a Klein bottle (Wagner, *Coyote Anthropology*, 5). I shall return to it later on.

to put it in epic terms, the rejection and the ejection of any κλέος – a feature whose genealogy and implications I intend to analyse in detail in this book. For, once more, while the Homeric Odysseus, in spite of roaming and suffering, manages to fold his life onto a defined *cum* meaningful figure, contemporary thought oscillates between the view that the figural eludes us and the view that all figures are made of crap.

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