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‘Let Demodocus rest his ringing lyre now!’

A Benjaminian refrain over the eighth book of *The Odyssey*

CARLOS GUTIÉRREZ AND VALENTÍN BENAVIDES

During the banquet hosted by King Alcinous on the island of Phaecia in honour of Odysseus, who has not yet revealed his identity to anyone, the blind poet Demodocus, inspired by the Muse, makes two appearances singing about episodes from the Trojan War. Both times, Alcinous notices that Odysseus tries to hide his tears and stops the recital—the first time being to engage in sport competitions, the second, when the poet on Odysseus’ request sings about the Trojan Horse, leading to a very different showdown, as he continued to hide his identity as well as his tears:

> So from Odysseus’ eyes ran tears of heartbreak now.
> But his weeping went unmarked by all the others;
> only Alcinous, sitting close beside him,
> noticed his guest’s tears,
> heard the groan in the man’s labored breathing
> and said at once to the master mariners around him,
> ‘Hear me, my lords and captains of Phaeacia!
> Let Demodocus rest his ringing lyre now—
> this song he sings can hardly please us all.
> Ever since our meal began and the stirring bard
> launched his song, our guest has never paused
> in his tears and throbbing sorrow.’ (Homer 1996: 208)

After this affective caesura, how could Odysseus get his life in motion again? Only two options remain: keep hiding and avoid the crisis or, conversely, acknowledge that the story sung by the bard is his own story and, following Alcinous’ request, reveal his identity—that is to say: ‘seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger’ (Benjamin 2007a [1969]: 255).[1]

To cut. To fragment. To recompose. Finally, the weeping becomes a revelation, and the revelation, a rebirth—Odysseus is born anew—and such a transfiguration process springs from the very core of a carefully structured network of interruptions. Let us take a closer look at how it works and the consequences that may derive from it.

A blind man who is led by enthusiastic frenzy (*en theos*, literally, in god), performs the truth due to the direct influx of the Muses—the divinity, after all.[2] Following the comments of the ever-insightful Aristotle—for whom both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* were the very paradigm of tragedy—the temptation to equate the fragment of the *Odyssey* to the caesura staged in Sophocles’ *Oedipus Rex* as theorized by Hölderlin is almost inevitable.[3] But, unlike the prophetic scene between Oedipus and Tiresias—fashioned through constant opposition movements—the disruption in the *Odyssey* is based on repetition. The performances of Demodocus—which constitute, in themselves, the nodes of the network of disruptions—recounting scenes from Odysseus’ life are interrupted by the interpolation of the above-quoted fragment, which is reiterated twice. What potentialities does this kind of *ritornello* unfold?[4]

It is precisely the performances of the blind bard, and the different reactions they elicit, that we must examine in depth to fully understand the significance of the interruption. The two songs recounting episodes from the Trojan War, as well as a mythological theme song whose main characters are Hephaestus, Aphrodite and Ares, act as a mechanism of affective modulation capable of handling at ease the inherent tension of the book and, therefore, of catalysing the transformation of Odysseus—showing him who he really is. Odysseus, accompanied by Alcinous, arrives at the palace of the Phaeacians under the epithet ‘raider of cities’, a sign of a masculine and virile identity characteristic of every hero worthy of that name. But that identity will soon begin to erode due to Demodocus’ first performance: a chant that proclaims the glory of men through the struggle between Achilles and Ulysses. While everyone is having fun listening to the bard, Odysseus breaks down in tears. Why? Alcinous wonders, annoyed: there must be something in the song,

[1] Not surprisingly, Benjamin’s phrase that will serve as a refrain in our article occurs in the middle of a reflection on the labour of the historian. Although it may seem that we are taking the phrase with some freedom, without taking into account the dialectic between the oppressed and the ruling class that underpins Benjamin’s perspective, we hope to demonstrate the value of this point of view in understanding Odysseus’ transformation.

[2] *O theos autos esti o legon* (‘god himself is the speaker’) is the expression that Socrates employed in Plato’s *Ion* when referring to the process of enchantment and the profound unity between Muses, poets and rhapsodes. For two interesting analyses of this dialogue, see Nancy (1990) and Cavarero (2005).

[3] For reasons of brevity, we cannot develop this point here. For an interesting and recent analysis of Hölderlin’s theory, see Billings (2014).

[4] We use the term *ritornello* or refrain in tune with the concept developed by Deleuze and Guattari (1987), especially for its potentiality to fold diverse blocks of space-time and, therefore, for its capacities of territorialization, deterritorialization and reterritorialization.

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perhaps in the bard's own voice, that deeply displeases his guest. Thus comes the first abrupt interruption; the singer must silence his chant immediately. The former reaction of the king, as we have advanced in the opening paragraph, is to distract Odysseus, to alleviate his sorrows through sports games. Alcinous unconsciously provides his guest with the possibility of running away from a personal crisis that is deeper than the king could imagine. But Odysseus has already shown his vulnerability; Demodocus has known how to awaken his trauma, reminding him of his sufferings and of the agony he provoked. The past makes itself present in the most unexpected way, and Odysseus begins 'to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger'.

This carefully designed process that we have called affective modulation continues in the next mise en abyme, in which the bard sings the misadventures of Hephaestus in his relationship with Aphrodite and her lover, Ares. Beauty and war are linked together in the song of Demodocus, who unfolds a narrative about resentment, shame and cleverness within the general framework of adultery. Are not these, to a large extent, the main motifs of the entire *Odyssey*? Isn't cleverness one of the fundamental characteristics of Odysseus, which makes Hephaestus a mythological transcript of our protagonist? Borrowing the expressive phrase of Anne Carson about the role of the chorus within the tragedy, Demodocus seems to act in this case as a lawyer in search of a (mythological) precedent with which to present the entire epic narrative in a few lines.[5] But, once again, the way in which the tale is told and the emotional reactions it causes is as important as what is described: putting it in more recent musical terms, it looks as if this time the bard had decided to compose his new song about suffering and revenge in a major key, modulating from Odysseus' sadness unfolded in the first song to the pleasure and joy of the second one. The infectious laughter of the gods is easily transferred to Phaeacian listeners, including Odysseus. Only Poseidon is not laughing. What lies behind this modulation? To understand this, we believe that we must emphasize the analogy between Hephaestus and Odysseus: if the god of fire and forge embodies properly human vicissitudes, the apparently unsuitable laughter of the gods clearly shows their superiority, their absence of concern for worldly matters. Instead, the pleasure and laughter of the Phaeacians and Odysseus enclose their lack of awareness of their true place in the world… but the mythological past and the actuality of the present are already pregnant with future, and soon the cunning hero will be able 'to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger'.

But this will not be achieved without suffering, so a new modulation is needed. Odysseus himself requests a new song from Demodocus, one that relates the decisive event of the Trojan War: the introduction of the wooden horse into the city and its subsequent destruction. While the bard's performance is on its way, Alcinous realizes that tears and sadness have returned to Odysseus' face: the sorrow of his guest has become even more sensible than it was in the first appearance of the affective shock. Why? The king wonders again. 'Let Demodocus rest his ringing lyre now!' he orders. At this moment, Alcinous decides to ask the question aloud to his guest, forcing Odysseus, in an imperative mode, to face his emotional crisis instead of running away from it. The forceful caesura demands Odysseus—and us who, as silent witnesses of what is happening, become the Benjaminian 'relaxed audience'[6] —who until now had been one more spectator of his own history, to concentrate all his energy on what is happening: it is not a question of passively contemplating, but of being actively moved—not of being distracted, but of being urged to think.

Therefore, the emotion prior to the interruption is not a mere attribute, but the very way in which the situation unfolds. Continuity is constantly broken but, as if it were a film montage, the discontinuity allows the material to move, to modulate into another affective state, to live a new life. But what is the repeated interruption made of? Odysseus buries his face with his hands, trying to hide the tears that soak his cheeks. Alcinous looks at him while he softly sobs and moans. At the very heart of the repetition is precisely a gesture of lament, the emotion crystallized at its very peak. Devised (if we are allowed to be bold) as a close-up, it is

[5] See Carson (2012).

[6] Walter Benjamin developed this concept in 'What is epic theatre?'. See Benjamin (2007b [1969]).

not, however, of merely descriptive interest. It expresses both the unbearable presence of the past and the expectation of something that is going to take place. It is both a symptom of what happened and a warning of what will happen, manifested past and latent future.

Now that we are coming to the end, now that we understand how Book VIII is built on the interruptions caused by Demodocus' singing and the affective intensity unfolded in his songs, the key question remains to be answered: why is Odysseus crying, if he is listening to the story of his victory? What is the significance of Odysseus' lament? At this point, we must remember that the eighth book began by defining Odysseus as a 'raider of cities'. Now, the manly, fiercely and astute hero is described as a woman weeping for her dead husband:

> great Odysseus melted into tears,
> running down from his eyes to wet his cheeks…
> as a woman weeps, her arms flung round her darling husband,
> a man who fell in battle, fighting for town and townsmen,
> trying to beat the day of doom from home and children.
> Seeing the man go down, dying, gasping for breath,
> she clings for dear life, screams and shrills—
> but the victors, just behind her,
> digging spear-butts into her back and shoulders,
> drag her off in bondage, yoked to hard labor, pain,
> and the most heartbreaking torment wastes her cheeks. (Homer 1996: 208)

The process has taken Odysseus (and us) through the songs of the blind bard, from the memory of his agony in the first song, to the feeling of lightness and carelessness of the gods when it comes to worldly subjects. If we carefully follow the path traced by Demodocus—who embodies the divinity, and whose task is, let us not forget, to show Odysseus who he really is—we cannot think that Odysseus is crying again simply because of an individual memory of the previous suffering, as in the first song. The effort and suffering are mixed here with the supremacy and lightness of the deities: Odysseus realizes that he has been nothing more than an instrument in the hands of forces that transcend him. If we look, for a moment, at the beginning of the third song, we will easily notice a brilliant device used by Demodocus: the song begins with the wooden horse already inside the dominions of the city. However, the bard continues his chant with the Trojans arguing about what they are going to do with the horse. The sequence is temporarily dislocated, which brilliantly expresses that even if the Trojans thought they might have some kind of control over their future, the decision had long been taken: the destiny of the city of Troy is to be destroyed. 'Tell me', finally says Alcinous, 'why do you weep and grieve so sorely when you hear the fate of the Argives, hear the fall of Troy? That is the gods' work, spinning threads of death through the lives of mortal men' (Homer 1996: 209–10). As the Trojans, Odysseus realizes that even his own individual excellence (*aristeia*) is a product of powers not his own, of forces that surpass him. The victorious hero is also, in a way, a victim. Finally, we fully understand the sense of the phrase 'to seize hold of a memory as it flashes up at the moment of danger'.

The revelation of who he really is means, for Odysseus, a transfiguration: Ulysses discovers a new relation with himself, with the world and with his own past in a process we can describe as sympathetic (*sym pathé*, that is to say, feel with, a shared passion), a concept that describes the profound bond between diverse entities, whether human or non-human, physical or metaphysical—we have seen it as an emotional bond between Alcinous and Odysseus, with victims and other human beings, but also acting as a connection between human beings, songs, objects and deities.[7] As the Greek tragedy, the Book VIII of the *Odyssey* shows us the inherent conflicts implicated in being human—what it means to be human, what it means to be embedded in a world of human and non-human powers, the difficulties in negotiating our individual agency within such a world. The fragment deals with suffering, but also with the mysteries of our capacity to affect the world and our extraordinary openness to forces that lead us to act in ways that are alien to us. It allows us to think interruptions not only positively, but as a fundamental subject: in Book VIII, the pain that causes the interruptions is presented as an opportunity to build its sense in creative and thoughtful ways. Even if that work of providing meaning remains (how could it be otherwise!)

[7] The concept of sympathy is undergoing a very interesting revision in recent times. In our view, three of the most interesting examples from different disciplines are in Spuybroek (2011), Bennett (2016) and Holmes (2019).

always short, always letting a trace of that grief to be inexplicable, it allows us to deal with it fundamentally through self-knowledge.

In this sense, another important thought arises: Odysseus would not have achieved such a rebirth, such a knowledge of himself, if he had not been able to rub his eyes at the images unfolded by Demodocus.[8] Even the insightful Oedipus failed to recognize himself and assume the truth revealed by Tiresias. If images no longer surprise us, it they do not cause powerful interruptions, our truths will remain in an eternal chiaroscuro; we become static, predictable, easily controlled beings. In these times of saturation, quickness and consequent trivialization, we need, more than ever, powerful images that contain in themselves the potential to stimulate new ways of looking, gestures that compromise both our memory and our future. It does not seem like a trivial detail to us that, at the beginning of Book 9, Ulysses is not defined as a hero or a victim, but as 'the great teller of tales'. Now, the hero becomes a poet, and it is not surprising: if the key to change ourselves is to reform our imaginary, any revolution worth its salt, individual or collective, must be poetic at its very core. 'Operating by putting into crisis… but always in such a way that story-telling is itself memory, and memory is invention of a people' (Deleuze 2005: 223). The *Odyssey* speaks to us with the same force and validity as ever. Perhaps, as for Odysseus, the secrets of our future lie in our past.

[8] Once again, the expression to 'rub his eyes' in front of the images is a direct influence of Walter Benjamin (1999: 464).

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