
Nostos

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“Death is an old joke, but it comes fresh to each of us.”

—Ivan Turgenev, *Fathers and Sons*

IN THE FINAL month of his life, his body increasingly debilitated by coronary artery disease and his formerly razor-sharp mind mildly compromised by a degenerative neurological condition, my 85-year-old father reread Homer’s *Odyssey*. The immediate occasion was the publication, several years ago, of a highly acclaimed new translation by Emily Wilson, a translation I was teaching for the first time, in lieu of my long-treasured Richmond Lattimore, in an undergraduate course that began in early January. My father and I never explicitly decided that he would read the poem alongside my teaching of it. We certainly did not plan on the fact that our last conversation, two days before he died, would revolve around the final book of the poem. And I did not expect that Homer’s *Odyssey* would provide my father with his own κατάβασις, a fantastical journey into life after death, or with his own νόστος, or homecoming, in the final days of his life. But that is exactly what happened.

I grew up in a family in which conversation often revolved around books, but those conversations were usually not terribly sophisticated. A recommendation for an especially gripping mystery novel, a chat about a Wharton or Thackeray novel that we’d all read far too long ago to

remember in any detail, or, as was increasingly the case in the last few years of my father's life, a tedious monologue, delivered by him, about a long, dense work of World War II history. It was unusual for my father to read poems, even those with the boyish adventure appeal of his favorite Dumas and Hugo novels, and he often preferred to consume works of classic fiction through film. But my father understood that certain books were made to accompany us on our life journey, to be picked up once again every few decades to see what new wisdom they might yield.

My father read *The Odyssey* as a poem about death. He also read it as a poem starring himself: devoted father, loving if not also mildly flirtatious husband, lawyerly wordsmith, architect of ingenious jokes and tricks. Most readers insert themselves, one way or another, into the works of fiction they read, seeking out those characters whose temperaments and predicaments resemble their own. Despite my advanced scholarly training and thirty years of experience as a literary historian, all of which were calculated to extinguish in me the recreational urge to read for self-centered pleasure, I am no different.

Semester after semester, I bring my evolving, and hopefully maturing, mind back to the same works, curious to see what has changed in the books I teach as a way of gauging what has changed in me, or in the world around me. My colleagues often comment to each other in hushed tones how teaching Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* changed after the 2016 presidential election, and whole volumes of pedagogical essays are devoted to how to teach this or that book in the age of Covid, or in the age of #Metoo. Yet few works of literature are as kaleidoscopic as Homer's

Odyssey, and few possess to the same degree that quality which the ancient Greeks call ποικίλος: variegated, dappling, manifold.

My career as a literary historian has been marked by tedious debates over which books, if any, merit the designation of a classic. The answer is obvious: a classic is ποικίλος, a book that changes with you, and changes in revelatory ways. A classic grows old with you, while also growing young again with each new generation of readers. The best books are shape-shifters, and the act of rereading them a kind of shamanism.

The Odyssey now presented itself to my father as a poem about his own final voyage: the passage from life to death, and from death to whatever may or may not lie beyond it. I became his guide—his Tiresias—answering his questions about the poem during our twice-weekly phone calls while also tracing his journey through the poem as one marked by both his and my growing awareness of his imminent death.

“So, Odysseus chooses to go home to Penelope rather than stay forever with Calypso?,” my father asked during one of our earliest conversations. “Right. He chooses mortality, and an aging wife, over an eternally young and beautiful goddess.” “It would be nice to be young forever,” my father commented, “but it wouldn’t be nice to live forever. All your friends would die, and there would be no one left.” I wondered whether this comment stemmed from the recent loss of several very dear friends, one his trusted former physician, and the other a friend since the 1960s whose descent into dementia my father had witnessed with sorrow and concern. “And what would I do

with a young wife at my age?," my father chuckled. "It is better to grow old together." He understood uncannily well, I thought, the nature of the marital bond between Odysseus and Penelope, a couple well-matched in intellect—sharing in *ὁμοφροσύνη*, or likemindedness—as Homer calls them, but also a couple bonded through their shared mortality.

Jews are, in my experience, extremely cagy about the afterlife. My father was no exception, a highly rational man with strong secular leanings whose knowledge of his faith was limited and whose skeptical distaste for all dogmatic religion was no secret to those who knew him well. Yet one could, on occasion, still find the man pursuing his reason to what the seventeenth-century English writer Thomas Browne, in *Religio Medici*, calls an "*o altitudo*," often "satisfying [him]self in a mystery" at the Hayden Planetarium, marveling at the vastness and the complexity of the cosmos. The most rational minds are also, oddly enough, sometimes the minds most capable of mystical contemplation. I am no stranger to this paradox, a long-standing atheist who found myself, eight years ago, in the parish office of a Franciscan priest in Durham, North Carolina, discussing whether conversion was possible for someone who had some serious reservations about the Catholic doctrine of the resurrection of the flesh. "You do not need to believe it," my priest told me, "you only need to believe in the possibility of it. You need to believe that it would be nice."

My father did not believe in an afterlife, but he did believe that an afterlife would be nice. "I do not understand the end of Tiresias's prophecy," my father told me when we arrived

at Book 11, Odysseus's descent to the underworld. There, Odysseus meets with the blind, transexual prophet who foretells his journey home, albeit in riddling and ambiguous terms: "when you are wearied out with rich old age," Tiresias predicts, "you will come where men have lived / with meat unsalted, never known the sea," and these men will mistake Odysseus's oar for a winnowing fan. You will plant your oar in the ground, Tiresias tells Odysseus, you will make a sacrifice to Poseidon, and finally you will die "a seaborne death / soft as this hand of mist."

"But Odysseus does not die at the end of the poem," my father objected, wondering how to make sense of a prophecy that does not, at least in the literal sense, come true within the confines of *The Odyssey*. "No, but Tiresias's prophecy is filled with predictions that either may or may not come true." "Is it a joke?" my father asked. "Perhaps," I answered. "It is hard to imagine anywhere in ancient Greece where people would not recognize an oar, or where they had no salt. And *The Odyssey* is full of prophecies that either do not mean what they appear to mean, or do not mean anything at all."

Our conversation about Tiresias is full of riddling double meanings, both revealing and concealing my father's growing readiness for death while also letting slip in the most delicate of ways his yearning to know exactly when and how the hand of mist might arrive for him. "Then it's a joke." My father was reading Tiresias's prophecy as a parable about death—about death as a joke with a punchline at once inevitable and unpredictable. *Maybe the essence of the joke that is death is that we know that the joke will end, but we cannot anticipate how it will end.* My

mind immediately raced to the strange ancient legends about how Homer died of laughter at hearing a riddle—or, in an alternate version of the story, died because he could not solve a riddle about lice, one told to him by some young boys who were fishing (the riddle itself is both terrible and brilliant, in all the ways most ancient jokes are). What if these stories about Homer dying of laughter arose because ancient readers understood *The Odyssey* as a poem reverberating with the anxious humor that attends upon our uncertainty about death? Was *The Odyssey* a poem that shows us how to wield jokes and tricks as weapons against death?

This was, I thought to myself, a very Jewish way to read Homer's *Odyssey*.

As I taught *The Odyssey* last winter, I was seeing death everywhere in the poem: in the grim massacre of the suitors, in the plaintive shade of Elpenor, unburied and unwept, in the death of poor Argos the dog, a scene so heart-rending that I often must pass over it in silence during class, like Virgil's Daedalus leaving the death of his son Icarus off the carved walls of the temple of Cumae. I was seeing Odysseus, the consummate trickster, as a figure eager to outwit death—to “baffle” and evade it—until he comes home and finally begins to make peace with the inexorable truth. “Death will drift upon me,” Odysseus tells Penelope, relating to her the prophecy recounted to him by Tiresias in the underworld:

... from seaward, mild as air, mild as your hand,
in my well-tended weariness of age,
contented folk around me on our island.
He said all this must come.

(*Od.* 23.285–88; Fitzgerald, trans.)

Around a week before my father died, I dreamed that he died. I am no prophet, but augury was, for the ancient Greeks, a science rooted in observation of the natural world, and my premonitions were likewise anchored in natural fact: body growing frailer, gait less confident, breathing more labored. I did not see my father die in my dream, just as my mother did not see him die in life. She was out grocery shopping. Instead, I saw before me a series of images, memories preserved like so many faded snapshots in an old album. Practical jokes he played on his younger brother, adventures at summer camp, the orange glimmer of a warm Spanish evening on his honeymoon, a favorite brown velvet swivel chair where he used to tickle me and try fruitlessly to teach me the rules of NFL football. "These are yours now," a voice told me in the dream. "They are yours to keep."

I awoke to a profound sense of calm. He was ready, and so now was I. The dream was a gift, a presentiment that my intuition had bestowed upon my waking self, and it was a Homeric gift. Like Odysseus, I was being given the chance to "meet death twice," to pass through its doorway and then return so as to better prepare for the next visit—that is, for my father's actual death but also, perhaps, for my own. The day after my dream, I was teaching Book 19 of *The Odyssey*, in which Penelope has a dream that presages Odysseus's return to Ithaca—a return which of course has already taken place, since her husband is right in front of her, disguised. Yet she dismisses her dream as "mere confusion, / a cobweb of no consequence at all." Circumspect Penelope, so admirable in her skepticism, cannot brook the idea that her dream is true. But Odysseus protests, "there

is no way of twisting this dream to give it some other meaning.” That conversation swirled in my mind as I pondered whether the vision I had seen the previous dawn had passed through the gate of horn or of ivory. Both: my dream was a cobweb, but I also knew it would come true.

“Telemachus and Odysseus are very close,” my father observed, delighting in the scene where father and son defeat the suitors after reuniting with each other. “Yes, it’s odd how close they are given that Odysseus wasn’t around for Telemachus’s entire childhood.” When I returned home a few days after my father’s death, my mother handed me some cards that I had written to my father as a child. One teasingly chastised him for being “crazy,” going to his office on the subway during a huge snowstorm during the winter of 1977. The other, probably written for some school project that asked us to recount an average day in the life of our family, described him as coming home, complaining about his secretary over dinner, and then proceeding to work until 11pm. It was true: he was completely encased in his work, yellow legal pad always in front of him, new frustrations always to air about his firm, an undercurrent of anxiety, sometimes followed by elation, as each new case reached trial. But he was also always present, as if our household had an Athena who conjured up the shade of an absent father. Video games on an Atari console, two wicker chairs pulled close to a 15-inch TV set. Saturday morning errands on Broadway, often stopping at a desolate, basement nut shop run by Afghani immigrants for whom my father developed a mysterious sympathy. Sledding on the hill in Riverside Park that we dubbed the “dreaded north slope.”

"I love the stringing of the bow," my father commented. I bit my tongue, realizing that he would probably not be all that interested in what I had to say about the extraordinary simile comparing Odysseus's bow to a lyre: "he plucked the string that sang sweetly to his touch with the sound of a swallow's note." To my father, the scene celebrated an old man's enduring dignity and potency. "My strength is undiminished," says Odysseus as he strings the bow, proof of a virility unharmed by age. A year before this conversation, my father still thought he might ski again. A few months earlier, he entertained the idea of swimming at a local pool, though I do not think he ever did. A few days before his death, he had emailed a friend about a lovely day they had once spent in Cadaqués, on the Mediterranean coast of Spain. "That was when I could drink and walk," my father wrote, no goddess by his side to infuse strength into his weakened muscles or rejuvenate his weather-beaten skin.

"I had hoped to finish *Odysseus* before our trip was over," said my father at the beginning of our final conversation with each other, "and I did." His slip of the title was a bit odd. Odder still was his reference to a trip, since there had been no vacations for my parents, though they had once been avid travelers, since a cruise to Alaska in the summer of 2019. I did not know until a week later that my father spent the last few days of his life believing that he was on a road trip. Was it a teenage adventure in a 1953 Buick, that delicious first taste of adult freedom which came with a driver's license and a girl in the passenger seat wearing a tight sweater? A journey to the Egyptian Pyramids, or to the Forum in Rome, the sorts of destinations that later thrilled my father as a lover of antiquity, marveling at

what endures of the colossal wrecks of the past? Or, was it an Odyssean journey that marked the beginning of his passage to another world? Did he hear the Sirens, or see the saffron-threaded dawn?

“He saves his father for last,” my father observed about the final recognition scene of the poem, when Odysseus at long last reveals himself to his father Laertes, but only after concocting yet another fiction, this time claiming to be Eperitus, a man who hosted Odysseus in his fictional homeland. This scene has always been an uncomfortable one for me to teach. Instead of revealing his identity, clasping his father with kisses and telling him “the whole story” of his return home, Odysseus “tests” his aged and unkempt father, “making trial of him with questions,” at least until Laertes breaks down at hearing news of his long-lost son, and Odysseus discards his disguise. “I have things to tell you, and there is little time,” Odysseus then urges his father. They need to hurry, to gather together the Ithacans for their final battle. It was the wrong time for disguise, for trickery, for delay—for all the strategies Odysseus deploys as a means of survival in a harsh world, as a means of outwitting death. When Odysseus and Laertes meet, trickery tries to outwit death—and fails.

My father was a practical joker whose jokes sometimes went a bit too far. He once convinced the wife of his best friend that her husband was having an affair—a joke he abruptly aborted when it began to go terribly wrong. Another time, he expertly forged a recall notice for a telescope purchased by that same friend, who then spent hours disassembling the instrument and packing it up in a furious haze, anxious that his eyes might have been

damaged by a defective lens. What were these jokes? A quest for loopholes in the inescapable law of mortality? A genius for intricacy, like the elaborate lock and the olive tree bed crafted by Homer's Odysseus? A guarantor of eternal fame? "I am Steven, man of many devices, blinder of Polyphemus, winner of many lawsuits?"

Reading *The Odyssey* together, my father and I prepared in tandem for his death without ever discussing it. "I have things to tell you, and there is little time." The poem opened a portal for us to have that conversation in another dimension, to travel to the Cimmerian limits of the world, take a peek over the edge, and return. This isn't to say that there was no *ars moriendi* in the weeks and months before his death. We had one very frank conversation about family finances; we had several hugs that lingered more than usual. And my father bestowed upon me a bizarre story I had never yet heard, and which he had presumably been saving for a long time, about how he decided my mother was the woman he wanted to marry after she bit him on the arm during an argument, while they were driving home from Pennsylvania.

Characters in *The Odyssey* often promise to tell "the whole truth"—and then tell a lie. My father and I read *The Odyssey* to unravel a fictional version of the truth, a fiction that brought us as close to the actual truth as we dared to get, a fiction that allowed us to rehearse for death. This is what books do, at least the best books, those that bend the light of one's experience like a prism.