

BOOK REVIEW

Travel and home in Homer's Odyssey and contemporary literature: critical encounters and nostalgic returns. By CAROL DOUGHERTY. Classical Presences. Oxford, UK and New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2019. Pp. 175. Hardback, \$90.00. ISBN: 978-0-19-881401-6.

You can't step into the same river twice, and you can never return to the same home you left. When you (a reader, a teacher) come back to the *Odyssey* after some time, it is not the same epic it was because you are not the same you. Something you've read, or watched, or lived through in the meantime sparks a new way of reading this old, familiar text. If you're like me (and, if you're reading this, you probably are) you think about the *Odyssey* all the time. I'm not a Homerist, but the *Odyssey* is under my skin. I bring it with me into everything I read or write, every class discussion or casual conversation; in turn, every time I come back to the *Odyssey*, I bring back to it everything I've experienced since our last encounter.

Carol Dougherty is well known for her sophisticated yet accessible theoretical readings of Homer and archaic poetry. What a delight, when encountering her new monograph *Travel and Home in Homer's Odyssey and Contemporary Literature*, to realize that, of course, famous classicists also walk around with the *Odyssey* under their skin. *Travel and Home*, published through the Classical Presences series, is a very new sort of book. As much a study of the influence of Homer on contemporary literature as of the influence of contemporary literature on Homer, this book models a dynamic sort of reception using improvisation and nostalgia as its interpretive framework. This approach is appealingly subjective, as reading truly is a personal experience: the occasional presence of such phrases as "we might compare" (101 n.12) or "this calls to mind" (103, n.18) reminds us that we have been graciously invited to accompany Dougherty, a very smart but still relatable reader, on her own personal journey through the *Odyssey* and 20th and 21st-century fiction.

The book's Introduction explains the improvisational approach by framing it through Odysseus' own improvisations, his process of finding himself by testing

different, polytropic, versions of himself over the course of the poem, and through the improvisational nature of epic performance – like Odysseus, the bard changes his narrative on each occasion to suit the performative time and place.

Following this Introduction, each of the book's chapters focuses on a different novel: Michael Ondaatje's *The English Patient* (1994), Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980), Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006), Rebecca West's *The Return of the Soldier* (1918) and Toni Morrison's *Home* (2012). These five novels are thematically arranged in two groups, the first three exploring the opposition between staying and leaving and the last two focusing on the role of nostalgia in reestablishing a returning soldier's identity following the traumas of war.

Each chapter dances between the *Odyssey* and the novel under discussion, offering deep and rich readings of both. The section on *The English Patient*, a novel of slowly revealed pasts, found identities and reinvented homes, provides an elegant model for the subsequent chapters as well as a kind of thesis statement on the relationship between reading and home: "Texts like the *Odyssey* and *The English Patient* not only take us to new places, fashioning worlds beyond our imagination, but they create new homes for us to inhabit there, even if just for a while, even if we soon long to leave them and return home again" (43).

The second and third chapters destabilize the gendered binary between home and travel. In *Housekeeping*, the protagonists – the transient Sylvie and her nieces Ruth and Lucille – wrestle with the question of whether "the essence of domesticity" is found in the house, or with those who occupy it (62). In the end, Lucille remains at home while Ruth and Sylvie set off to make a home on the road. In *The Road*, an unnamed father and son travel a bleak, apocalyptic landscape (there are cannibals), finding shelter and comfort where and how they can. While these chapters contain many thought-provoking readings, I was both unconvinced that McCarthy's novel has a more hopeful conclusion than Robinson's and unsure how *The Road* depicts "a world in which traditional houses and the women who keep them have been shown to be insufficient" (140). Surely the apocalypse wasn't the fault of the women who keep traditional houses?

The fourth and fifth chapters examine the portrayal of amnesiac soldiers in novels by Rebecca West and Toni Morrison. These chapters introduce the idea of nostalgia as a mechanism of either avoidance or coping. Chris Baldry, the shell-shocked protagonist of *The Return of the Soldier*, has forgotten the last fifteen years of his life, including his wife, and fixates on an idyllic moment from his youth; he regains his memory only to be redeployed – like Odysseus, ultimately unable to

remain. *Home's* hero, a Korean War veteran named Frank Money, returns to his hometown of Lotus, Georgia, to nurse his sister to health. Morrison's novel is the most explicitly engaged with Homeric epic, but the inverted valence of the Lotus Eaters – amnesia as making room for new, better memories – constitutes a “tilting” of Odysseus' journey (137). By focusing on the processes of healing and re-incorporation into the community that are absent from the *Odyssey*, *Home* suggests that it is possible to go home again.

In the book's Conclusion, Dougherty explores the idea of nostalgia as an interpretive framework, describing “the experience of returning to the ancient epic as both an expression of absence and presence, memory and amnesia, continuity and engagement” (151). Reading the *Odyssey* alongside modern fiction whose narratives play out like permutations of the ancient epic's plot allows us as modern readers to fill in absences – in particular, the lack of subjectivity from Homer's female characters. It reminds us to remember the echoes of war trauma that roar just beneath the surface of the *Odyssey*. It instills a sense of continuity not only with others but also with our past selves as readers of the *Odyssey*, always different, but somehow still the same.

HILARY J. C. LEHMANN

Knox College, hklehmann@knox.edu