

**Against Cosmopolitanism:  
Resisting the Sirens' Song \***

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“I love a hundred times better the poor Ithaca of Ulysses,  
than a city shining through so odious a magnificence.  
Happy the men who content themselves with the pleasures  
that cost neither crime nor ruin!

--Fenelon, *Lettre sur les occupations de l'Académie Française*

We are not presented with Odysseus' choice on the island of Ogygia: immortality is not an option for those of us not becalmed on enchanted islands populated by divinities. Yet, how we view such an offer, how we finally regard the relative attractions or disadvantages of such a possibility, whether we praise or question Odysseus' choice, may have implications beyond the sheer brute fact that immortality is not our lot. For, it seems that Odysseus' choice reflects a whole range of commitments regarding human limits, limits most obviously on life itself, but also limits that human affections demand, and limits on the range of those affections themselves, on human designs, on ambitions, on optimism, limits on the extent to which mankind can or should seek to conquer nature. The embrace of death represents an acceptance of an array of limiting features to human existence, and the admission that we would be incapable of making, or unwilling to

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make, Odysseus' choice, might give us pause as to what other implications that stance would entail.<sup>1</sup>

To ask whether the *Odyssey* can shed light on contemporary debates about “cosmopolitanism” versus its opposite – defined by cosmopolitans as “nationalism,” but by its supporters more positively perhaps as “communitarianism” or “particularism” – would appear to engage in an anachronistic and perhaps unjustified inquiry. The very concept of “*kosmou politēs*” – “citizen of the world,” the phrase coined by Diogenes the Cynic in the fourth-century B.C. – would have been incomprehensible within the more limited epic *ethos*. Some, even most, of the most respected Homeric scholars view the epic worldview as one defined solely by *poleis*, and the hero's identification solely with a particular place and a particular people. Inasmuch as “cosmopolitanism” implies a *choice* that can be made between competing identities of where and to whom one belongs and should commit one's efforts toward justice, many Homeric scholars disallow in the first instance that such a “choice” was available to Homeric man.<sup>2</sup>

However, some of the defining features of what came to be known as “cosmopolitanism” existed certainly before the phrase itself was coined, and, arguably, can be found in certain guises within the Homeric texts as well.<sup>3</sup> According to one definition, “cosmopolitanism” represents the attempt “to transcend chauvinistic national loyalties or parochial prejudices,” and, to exhibit “a familiarity with, or appreciation of many parts and peoples of the world...”<sup>4</sup> In the case of Odysseus, the latter part of the definition – a “familiarity with,” even an “appreciation of,” many parts of the world certainly applies (witness his admiration for the polity of the Phaiakians, for example). However, it is on one aspect of the former part of the definition, especially regarding the

idea of “transcending” one’s parochial knowledge with the aspiration of apprehending a greater whole of humanity, or beyond, that I would like to examine in the following pages.

If the possibility of “choice” is often denied the Homeric hero, the prospect of “transcendence” is even more dubious. Even a sympathetic thinker such as Alasdair MacIntyre does not credit the Homeric heroes with the ability even to contemplate, much less achieve a standpoint of objectivity achieved through transcending one’s limited worldview. For MacIntyre,

the self of the heroic age lacks precisely that characteristic which ... some modern moral philosophers take to be an essential characteristic of human self-hood: the capacity to detach oneself from any particular standpoint or point of view, to step backwards, as it were, and view and judge that standpoint or point of view from the outside. In heroic society there is no "outside" except that of a stranger. A man who tried to withdraw himself from his given position in heroic society would be engaged in the enterprise of trying to make himself disappear.<sup>5</sup>

MacIntyre’s conclusion about the impossibility of achieving a standpoint of pure objectivity – either for ancients or moderns alike – attracts and persuades as he proceeds in his historical investigation. However, in considering Homer’s heroes as incapable of *achieving* such removal from society at large, or objectivity, he similarly denies the *temptation* for transcendence. I will suggest that this temptation is no less powerful – and, no less dangerous – for the Homeric hero as it continues to be for modern man.

In fact, Odysseus is explicitly offered such "detached" knowledge of the world, that clear unmediated vision only permitted to the gods: it is the knowledge offered by the Sirens. His hunger for this wisdom is manifest: he strains against the self-imposed and twice-fastened bonds that keep him from the Siren's offer:

Come this way, honored Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans,  
and stay your ship, so that you can listen here to our singing;  
for no one else has ever sailed past this place in his black ship  
until he has listened to the honey-sweet voice that issues  
from our lips; then goes on well pleased knowing more than ever  
he did; for we know everything that the Argives and Trojans  
did and suffered in wide Troy through the gods' despite.  
Over all the generous earth we know everything that happens.  
(12.184-191).<sup>6</sup>

Odysseus' *physical* temptation to fling himself off the ship to *know* the Siren's revelation reveals the power of this offer over Odysseus; the rotting corpses of other humans who lay about the water's edge further indicates this power over all humans (12.45-46).<sup>7</sup>

Similarly, reality of the temptation that Calypso's offer of immortality entails should also not be underestimated: at stake is Odysseus' eternal existence, either on the paradisiac island with the beautiful and unaging goddess Calypso, or among the immaterial shades in the cold necropolis, Hades. Within the epic itself we learn of Odysseus' existence on Calypso's island Ogygia at the outset (as related by Athena to Zeus, 1.48-59), and again return to his existence there after the *Telemachia* in Book 5. Yet, chronologically Odysseus' journey to Hades occurs *before* his exile on Ogygia, to be related later to the Phaiacians upon escaping Calypso in Book 11. He decides to refuse Calypso's offer of immortality already having descended to the underworld, and already having learned there his fate both in the near term – regarding his return to Ithaca – and longer term, concerning his mortal fate.

Odysseus's ability to resist these offers of universal knowledge or immortality – both representing a form of “transcendence” that bears some remarkable similarities to cosmopolitanism, or its cousin universalism – yet also remain tempted by them, suggests a stance of “limited transcendence,” a transcendence of which humans are aware and even to which they can aspire, but which finally they must also be wary and which they must reject when it tempts them to total transcendence of what Homer understands to be the human condition.<sup>8</sup> I will suggest below that this form of “limited transcendence” is exemplified in some of the actions and choices of Odysseus, especially those that reveal the simultaneous attractions of the cosmopolitan alternative and the requirements of partiality that bind us to particular places and particular people. These latter requirements, the *Odyssey* finally suggests, keep us fully human and represent the only avenue by which justice can finally be achieved, not through dedication to universal or cosmopolitan knowledge, since this knowledge threatens to attenuate our connections, devotion, and duties to humanity, especially to the humblest and least powerful of our fellow citizens.

### **Contemporary Debates**

The question of whether particularity is to be preferred to universality is played out in many different debates in contemporary political philosophy. Of course, the issue is topical given the dimensions of the “culture wars” and especially recent responses to the multicultural challenge in the wake of the end of the Cold War. Primarily in the face of the devolving nationalisms of the post-Soviet era following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989, thinkers who shared some of the same political aspirations of multicultural

critics nevertheless became uncomfortable with disconcerting similarities between the renewed politics of ethnic and national strife and arguments about ethnic and racial identity forwarded by colleagues in the academy.<sup>9</sup> A renewed fascination with the origins of liberalism during the Enlightenment, of the promise of equal status and equal rights, of universal reason, of the overcoming of religious superstition, and of the possibility of cosmopolitan citizenship found new support among a wide range of scholars whose initial impetus was a rejection of multiculturalism's critiques linked to a desire to retain the aspirations of the traditional Left.

Echoing older laments that the true universalism of the Enlightenment has been betrayed, such as that of Julien Benda in *The Betrayal of the Intellectuals* (*La Trahison des Clercs*, 1927), are recent authors ranging from sociologist Todd Gitlin, to the historian David Hollinger, to the philosopher Martha Nussbaum. In *The Twilight of Common Dreams*, Gitlin for one regrets the embrace by the Left of a form of particularism that betrayed the older Enlightenment ideal of universalism, especially a form of cosmopolitanism which stressed the commonalities of human beings over the differences of ethnicity, gender, race, or nationality. The competing "universalisms" in the wake of the Left's betrayal of Liberalism hold less appeal, and more danger, from Gitlin's perspective: either the universalism prevalent among some on the Right, the "rhetoric of global markets and global freedom" that has about it "something of the old universalist ring"; or, the renewal of an even older universalism than that of the Enlightenment emanating from religious impulses around the world.<sup>10</sup> If the first is worrisome for the false universalism that reduces us primarily to consumers rather than citizens or more fully integrated human beings, the second is equally worrisome less for

its purported attempt to convey a universal message than for its actual practice of excluding “the infidel, the secularist, the modernist blasphemer.”<sup>11</sup> Instead, Gitlin recommends a form of universalism that allows us, on the one hand, to overcome any differences that either religious or “multicultural” divisions may portend, “to agree to limit the severity of their differences – even while pounding the table and claiming the uniqueness of their communities.”<sup>12</sup> Only by limiting the embrace of those identities that only partially define us, and instead focussing on that part of our common human identity that links us, Gitlin contends, can the Left re-engage in a politics that hopes to address true conditions of injustice not only within universities, but throughout the world as well.

Sharing Gitlin’s concerns about multiculturalism’s assertion of an inescapable identity according to either ethnicity, race or gender according is David Hollinger, for whom the very openness of identity that modernity affords leads less to the easy assumption of identity along ethnic or cultural lines than to a situation of “post-ethnicity.” Due especially to shifting identities that would allow, for example, Alex Haley to identify his “roots” as much with his white Irish forebears as with his black African ancestors, as well as with the various heritages that compose America more generally, such as that democratic heritage arising from America’s documentary history of the Declaration of Independence and the Constitution, Hollinger suggests that the more appropriate perspective for twenty-first century is one of “cosmopolitanism,” which he distinguishes from both universalism and pluralism.

In contrast to universalism, which he suggests seeks to find a common ground where multiculturalists would be inclined to find only “difference,” cosmopolitans by contrast do not seek either to identify all people as fundamentally distinct or similar, but

rather are receptive to “recognition, acceptance, and eager exploration of diversity.”<sup>13</sup>

Cosmopolitans are “diversity-appreciating” in outlook, and view such diversity as a simple “fact”; universalists, by contrast, actively seek to create unity despite existing diversity, and ultimately must view such diversity more as a “problem” than a simple fact. On the other hand, cosmopolitans differ from “pluralists” to the extent that pluralism tends to view human beings first as members of groups rather than as individualists; cosmopolitans, by contrast, view people primarily as individuals for whom group identity is potentially shifting and evolving. Thus, according to Hollinger, pluralists grant privilege especially to already-established groups, assuming the existing landscape of human relations to be the norm; cosmopolitans, alternatively, are “willing to put the future of every culture at risk through the sympathetic but critical scrutiny of other cultures.”<sup>14</sup>

While Hollinger’s formulation is compelling, to an extent he attempts to draw too fine a distinction between cosmopolitans and universalists, on the one hand, and pluralists on the other. While he is intent on creating an ideal “type” of cosmopolitan, there is no denying that a cosmopolitan, however defined, continues to place a priority on the universal over the particular (or else cosmopolitan would cease to mean anything), even if the cosmopolitan continues to appreciate diversity in the world. Indeed, there is less tension between “cosmopolitan” and “universalist” as Hollinger defines them than he suggests, especially considering the distinction Hollinger draws between the cosmopolitan and the “pluralist.” Regarding the pluralist, the cosmopolitan concludes that group affiliation *can* be a problem, hence drawing on the critical perspective of what Hollinger describes as “universalist”; yet equally so, regarding the universalist, the

cosmopolitan concludes that plurality must have a place. In effect, the “cosmopolitan” as described by Hollinger shifts between the two poles, evoking a more universalist stance in response to pluralism and a pluralist stance in response to universalism. However, Hollinger’s version of cosmopolitanism does not reside precisely between the two poles, but resembles more closely what he regards as its universalist orientation, inasmuch as group or patriotic identity, whether our own or someone else’s, is something to be regarded as wholly unnatural, changeable, even finally discardable. While a cosmopolitan by Hollinger’s lights can *appreciate* difference, even acknowledge that it is ineradicable at some level, he also maintains that such differences can always be transcended by an act of volition or will, by *choice*. Such is at base the fundamental assumption of liberal cosmopolitanism, whether defined as “universalist” or not.

This aspect is seen most clearly in the work of the preeminent proponent of cosmopolitanism during this period, Martha Nussbaum. Based on arguments she made in a *Boston Review* article in 1994 entitled “Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism,” later collected with various replies in the 1996 collection *For Love of Country*, and recently reiterated in her 1997 book on liberal education, *Cultivating Humanity*, Nussbaum has been in the forefront of reasserting the Stoic and Enlightenment ideal of cosmopolitanism.<sup>15</sup> Nussbaum finds particularly appealing the stance of Diogenes, who declared himself to be “a citizen of the world.”<sup>16</sup> The import of this phrase, for Nussbaum, is not to *extirpate* our citizenship of any particular place, but, as she puts it, to reveal that our more “fundamental” and “primary” allegiance is with the human race, not any particular group thereof, from which we derive generalizable moral obligations and a universal conception of justice.<sup>17</sup>

While Nussbaum stresses that the Stoics recognized our dual identities – that identity deriving from “the local community of our birth,” the other from “the community of human argument and aspiration” – it is this latter community to which we owe our primary allegiance, since, she suggests, only this latter allows us to overcome the limitations of perspective and prejudice that the former forces upon us.<sup>18</sup> Nussbaum recognizes that the latter community of the *cosmos* is the more *volitional* of the two: whereas our birth community is an “accident,” an arbitrary place where any human being might have been born but only particular humans *happen* to occupy, the latter condition of universal humanity is something that we can choose to theorize and accept. At the same time, even Nussbaum must acknowledge that the very fact of our common humanity is at some level arbitrary; after all, we did not choose to be human any more than we chose to be born in any particular place. Thus, in a footnote she writes that

I am surprised that none of my critics have asked why I focus on the moral claim of the human species, and they appear to neglect the claims of other forms of life. From this direction one could imagine a serious challenge to my position, one that I have not yet answered.<sup>19</sup>

The challenge she imagines undoubtedly would force her to articulate either an inherent dignity solely inhering in the human creature, or to extend her analysis to include sentient and perhaps even all living creatures. In any event, most “fundamental” to Nussbaum’s recommendation is the insistence that arbitrariness be lifted from our identities, that we seek rather the fundamental sameness that attends the human or sentient condition – what she insists is our shared human dignity – regardless of any underlying distinction that may at first seem to separate us.<sup>20</sup> We can *choose* between our identities: that one to

which we should afford priority is the more universal, as it removes contingency and accident which for Nussbaum almost always prevent apprehension of justice and morality.<sup>21</sup>

Like Gitlin, she resists multiculturalism's appeals to particularity as preeminent over the false claims of reason and enlightenment: Nussbaum favorably cites, in addition to the Stoics, the philosophy of that arch-rationalist and cosmopolitan, Immanuel Kant.<sup>22</sup> However, like Hollinger she also resists calling for a kind of "universalism" that eliminates difference: while occasionally she speaks as if we should concentrate only on underlying similarities of human beings – arguing at some points that "we should recognize humanity – and its fundamental ingredients, reason and moral capacity – wherever it occurs, and give that community of humanity our first allegiance" – at others she insists that a cosmopolitan education should concentrate on exploring the uniqueness of other cultures and traditions.<sup>23</sup> She also resists Hollinger's depiction of "pluralism," insisting that we are in the first instance always individuals, never primarily part of a group. She asserts that we should "give our first allegiance to no mere form of government, no temporal power, but to the moral community made up by the humanity of all human beings."<sup>24</sup> The presumption, of course, is a familiar one in liberal theory, viewing "government" as fundamentally unnatural, even inherently wicked, but *humanity* as potentially good either as individuals and or in its collective incarnations.<sup>25</sup> Thus, Nussbaum is able to adhere both to an individualist worldview which she combines simultaneously to a fictive idea of "world community" deriving from the inherent morality of our human attributes.

In Nussbaum's most explicit description of the connection between the cosmopolitan and the citizen of a particular place, Nussbaum writes of "concentric circles" that capture the series of obligations defining a given human being. Stating that a cosmopolitan does not "propose the abolition of local and national forms of political organization and the creation of a world state," nevertheless we must view our relations with particular people within against the backdrop – and standard – of humanity generally:

The first [circle] is drawn around the self; the next takes in one's immediate family; then follows the extended family; then, in order, one's neighbors or local group, one's fellow city-dwellers, one's fellow countrymen. . . . Beyond all these circles is the largest one, that of humanity as a whole. Our task as citizens of the world, and as educators who prepare people to be citizens of the world, will be to "draw the circles somehow toward the center," making all human beings like our fellow city dwellers. In other words, we need not give up our special affections and affiliations and identifications, whether national or ethnic or religious; but we should work to make all human beings part of our community of dialogue and concern, showing respect for the human wherever it occurs, and allowing that respect to constrain our national and local politics.<sup>26</sup>

Cosmopolitanism, both in its ancient, Enlightenment, and contemporary manifestations, and despite slight differences between them, is marked by several fundamental shared features. The first is its preference for universality. Notwithstanding Hollinger's correct reservation that cosmopolitanism does not necessarily seek the

homogenization of the world according to a universal standard (although some versions do, notably varieties of Marxism), cosmopolitanism can acknowledge a pluralist cultural universe while insisting that certain features of human existence apply across national and cultural boundaries. Cosmopolitanism stresses the need to study other cultures with the toleration to resist condemnation of different practices; at the same time, however, it is fully expected that a result of that examination will be, as Nussbaum suggests, a “drawing together” of the circles when we come to realize the common features of humanity uniting us. Those features are our shared rationality, a universal morality (expressed, among others, by Kant in his formulation of “the kingdom of ends), and a fundamental human dignity. To varying degrees, cosmopolitans also exhibit a confidence in science and technology to conquer natural challenges to human penury and break down physical barriers separating humans;<sup>27</sup> a belief in progress, not only in the ability of science to ameliorate humanity’s material and political condition, but its moral capacities as well; the certitude that irrational religious beliefs, often manifested in persecution and intolerance, will give way to either the willingness to forego religion altogether, or in its place a naturalistic or deistic piety that offers a moral code without accompanying threats of punishment from a divine being or a class of clerics to enforce them; and, informing all of these beliefs, the underlying certainty that all of these outcomes can be effected by a properly designed educational approach, rationally conceived, widely disseminated, universally applicable and irresistible in its effect once its teachings were moved from the elite intellectual arena to the populace at large.<sup>28</sup>

Critics of cosmopolitanism reject many and at times all of these defining features, although often based on radically different bases. Respondents to Nussbaum’s original

article ranged in their critiques, from Benjamin Barber's conditioned patriotism to Gertrude Himmelfarb's claims of American universalism; from Nathan Glazer's insistence that loyalty has actual physical limits to Michael McConnell's invocation of Burkean "little platoons"; from Michael Walzer's gentle reminder that cosmopolitanism is as much prone to political abuse as patriotism, to Anne Norton's telling critique that cosmopolitanism may simply be another variety of particularism. Neither exclusively coming from the Left nor Right, these critiques were almost uniformly informed by a mistrust in both the practicability of a cosmopolitan worldview – summarized in Harvey Mansfield's dismissive response that while "Martha Nussbaum is one of the most eminent female philosophers of our time. . . , when it comes to politics she's a girl scout" – and more often than not its desirability if such a worldview comes at the cost of weakening people's ties to local affiliations and loyalties.<sup>29</sup>

Often, then, a stark choice is presented: cosmopolitanism or patriotism; universality or particularity; locality or humanity. Yet, ancient reflection on human aspirations and personal duties suggests that this choice may be too stark, too severe. The *Odyssey* in several moments intimates that if at some level such a choice is finally unavoidable, it is a choice made with a fundamental recognition about the limits imposed by that choice itself. Odysseus' own choices reflect a commitment to that which most retains our connection to humanity, yet can only find its deepest sources of commitment by opening itself to the possibilities which draw us beyond humanity toward a form of transcendence.

### Nostalgia: “Homecoming” and the “Longing born of Separation”<sup>30</sup>

At the outset of the *Odyssey* we are told that Odysseus has seen untold marvels of the world:

Many were they (the men) whose cities he saw, whose minds he learned of... ( “*pollôn d’ anthrôpôn iden astea kai noon egnô*”: 1.3)

Of all the heroes who fought in Troy, Odysseus most fully embodies that first injunction toward achieving a cosmopolitan education as recommended by Nussbaum and most other proponents of cosmopolitanism, that a cosmopolitan education “must be a multicultural education, by which I mean one that acquaints students with some fundamentals about the histories and cultures of many different groups.”<sup>31</sup> Yet, curiously, we are told shortly thereafter that this undeniably “multicultural” experience did not succeed in making Odysseus long for a community composed of citizens of the world, but instead might be said to have had the opposite effect – to make him pine for *nostos*, return to a particular place and particular people.

Then all the others, as many as fled sheer destruction,  
were at home now, having escaped the sea and fighting.  
this one alone, longing for his wife and his homecoming (*nostou*),  
was detained by the queenly nymph Calypso, bright among goddesses,  
in her hollowed caverns, desiring that he should be her husband. (1.11-15)

Only in Book 5 do we learn the extent of the sacrifice that Odysseus makes: not only does Calypso offer to make Odysseus her husband, but accompanying the invitation of matrimony is that exceedingly rare offer that few mortals ever encounter: the possibility of immortal life. Odysseus’ singular refusal of this offer suggests a stance of suspicion toward what might be called proto-cosmopolitanism, or a form of universalism, that nevertheless recognizes its attractions as well as dangers.

When we join Odysseus in the midst of his ninth year of wandering, we encounter a man who consistently turns down Calypso's astonishing proposals, but also a man who has found both Calypso and presumably those proposals enticing at some point. It is important to note not only that Odysseus refuses the offer of immortality, but that he does so having acknowledged fully the attractions of Calypso and her island. While his eyes are described as "never wiped dry of tears" (5.152), and he is to be found often sitting at the edge of the sea longing for a means by which to return to Ithaca, we are also told that he "wept for a way home since the nymph was no longer pleasing to him" (5.154) – meaning, of course, at one time she *was* pleasing to him. In light of our later discovery that Odysseus remains for a year with Circe, despite her promises to perpetrate no further evils against him (which would seem to preclude the spinning of a spell which forces Odysseus to remain against his will), and only leaves upon being approached by his men and challenged not to forget his desire to return to Ithaca, it comes as little surprise that while upon the island of Calypso, for at least some time, he finds the bounty of her immortal offerings and the pleasure of her bed to be irresistible.

While the many varieties of pleasure and ease offered by both Calypso and Circe prove appealing, in their purely physical aspect they resemble more the temptations of endless torpor with which the Lotus-eaters tempt Odysseus' men than the presumed attractiveness of universality or cosmopolitanism.<sup>32</sup> However, in addition to the attractions of longevity, as well as the sexual aspects of Odysseus' temptation by the goddesses, one perceives how life among the goddesses intimates not only the unconsciousness accompanying the Lotus, but also the expanded consciousness that seems to be the lot of the gods. As we learn upon Hermes' arrival on Calypso's island,

the gods instantly recognize one another: there is no point in dissembling their thoughts or words, since they are able to perceive the true purpose and intentions of each other.<sup>33</sup> Indeed, Hermes is the source of many of these revelations concerning divine apperception. Not only do the gods know one another and each other's thoughts instantly, but the ability of instant apperception extends also to nature itself: Hermes is able to apprehend the "nature" of the moly plant even though its true attributes lie hidden to Odysseus (10.302-306). In these many small pictures of divine sight, a larger portrait appears suggesting that divine vision comes closest to that to which humans aspire when they speak of a vision of the whole, the ability to envision a comprehensive picture of existence that transcends their own shortcomings and limitations born of ignorance, partiality or prejudice. In short, the gods seem to have the ability to see as *cosmopolitans*, as true citizens of the universe, to see through the apparent divisions and cultural accretions to the "nature" of things, to apprehend others truthfully and instantly, to understand the undercurrents of human and divine existence from a point above, and not as mere participants caught in its many currents and tides.<sup>34</sup>

This divine vision is a tempting one: Tithonus especially, but also Orion, and Iasion fall prey to the attractions of the immortals and its accompanying universality, always at the dreadful price of death and outright destruction however. If Odysseus does not know of this particular fate often awaiting mortals who seek more than their lot, he does seem able to resist Calypso's offer of immortality, it seems, mostly due to his own distaste for the repetitive emptiness of existence on Ogygia. If a year's infinite pleasure on Circe's island proves multifarious enough not to weary, seven years of similar titillation with Calypso is more than enough to alert Odysseus that an eternity of the same

would represent less the ultimate reward than perpetual torment. Existence among humanity, if mortal and restricted in its vision, is also curiously fuller and more “real” than that bloodless universality offered by Calypso. Even Hermes senses as much as he lights upon Calypso’s island, lamenting that he did not wish to make the journey to the god (if not goddess) forsaken island, where

there is no city of men nearby, nor people  
who offer choice hecatombs to the gods, and perform sacrifice. (5.101-102)

While life on Calypso’s lonely island apparently represents the more obviously attractive option, having tasted the emptiness of divine existence, Odysseus reaffirms his longing to return “back to my house and see the day of my homecoming” (5.220).

Odysseus’ decision remains remarkable, however, not only given the later revelation that he has descended to Hades – and hence knows the final horrors of mortal existence, the inescapability of death and its attendant miseries in eternal lamentation – but as well since he also knows the overwhelming attractiveness of universality that he seems to reject in his refusal to accept divine immortality. For, prior to the offer of immortality, Odysseus has been tempted by the prospect of “cosmopolitan” vision in as pure a manner as ever described in human experience. A short time before he reaches Calypso’s island in a shipwreck, he first sails by the island of the Sirens who afford him the most severe temptation of his entire perilous journey. As Charles H. Taylor observes, “there is, indeed, only one occasion when he consciously wishes to yield to a temptation, even though he knows it would mean his destruction. Despite Circe’s explicit warning of the mortal danger, he wishes to stop and hear the Siren’s song. Since he takes the

precautions Circe has advised, he is unable to yield, but it is instructive that this one time he wishes he could.”<sup>35</sup>

What is the content of this most irresistible temptation? Taylor stresses the first part of the Sirens’ song, in which they promise to reveal “the great glory of the Achaeans.” For Taylor, the crux of the temptation is a full realization of Odysseus’ identity, that which often comes under threat by temptations of unconsciousness, but in this instance a temptation offered to secure final knowledge of his own identity. This may be correct as far as it goes, but this reading wholly misses the second half, and finally more intriguing promise offered by the Sirens:

for we know everything that the Argives and the Trojans  
did and suffered in wide Troy through the gods’ despite.  
Over all the generous earth we know everything that happens. (12.189-  
191)

Not only do the Sirens offer to confirm that which Odysseus already knows, but they hold forth the temptation of all the many things that he does not, and cannot possibly know.

Each person who passes by the Sirens’ island and takes time to listen to their comprehensive song comes away “a wiser man” (*pleiona eidos*: 12.188). What the Sirens essentially promise is to lift the veil of darkness that limits human vision, that imperfect vision that allows only partial or mistaken knowledge of those things we directly encounter and even more things we cannot. In the place of our fragile and incomplete knowledge they promise to Odysseus the sight of the gods, that vision of Zeus which in the *Iliad* is described as *pleiona eide*, an expansiveness of apprehension that the Sirens promise to those who listen as well (XIII.355).

For this expanded vision Odysseus uniquely strains toward and submits to temptation. Yet, we also know that the promise is in fact an illusion. The Sirens may

indeed know all that passes on the bountiful earth, and even may be able to disclose it to the passing sailor as he strives to reach their barren island, but we also know that in the course of that desperate effort any man who tries to realize the Sirens' offer will meet a calamitous fate. Odysseus has tied himself to the mast in order to hear their song but to avoid the fate that awaits those mortals who pass by the Sirens without knowing the dangers accompanying their song. He singularly knows those dangers, since Circe has related:

You will come first of all to the Sirens, who are enchanters of all mankind and whoever comes their way; and that man who unsuspecting approaches them, listens to the Sirens singing, has no prospect of coming home and delighting his wife and little children as they stand about him in greeting, but the Sirens by the melody of their singing enchant him. They sit in their meadow, but the beach before it is piled with boneheaps of men now rotted away, and the skins shrivel upon them. (12.39-46)

Odysseus, who is so often notable for his ability to hold himself back from temptations that divert him from *nostos* – those many offerings that would overcome the *algos* that seemingly separate humanity from a greater comprehension of the whole either through the loss of consciousness represented by the effects of Lotus, or a form of hyper-consciousness offered by the Sirens – in the case of the Sirens shows how ultimately tempting, and devastating, the offer of “expanded vision” is to the human who craves knowledge of the whole. Of all the many challenges confronting Odysseus in his long journey home, not the vengeance of Poseidon, not the barbarism of Cyclops or the Laestrogonians, not the wiles of Circe or the immortality offered by Calypso bring him to a moment of total succumbing as does the song of the Sirens.

Knowledge of all that passes on the bountiful earth appeals for its comprehensiveness. Similar to arguments in favor of cosmopolitanism, the knowledge of

the whole attracts especially due to the promise of a fundamental knowledge, that vision of *physis* that is otherwise only accorded to the gods (as Hermes demonstrates, 10.302ff.). The Sirens offer to Odysseus an encompassing knowledge of what makes humanity, and perhaps all of existence, a singular whole. From our limited perspective, we tend to see only the many distinctions that culture and history accord to people separated by distance and time; the Sirens, on the other hand, have a global knowledge that comprehends diversity and allows a glimpse of underlying unity. What startles about the Odysseus' response to this knowledge is how much this global knowledge undermines his actual sympathies to human beings. Odysseus exhibits a complete lack of awareness of those corpses described by Circe lying about the shore of the Sirens' island, "boneheaps of men now rotted away, their skin shrivel[led] upon them..." At no point in Odysseus' description of the actual passage of his ship past the island of the Sirens does he acknowledge that he had perceived the rotting bodies of similarly tempted humans: we only know of them from Odysseus' recitation of *Circe's* description, not from Odysseus' recollection of his moment before the Sirens. It is as if, in the midst of his own enchantment, entranced by the overwhelming attraction to the promise of universal knowledge, Odysseus is no longer able to see either the true effects of that temptation, or even the mortality of his fellow humans, the fundamental similarity that is seemingly promised by the knowledge of the Sirens but which in fact lies before him unseen on the shore.

In some respects, Odysseus' total succumbing before the Sirens reflects deep ambivalence about homecoming (or remaining at home), the uncertainty of his devotion

to justice and the deep tension between the promise of transcendence and the possibilities of commitment. Seth Benardete has observed in damning terms that Odysseus'

greatest and deepest desire is not for home, but for knowledge. Odysseus can resist the enchanting speeches of Calypso, which offer him immortality, but he cannot resist the enchantment of omniscience, and he is willing to give up his life for the chance. Justice is not at the heart of his nature.<sup>36</sup>

His inability to apprehend the true commonality of humanity before the Sirens, exhibited both by his willingness to sacrifice his homecoming and an absence of pity toward fellow humans who have fallen as well as an acknowledgement of his own shared fate, seems to be the concomitant result of the very temptation toward an unachievable and misleading comprehensive knowledge. If Odysseus is able to resist the temptation of immortality offered by Calypso precisely *because* of his acknowledgement of a shared fate and underlying similarity with his fellow mortals – indicated by his recognition of Penelope's limitations, especially her mortality, compared to Calypso's eternal splendor – by contrast, it is due to succumbing to the Sirens' appeal of *pleiona eidos* that he forgets his mortality and the mortality of those around him, literally becoming unable to *see* the *actual* humans who have fallen before him in his vain effort to comprehend the totality of humanity.<sup>37</sup>

However, what is lost in Benardete's condemnation of Odysseus' abandonment of justice, and Odysseus' utter forgetfulness of both his and others' needs and limitations, is the fact that Odysseus is only able to survive this callous moment because he has previously *ordered himself bound*. This is the same character who, escaping Cyclops,

seeking *kleos*, announced his name and taunted the more powerful since he had not, in Plato's words, been cured of "his love of honor" (*Republic*, 620c). However, before reaching the Sirens, he heeds Circe's warning to have himself bound, in effect suggesting a commitment to law, those external restraints that are necessary for limited and easily tempted mortals in the pursuit of justice. Thus, to anticipate his own weakness reflected in his respect for Circe's warning, Odysseus reveals what may be construed as a commitment to a higher form of justice, which, even while occurring amid his ultimate temptation, reflects his more fundamental commitments to homecoming and to the pursuit of justice on Ithaca.

Cosmopolitan vision is something of a siren's song: irresistible to those who open their ears to it, but finally diverting in its true effects and damaging to the actual relations among existing people, ultimately threatening to undermine the possibility of achieved justice in communities of humans in the pursuit of imagined universal justice for the community of humanity. If the Sirens threaten to divert Odysseus finally and irrevocably from his homeward journey, and turn him entirely from the concerns of humanity – including concerns for justice – it is later, when confronted with the choice of Calypso that Odysseus seems to reassert his humanity by reference to humans, and to re-dedicate himself to the push homeward that will culminate in the re-establishment of justice in Ithaca.

### **The Temptations of Temptation**

This sequential reading may, of course, render the answer too simply and far too definitively than the text will allow. After all, Odysseus does return and poignantly recaptures the erotic love that binds him to Penelope (23.300-309); he does vanquish the

suitors and – with the assistance of Athena and the final intervention of Zeus – he does put Ithaca on a just footing, setting the stage for the rule of Telemachus. We also know, however, that he must leave Ithaca in accordance with the prediction of Teiresias; that he must journey to a land whose people cannot distinguish between an oar and a winnowing fan, and that he will finally die “by agency” of – either at or from – the sea. Has he been cured of the temptations of the Sirens? Has he overcome the seemingly eternal longing for transcendence, to know “everything that happens”? Does not his own savagery in the treatment of the suitors, in the severe punishment of the serving girls, and the grisly execution of Melanthios contradict anything that might be said about his tenderness toward Telemachus, Eumaios, Penelope, or Laertes (only after treating even his father with some unnecessary cruelty of deception)? Has he become fully capable of seeing the rotting corpses surrounding the feet of the Sirens, or, if forced to travel past their island again on subsequent journeys, would he overlook them again, diverted from human sympathies to see only the dream of knowledge?

Dante seemed to think that Odysseus is not wholly cured of his love of knowledge, but continues his journey after his homecoming. Dante understood that the pure love of knowledge, the pursuit of “experience,” represented a concomitant rejection of his commitments to people. As Ulysses himself relates from the flames of the inferno,

my heart forgot  
 My aged father, I regarded not  
 My fondness for my child, my wife bereft  
 Of her due rights of love, but through my heart  
 Again the unconquerable ardour burned  
 To search experience of the world, anew  
 The vice and valour of mankind to view,  
 And seek the events of lonely lands apart  
 From known adventures of my race.

At the foot of a mountain which likely ascends to “Paradiso” itself, Ulysses urges his men to “deny not that we add to all our gains, / While the brief vigil hour of life remains, / Experience of the unpeopled world that lies / Behind the lights of sunset,” a call that leads to their final destruction as punishment for their hubris.<sup>38</sup>

A telling understanding of Odysseus’ continued “algos,” his incurable “longing,” despite even the achievement of “nostos,” is rendered in touching detail by the contemporary Greek poet, C. P. Cavafy in the poem “Ithaka”:

Hope the voyage is a long one.  
 May there be many a summer morning when,  
 with what pleasure, what joy,  
 you come into harbors seen for the first time;  
 may you stop at Phoenician trading stations  
 to buy fine things,  
 mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,  
 as many sensual perfumes as you can;  
 and may you visit many Egyptian cities  
 to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars.

Keep Ithaka always in your mind.  
 Arriving there is what you are destined for.  
 But do not hurry the journey at all.  
 Better if it lasts for years,  
 so you are old by the time you reach the island,  
 wealthy with all you have gained on the way,  
 not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.

Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.  
 Without her you would not have set out.  
 She has nothing left to give you now.

And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.  
 Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,  
 you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.

One wonders if Odysseus is content with his lot, whether he even comes to regret his decision – if not constantly, at least occasionally during times of ennui, when the demands of ruling become burdensome or the wrinkles adorning Penelope’s and his own

face deepen and spread. The satirist Lucian, for one, thought that Odysseus must have come to regret his choice: indeed, in a fanciful letter written to Calypso, he imagined Odysseus lamenting his situation, “thoroughly sorry to have given up my life with you and the immortality which you offered me. Therefore, if I get a chance, I shall run and come to you.”<sup>39</sup>

As the Sirens episode reminds, humans may successfully resist the temptations of knowledge, the cosmopolitan gaze, the transcendent opportunity of divine sight, but the temptation nevertheless remains and – above all – it is a *temptation*, constant, irking, never fully overcome. There is something *desirable* about transcendence, a longing that even our *eros* for particular people and our commitments to justice cannot completely overcome.<sup>40</sup> To deny the fact that such temptation exists – to deny that a real *choice* is presented to Odysseus or to humans generally – is to deny that most anciently described longing to see beyond the horizons that limit our sight, to place ourselves so firmly in the world of *limits* that we forget aspirations beyond what “these Ithacas really mean.” Quite ironically, the embrace of a world defined only by limits and the absence of longings beyond the apparent can breed pride in the recognition of our own humility.<sup>41</sup>

Curiously, the view that transcendence holds little fundamental appeal to humanity is to be found in the writing of Martha Nussbaum – not now in her recent discussions of cosmopolitanism – but in a profoundly sensitive reading of the *Odyssey* that, focusing on Calypso’s offer of immortality and Odysseus’ denial, deeply appreciates the dangers posed to existing human bonds by the temptations of the divine and transcendent. At some level her reading of the *Odyssey* in the essay entitled “Transcending Humanity” seems to exist in irredeemable tension with her later writings

on cosmopolitanism (although, I will suggest below, there is a continuity to be detected).<sup>42</sup> Nussbaum, who in her recent writings on cosmopolitanism poses the priority of *humankind* over particular *humans*, in focusing especially on Odysseus' decision to decline Calypso's offer of immortality finds instead a recommendation of homecoming opposed to the transcendence offered by Calypso. Faced with the choice – like that of Achilles – for a long, uneventful life with Calypso or a short, glorious one with Penelope, Odysseus apparently does not hesitate (unlike Achilles). Rather, according to Nussbaum, he chooses “the whole human package: mortal life, dangerous voyage, imperfect mortal aging woman. He [chooses], quite simply, what he is...”<sup>43</sup>

One understands Nussbaum here: Odysseus confirms his position as human opposed to the divine option offered by Calypso. Yet, to a large extent, Nussbaum seems to understate the magnitude of that decision, indeed to deny an actual choice was made. Can one simply choose to be what one already is? To be what one “is” neglects both the option of what one is not – clearly attractive to Tithonus, who unlike Odysseus opts for immortality – and the thought that what one thinks one “is” does not fully comprehend the full range of longings of the human experience, the possibility that one can “be” more than what one “is.” Such a reading neglects not only the evidence that Tithonus longs for immortality – hence, that transcendence “is,” or can be as much a part of the human experience as its conscious denial – but tellingly, the temptations to which Odysseus succumbs before the Sirens, which Nussbaum neglects to discuss. For Nussbaum, there would seem to have been no actual *choice* since she cannot credit the longing for transcendence in the first place; she wholly ignores the very attractions of *becoming* a god.<sup>44</sup> If Odysseus can only choose that which he *is*, then he is presented no real choice

at all. Such a view is finally *too* limited, too disregarding of widening horizons, and one that seems refuted by the descriptions of the frequent, if mostly unhappy, human temptation to transcend humanity.

“Transcendence,” then, is not as wholly “strange” or unavailable to Odysseus as Nussbaum suggests in her account of the *Odyssey* (just as it seems too strange and wholly available in her account of cosmopolitanism), at least not from the perspective of human craving. As both the examples of Tithonus – who tragically but wholeheartedly accepts immortality – and Odysseus before the Sirens reveal, transcendence may be wholly inappropriate for humans, at some essential level undermining what it means to be *human*, but paradoxically, at least one recognized feature of “humanity” in antiquity *is* the overwhelming but dangerous temptation to transcend our human estate. Part of being human means to long to be more than human, even if we stand to lose our humanity in the pursuit. Our natures as human beings are more divided than Nussbaum indicates in her analysis – one that quite rightly stresses the “otherness” of “external” transcendence, but which does not credit its attraction nonetheless. The choice that Odysseus makes on Ogygia, refusing Calypso’s long-standing offer of immortality, reveals a centrally important feature of the human brush with transcendence. Not only is such transcendence “foreign” to being human at some level, but that in the struggle to ascertain that which is more centrally human – our aspirations or our limitations – the choice for the latter in many ways deepens our commitments to *humans* in ways that a devotion to “humanity” or to the “divine” cannot. That is, curiously, the lack of recognition by Nussbaum of the attractions of divine transcendence when considering Odysseus’ choice seems intimately related to her subsequent downgrading of

commitments to particular *humans*, as opposed to the priority of “humanity,” in her later writings on cosmopolitanism. Altogether absent in Nussbaum’s own sympathetic treatment of Odysseus is the absence of doubt, of misgiving, of curiosity, the sense that Odysseus – having heard the Sirens, descended to Hades, tasted the moly plant, slept with Circe and Calypso – will never be wholly content with the limits of the human condition, even if (*pace* Lucian) he continues to view his choice as correct.

Odysseus’ choices, especially that one arrived at on Calypso’s island, suggests that the encounter with transcendence can be limited, without denying its dangers and attractions. In the first instance, one can detect “limited transcendence” in Odysseus’ own embrace of human infirmity – his devotion to Penelope and Ithaca – an infirmity that is underscored by the dangerousness of comprehensive knowledge or divine vision whenever humans encounter it. This limit is not automatically recognized: before the Sirens, Odysseus shows significantly less resistance to the dream of transcendence than with Circe or Calypso, who themselves offer a form of transcendence nearly irresistible to most mortals. Once human infirmity is embraced, however, a form of transcendence proves possible, but only on a limited basis. Transcendence is possible to imperfect humanity as a glimpse, not as a way of being. Thus, Odysseus does hear the song of the Sirens, however momentary in nature. He does remain with Circe for one year, and with Calypso for seven. He does journey to the underworld and see there the fate of all humanity. His momentary contact with the divine and chthonic afford him glimpses of a comprehensive knowledge reserved for the gods, but briefly perceptible to those who are open to its existence yet wary of its overarching temptations. In this sense, he asserts human aspiration for and the temptations of comprehensive knowledge even as he denies

its full possibility, siding with “humanity” – in Nussbaum’s account – without denying the attractions of the divine.

The second manner that transcendence is limited relies on this first. An embrace of human limits suggests that the encounter with transcendence, if successfully resisted at some level, deepens human commitments to “partiality,” namely to the places from which we come, the people with whom we regularly concert. Where Nussbaum sees Odysseus’ choice as exhibiting only his commitment to “humanity,” it is in fact more the case that Odysseus denies the divine estate because of *particular humans*. She disregards Hannah Arendt’s observation that “not man, but men inhabit the earth.”<sup>45</sup> The limitation that this observation represents, Homer suggests, results for two reasons. First, knowing the final inaccessibility of transcendence, we view more realistically the limitations placed on our senses and the finite extent to which we can extend the realm of our senses. Aristotle writes as much in the *Politics* when he asks who could be herald of an immense city whose borders were beyond the limits of our senses, unless he had the voice of Stentor?<sup>46</sup> The admission of our limitations, often only possible having made contact with transcendence or even its possibility – an encounter that reveals the true extent of our limitations – can have the unexpected effect *not* of making us crave endlessly for the inaccessible transcendent, but rather to cast our lot more firmly with those who surround us, those with whom we can reasonably pursue justice in the more limited fashion possible for humanity. Secondly, inasmuch as the encounter with transcendence reveals our similarities most profoundly not from a global perspective, but rather by making us aware of our shared limitations – especially our fragile mortality – our sense of

commonality with other humans is correspondingly deepened, allowing us to see likeness even where the evidence of our senses suggests only differences.

The effect of Odysseus' travels is not, as might be predicted by Gitlin or Hollinger or Nussbaum, a deepening of Odysseus' dedication to his fellow "citizens of the world," but rather quite the opposite: in recognizing his own limitations, he comes to see a likeness especially to those he might otherwise not usually see, the people before his eyes who most desperately need a person of Odysseus' talents and wiles to help them in their pursuit of justice in Ithaca. Acknowledging the limits of what one can rightly perceive has the concomitant effect of comprehending those with whom one is connected through *eros*, the people closest to one's senses and self – not only one's family, but fellow citizens and especially those whose own prospects are most limited. Much of the tale of Odysseus' encounters upon his return to Ithaca is infused with his own sense of human limitations, of the ever-present possibility that even the greatest man can be brought down easily and swiftly by a whim of the gods or fate.<sup>47</sup> Nor is Odysseus alone in this understanding: it is perhaps a lesson that has been deepened by his encounters during his homecoming, but it is not one that is only available to those who are able to become true cosmopolitans, those who see "many cities" and who learn of "many minds" (1.3). Even the humblest of humans – perhaps especially the humblest – can encounter not only the fragility of human existence, but also the possibility of something greater, hence yearn too for a realization of justice. This yearning is most conspicuously found at the conclusion of the *Odyssey* in the encounter with the simple swineherd, Eumaeus.

Eumaeus is obviously a special character for Homer: he is, among the many characters who populate the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, the only character whom Homer

refers to directly as “you,” some fifteen times all told. He is thus, in some senses, the person for whom the *Odyssey* is written, paradigmatic of an ideal audience. It is a poem intended for the ordinary people as this unique use of “you” reveals, people who work at times in seemingly futile situations and who seek order and decency from the universe around them. Notwithstanding his ordinary status in the epic, Eumaeus is also remarkable for his apparent similarity to Odysseus. When, disguised as a beggar, Odysseus first encounters Eumaeus, Odysseus weaves a fable (one he will tell some five times to various persons, always with some differences) claiming to be born the son of a rich man who has fallen on bad times, even at one point almost being sold into slavery (14.192-359). We discover shortly thereafter that Eumaeus is truly the person Odysseus claims to be: born the son of a king, abducted from his home as a child by a duplicitous servant, and at a tender age sold into bondage to Laertes, father of Odysseus, he is a high-born man brought low by fate and fortune. Odysseus, through his disguise and by means of his lie, becomes indistinguishable from Eumaeus in *fact*. What this peculiar resemblance begs us to further consider, then, is what is the reality of their similarities, and what is mere appearance. That is, knowing as we do that Odysseus is in fact high-born posing as one low-born, and Eumaeus at least at the outset appears solely as low-born but is, in fact, equally high-born, we are forced to ask whether appearances or even one’s apparent status can tell us about a person’s nobility or inherent virtues. The similarities of the highest and the lowest bring us closer to an understanding of a shared human condition.

Odysseus responds to this tale of woe in a revealing manner, bemoaning Eumaeus' sad fate, but thankful that he has now found a good home, unlike the fate that Odysseus supposedly suffers:

But beside the sorrow Zeus has placed some good for you, seeing that after much suffering you came into the house of a kindly man, who, as he ought to do, provides you with victuals and drink, and the life you lead is a good one. But I come to you only after much wandering in the cities of people. (15.488-492).

Odysseus views his own long journey as a curse compared to Eumaeus' seemingly unenviable status as a bondsman and as servant to the suitors' endless appetites. To be a wanderer adrift in the world is worse than the "good" life that Eumaeus apparently leads, and but for the absence of Odysseus – who ruled once with justice, according to Eumaeus – one thinks Eumaeus might well agree with that assessment, notwithstanding his misfortune.

Eumaeus' understanding of the situation of humanity relative to the gods is similar to that of Odysseus'. He often expresses the fragility of human condition, the impotence of people in the face of fate and the inscrutable plans of the gods. Yet, that realization does not give over to resignation or rage, but rather to an acceptance of the obligations that this understanding of the human condition leads one to recognize between one's fellows who are equally limited and frail. As he says to the "beggar" Odysseus during their first encounter,

Stranger, I have no right to deny the stranger, not even if one came to me who was meaner than you. All vagabonds and strangers are under Zeus, and the gift is a light and dear one that comes from us, for that is the way of us who are servants and forever filled with fear when they come under the power of masters who are new.

Eumaeus understands his condition as one that is potentially shared by any human, informed by the fear of the suddenness that any situation can change for the worse. Further, he recognizes the protection that Zeus accords to all humans, even the most desperate, despite – or perhaps because of – his vast distance from the concerns of the gods, in contrast to the divine status of Poseidon’s son, Polyphemus, who views with contempt and cruelty the claims of guest-strangers.

Eumaeus’ understanding of how his own position in the world connects him to others is clearly not a “class” condition any more than it is a result of one’s relative expectations in the world. There is more in common between the beggar Iros and the gentleman suitor Eurymachos, and more similarity between Odysseus and Eumaeus, than one might expect if class and status were determinative of one’s worldview. One might suppose that the exposure to the fragility of the human situation makes Eumaeus and Odysseus more kindred, but the beggar Iros similarly knows the deep misfortune to which humanity is subject, but nevertheless treats the disguised Odysseus with contempt and humiliation. Homer does not tell us why some people interpret their situation differently, how some embrace the human limits that connect us to those around us and impel us toward the pursuit of justice, and in others the experience leaves one bitter and ruthless toward others, especially the less fortunate. It seems, however, to be an appreciation of the “middle position” of humanity, the condition simultaneously of longing for more than one can have, and committing to that which one does have, that marks the dispositions of an Odysseus and a Eumaeus, making them at once appreciative of the limits of human longing yet the possibilities for human decencies and even justice among a community of kindred.

### **The Final Limit**

The acceptance of death is the acceptance of utmost limits. Humanity pushes at most other limits nature imposes, even apparently overcoming some from time to time, but, as Sophocles acknowledges in the “Ode to Man” in *Antigone*, “only death, from death alone [man] will find no rescue....”<sup>48</sup> Of course, it makes no difference whether we “accept” our deaths or not: our demise is inevitable. What the attitude of “acceptance” entails, however, is a whole range of acceptance of limitations: negatively stated, limitations to hubris and overweening ambition; more positively, those limitations that make us aware of our fundamental equality to other humans who also face death, that focus our attention on what can be done in concert with others, and cause us to cherish the living as we make our inevitable journey toward death.

To accept death is to repeat Odysseus’ contemplation of Calypso’s offer of immortality as he confronted it: seriously, poignantly, perhaps desirously, but finally deciding against its temptations. Most paradoxically, as the reason for Odysseus’ choice of death reveals, namely *nostos*, the embrace of our mortality does not separate us from others – as assuredly our actual entombment will – but, in life, deepens our affections and provokes shared remembrance and the desire to enshrine memory in story and song.<sup>49</sup> Acceptance of death links generations, affords us a longer term view of life’s continuities, helps us to see beyond our momentary desires (revealing their stark insignificance), yet, at the same time, makes us realize that our mortal condition is the fundamental condition that we share with all others, hence confirming the underlying equality of that our human condition entails.

Death is portrayed as nothing if horrific in the *Odyssey*. In the *Nekyia* – the descent to Hades in Book 11 – Odysseus is portrayed standing above a pit of steaming sheep’s blood with sword drawn to fend off the innumerable spirits who would drink the vile brew. It is as if the spirits are drawn to corporeal fluids in order to assuage their inability to embrace one another. Death separates, turns humanity insubstantial, makes us as solitary and alone as individuals described in any State of Nature scenario. Nevertheless, in Odysseus’ confrontation with the dead, Homer shows how an encounter with mortality as harrowing as Odysseus’ actually results in a deepening of his commitments not only to those he loves, but to those who would seem otherwise insignificant and unworthy of one’s attention or friendship.<sup>50</sup> This dynamic is shown with particular poignancy in a series of episodes somewhat startling for their unusualness: the death of Elpenor that shortly precedes Odysseus’ journey to the underworld, his presence as the first soul that Odysseus encounters while in Hades, and the burial of his body upon the Odysseus’ return to the land of the living (10.552-560; 11.51-83; 12.9-15).

Elpenor is an insignificant and wholly forgettable figure in the epic, previously one of the nameless figures who rows Odysseus’ boat. Yet, on the day that Odysseus and his companions are to descend to Hades, Elpenor emerges from his anonymity when, following an evening of drunkenness, he awakens on the roof of Circe’s palace and, descending the ladder, loses his balance, striking the ground “so that his neck bone / was broken out of its sockets, and his soul went down to Hades” (10.559-560).<sup>51</sup> Only a few of Odysseus’ companions are named at any point, usually due to their excellence (e.g., Polites, “the leader of men, who was best and dearest to me of my friends” – 10.224) or for the purpose of making competing claims to Odysseus’ claims to rule (e.g.,

Eurylochos' insistence that they eat the kine of Helios – 12.279 ff.). Elpenor, by contrast, is notable for his lack of notability: he is, Odysseus relates, “the youngest man, not terribly powerful in fighting or sound in his thoughts” (10.552-3). Elpenor's death, while tragic, does little to advance the story; his presence in Hades, narratively speaking, merely diverts the reader from the true purpose of the journey, which is Odysseus' interview with Teiresias. One is tempted to agree with the “analytic” interpretation of Denys Page, who views the presence of Elpenor as a convenient bridge between the worlds of life and death, and as a figure who provides a transition between the bulk of the *Odyssey* to what he takes to be the interpolation of the *Nekyia*, but by himself and uninteresting and discardable character.<sup>52</sup>

However, this dismissive interpretation altogether misses the poignancy of the meeting between Odysseus and Elpenor, and the exchange there that foreshadows Odysseus' choice for mortality as confirmation of his commitments to family and polity. Odysseus has descended without realizing that Elpenor has died: in keeping with Elpenor's insignificant status, his absence goes wholly unnoticed. As the most recent soul to descend to Hades – and, as an unburied soul – Elpenor stands closest to the entrance of Hades, and is the first soul that Odysseus encounters. Seeing him, suddenly confronted with his death, Odysseus addresses him in anguished tones:

I broke into tears at the sight of him, and my heart pitied him,  
and so I spoke aloud to him and addressed him in winged words:  
“Elpenor, how did you come here beneath the fog and the darkness?  
You have come faster on foot than I could in my black ship.” (11.55-58)

In Odysseus' recognition of the swiftness of Elpenor's journey is an implicit comparison the length of time it has already required and will yet take to return to Ithaca, and the comparable brevity of our final journey to our true “homeland.” Odysseus' pity for

Elpenor implies a sadness about the finality of that journey not only for the previously nameless, but for himself and all mortals.

Elpenor responds by asking Odysseus to give his body rightful burial. Yet, he extracts this promise not only by reminding of the traditional curse that will result should his body be left exposed (a curse that the action of *Antigone* aptly reveals), but by reminding Odysseus of his own obligations to others, to those who bore him, to those he has chosen to love, and to those he will leave behind:

“But now I pray you, by those you have yet to see, who are not here, by your wife, and by your father, who reared you when you were little, and by Telemachus whom you have left alone in your palace; for I know that after you leave this place and the house of Hades you will put back with your well-made ship to the island, Aiaia; there at that time, my lord, I ask that you remember me, and do not go and leave me behind unwept, unburied, when you leave, for fear I might become the god’s curse on you; but burn me there with all my armor that belongs to me, and heap up a grave mound beside the beach of the gray sea, for an unhappy man, so that those to come will know of me.” (11.66-78)

By naming Odysseus’ three most beloved living relatives, Elpenor reminds Odysseus of his duties to the living, and by extension to those who die, even one as insignificant as he.

The invocation of Odysseus’ father in order to provoke pity and to remind Odysseus of his obligation even to one as lowly as Elpenor is particularly striking, given its similarity to Priam’s invocation of Achilles’ father Peleus as he pleads with Achilles – the man who killed his son and maimed his corpse. Priam pleads for the body of Hector that he might give him a rightful burial: “Achilles like the gods (*theois epieikel’ Akhilleu*), remember your father, one who / is of years like mine, and on the door-sill of sorrowful old age....”<sup>53</sup> The invocation of his father’s own infirmity and approaching

death – and by extension, Achilles’ own mortal lot – provokes profound and newly discovered pity in Achilles:

So [Priam] spoke, and stirred in the other a passion for grieving for his own father. He took the old man’s hand and pushed him gently away, and the two remembered, as Priam sat huddled at the feet of Achilles and wept now for manslaughtering Hektor and Akhilles wept now for his own father, now again for Patroklos. (24.508-512).

In each case, the pity invoked by remembrance of a dying generation, and a reminder of our own inevitable journey, succeeds in bringing seemingly divided people together:

Achilles is moved to hold Priam’s hand, and, in an eerily similar scene, Odysseus – who is not recorded having spoken to Elpenor during his life – is similarly moved to share remembrance and fleeting contact with Elpenor now that he has died:

So we two stayed there exchanging our sad words, I on one side holding my sword over the blood, while opposite me the phantom of my companion talked long with me. (11.81-83).

Reminding Odysseus of the ones that are yet “unseen,” those whom he cherishes, Elpenor, like Priam, recalls the deep commitments that motivate Odysseus, reminding us too of the links that our own mortality to the deaths of those we love, and extends that consideration beyond our own fears to a concern for that fate we share with even the least noticed, the most anonymous, the previously unnamed. Elpenor’s request that an oar be raised over his burial mound foreshadows the task that Teiresias will shortly reveal to Odysseus, that he must carry an oar far inland, to a place where an implement of the sea will be mistaken for a fan. If the oar in this latter instance will become, in the words of Seth Benardete, a reminder that “there is a god who presides over something you cannot see,” in the case of Elpenor, the oar is to remind us that here lies a human who was barely seen in life, but whose life nevertheless mattered, and over which other men mourned and

remembered.<sup>54</sup> The poet is careful that we know that Elpenor is not forgotten when Odysseus and his crew return from Hades. Immediately on the morning following their return to Circe's island, Elpenor is buried by the crew that remains:

Then we cut logs, and where the extreme of the foreland jutted  
out, we buried him, sorrowful, shedding warm tears for him.  
But when the dead man had burned and the dead man's armor, piling  
the grave mound and pulling the gravestone to stand above it,  
we planted the well-shaped oar in the very top of the grave mound.  
(12.11-15).

The poet notes that the burial mound lies on a bit of land that juts out into the water, so that any passing ship may see there the grave site of a man who was not forgotten, and know that others mourned his passing. The presence of Elpenor's honored gravesite forms a profound contrast to the unburied and unseen bodies of those who lay scattered around the island of the Sirens. If the invocation of loved ones reminds us more extensively of our commitments to other humans, and recalls us to the limits of our human estate, Odysseus' inability to "see" the rotting bodies beneath the Sirens demonstrates the dangers of transcendence, even acknowledging its ultimate attraction.<sup>55</sup>

Accepting death shows our awareness of limits, acknowledgement of our feebleness, and our participation in the continuities of nature, no matter what alienation our technology can buy. To resist death, to attempt to overcome that final and inevitable human limitation, is to pursue the mastery of nature to its extreme but unavoidable conclusion. The *Odyssey* shows us how old this most elusive and subversive dream is, and how the gods eventually exact their punishment.

The *Odyssey* also shows that death is indeed to be feared: the spirits of the Underworld cannot be touched by Odysseus; even their words are strange and incomprehensible. As Homer understood death, it meant the freezing of all one's

attributes and characteristics at the moment of death: thus Achilles remains bitter, Agamemnon bewildered, Ajax furious. Death, it seems, can only be overcome in life, through being "*polutropos*," many-sided, such that death's frozen quality can be thawed by variegated brilliance. Odysseus does not seek immortality through mastery or *hubris*, but rather as a human, fully, magnanimously, many-sided. Perhaps the key to comprehending Odysseus' quality of *polutropos* is that, having embraced death, he seeks to deny it its final victory. Through poetry and politics and home he stakes his claim to life. Like Odysseus, our journey may not end in Ithaca, but Ithaca remains the goal of those who would remain human.

## Notes to Chapter 5

<sup>1</sup> My teacher Wilson Carey McWilliams has written, “the willingness to die is an ultimate guarantee of moral standards, of purposes, and of the self; it establishes control over the tendency of the passions to seek survival at all costs, not excluding the destruction of the ego, the identity, of man.” Wilson Carey McWilliams, *The Idea of Fraternity in America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1973), 43. By contrast, Martha Nussbaum – whose view of “cosmopolitanism” will be contrasted with the limitations embraced by Odysseus – asks and answers the following question: “Who, given the chance to make a spouse or child or parent or friend immortal, would not take it? (I would grab it hungrily, I confess at the outset).” Martha C. Nussbaum, “Transcending Humanity,” in *Love’s Knowledge* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 368.

<sup>2</sup> M.I. Finley is among those who holds this view a “predetermined” Homeric identity. He writes: “The basic values of [Homeric] society were given, predetermined and so were a man’s place in the society and the privileges and duties that followed from his status.” *The World of Odysseus* (1954), 134. See also Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind* (New York: Dover Publications, 1982) and Herman Fraenkel, *Early Greek Poetry and Philosophy*, translated by Moses Hadas and J. Willis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975). A more recent echo of this view is found in Charles Taylor’s *Sources of the Self* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 117-118.

<sup>3</sup> Examples of “cosmopolitan” expression are widely recognized in writings from the fifth-century B.C., including Herodotus’ demonstration of Pindar’s adage “Custom is King” by means of comparing the differing disposal of corpses by Greeks and Indians (*History*, 3.38). Another example of a “cosmopolitan” perspective is found in Hippias’ pompous speech in Plato’s *Protagoras*, where he states that “I regard you all as kinsmen and intimates and fellow-citizens by nature, not by law: for like is akin to like by nature, whereas law, despot of mankind, often constrains us against nature” (337c-d).

<sup>4</sup> Thomas J. Schlereth, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought*, (South Bend: The University of Notre Dame Press, 1977), xi.

<sup>5</sup> Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue* (South Bend: University of Notre Dame Press, 1984), 126.

<sup>6</sup> Throughout this essay I will use Richmond Lattimore’s translations of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Greek versions of selected passages are provided from the Loeb editions of the epics. Throughout, I have adopted the customary manner of citing the Homeric epics. Citations to the *Iliad* utilize a Roman numeral for the book number and arabic numerals for the line numbers (e.g., VI.11-12), whereas citations to the *Odyssey* will adopt both arabic numerals for the book and line numbers (e.g., 6.11-12).

<sup>7</sup> See Gabriel Germain, “The Sirens and the Temptation of Knowledge,” translated by George Steiner, in *Homer: A collection of Essays* (Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1962), 96, edited by George Steiner and Robert Fagles. Germain compares the temptation of the Sirens to the great temptations throughout ancient literature, including those of Gilgamesh and of Eve in Eden. Notably, both succumb to their dangerous desire. He writes, “To abstain in the face of divine temptation is the mark either of a primitive mistrust ... or of a superhuman sage.” Odysseus’ abstention, however, is

neither: his is simple physical restraint, in the case of the Sirens. His resistance to Calypso's offer is more complicated, but finally suggests neither primitivism nor "superhuman" wisdom, but simple acceptance of his humanity, located between his animal and godlike propensities.

<sup>8</sup> The notion of "limited transcendence" is a variation of and draws upon Drew A. Hyland's understanding of Platonic philosophy as one of "finite transcendence," *Finitude and Transcendence in the Platonic Dialogues* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1995).

<sup>9</sup> Amanda Anderson sympathetically observes that "the reconsiderations of universalism are being made in the face of grave concerns over resurgent nationalisms and the often atomizing politics of identity.... The new universalism ... focuses on those ideals and practices that propel individuals and groups beyond the confines of restricted or circumscribed identities." "Cosmopolitanism, Universalism, and the Divided Legacies of Modernity." In *Cosmopolitics*, ed. Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 266.

<sup>10</sup> Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams* (New York: Metropolitan Books, 1995), 84, 86.

<sup>11</sup> Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 86. See also Barber, *Jihad v. McWorld* (New York: Times Books, 1995) and Richard Falk's essay "Revisioning Cosmopolitanism," in *For Love of Country*, edited by Joshua Cohen (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996) for an exploration of the false cosmopolitanism of the market.

<sup>12</sup> Gitlin, *Twilight of Common Dreams*, 209.

<sup>13</sup> Hollinger, *Postethnic America* (New York: Basic Book, 1995), 84.

<sup>14</sup> Hollinger, *Postethnic America*, 85.

<sup>15</sup> To the extent that Enlightenment authors – ranging from the *philosophes* to Benjamin Franklin – relied on earlier Stoic expressions of cosmopolitanism, see Thomas J. Schlereth's *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought*, xvii-xxv.

<sup>16</sup> Martha Nussbaum, "Patriotism and Cosmopolitanism," *Boston Review* Vol. 19, No. 5 (October/November, 1994): 4; Nussbaum, *For Love of Country*, 6; Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1997), 52.

<sup>17</sup> Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 52.

<sup>18</sup> Nussbaum, *For Love of Country*, 7.

<sup>19</sup> Nussbaum, *For Love of Country*, 151, n. 12.

<sup>20</sup> Nussbaum, *For Love of Country*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 60. She writes that "Stoic texts show repeatedly how easy it is for local or national identities and their associated hatreds to be manipulated...." That is, all local affiliations *necessarily* and *unavoidably* give rise to "associated hatreds," which can only be overcome by a more universal appeal to reason that transcends such emotional attachments.

<sup>22</sup> E.g., Nussbaum, *For Love of Country*, 13; *Cultivating Humanity*, 59, 61.

<sup>23</sup> Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 58-59; *For Love of Country*, 9-10.

<sup>24</sup> Nussbaum, *For Love of Country*, 7.

<sup>25</sup> Nussbaum acknowledges this form of liberalism to be more Kantian – and perhaps Rawlsian – than the classic liberalism of Hobbes or Locke, which assume a fundamental human viciousness, albeit also distrusting the motives of governments.

<sup>26</sup> Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 59, 60-61.

<sup>27</sup> John Dewey is a good exemplar of this belief in the dual benefits of science for both material and political ends, among many others. See my essay “Havel, Rorty, and the Democratic Faith of John Dewey,” *Social Research* 66 (Summer, 1999): 577-609. Benjamin R. Barber is at times sanguine about technology’s ability to unite people across great distances in *Strong Democracy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

<sup>28</sup> In addition to Nussbaum’s own recommendations for a cosmopolitan education (*Cultivating Humanity*, ch. 2), see Diderot’s famous “Preface” to the *Encyclopedie* as well as Rousseau’s *Emile*, in which a child is to be educated as a “man,” not a “citizen.” On all of these features of cosmopolitanism as pursued during the Enlightenment, consult more generally Schlereth, *The Cosmopolitan Ideal in Enlightenment Thought*.

<sup>29</sup> Most of the mentioned replies appeared in the volume of Nussbaum’s *For Love of Country*. Harvey Mansfield’s response, as well as that of Anne Norton’s, appeared only in the original *Boston Review* debate, “Foolish Cosmopolitanism,” *Boston Review* XIX (October/November, 1994), 10.

<sup>30</sup> The word “nostalgia” is a combination of “*nostos*,” meaning “return” or “homecoming,” and “*algia*” (from *algos*) meaning grief or longing, a feeling of separation, the sense of pain and loss from something lacking.

<sup>31</sup> Nussbaum, *Cultivating Humanity*, 68.

<sup>32</sup> On the relationship of these assorted pleasures to the threats to Odysseus’ consciousness and finally return to the realm of the human, see Charles H. Taylor’s fine article, “The Obstacles to Odysseus’ Return: Identity and Consciousness in ‘The Odyssey.’” *The Yale Review* 50 (1960-61): 569-580.

<sup>33</sup> See 5.77-80 describing Calypso’s instantaneous recognition of Hermes; and 5.97-98, in which Hermes acknowledges that since he is questioned by a goddess, he must speak truthfully. Of course, the gods can be diverted if they are not attentive, and can on occasion even hide their identities from one another, but to accomplish this latter obfuscation requires extraordinary devices, such as the cap of invisibility donned by Athena and the golden cloud sheltering Zeus and Hera described in the *Iliad* (5. 845; 14. 344-345).

<sup>34</sup> Jenny Strauss Clay’s discussion of the differences between mortal and divine apprehension seems to me authoritative. See Clay, *The Wrath of Athena* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1983) chs. 1,3.

<sup>35</sup> C.H. Taylor, 573.

<sup>36</sup> Seth Benardete, *The Bow and the Lyre: A Platonic Reading of the Odyssey* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1997), 99.

<sup>37</sup> Dostoevsky notes this phenomenon in *The Brothers Karamazov* when Ivan observes that the more one loves humanity, the less one cares for people in near proximity (Part 2, Ch.4: “Rebellion”). Gilbert and Sullivan in a lighter vein capture this paradox in a verse from the *Gondoliers*: “When everyone’s someone, then no one’s anybody.”

<sup>38</sup> Dante, *Inferno*, Canto 26.

<sup>39</sup> Lucian, *A True Story* II. Translated by A. M. Harmon. Loeb Classical Library, *Lucian* Vol. 1. (Cambridge: Harvard University, Loeb Classical Library), 341. In some regards, Lucian’s dismissal of Odysseus’ choice resembles Homer treatment of Achilles’ choice in the *Iliad* by revealing his regrets during the confrontation in the *Odyssey*

between Odysseus and Achilles in the underworld (11.465ff.). What each of these instances suggests is that regret may be built into the most resolute decision of this kind, even if we know that the choice we made is likely the correct one.

<sup>40</sup> It is perhaps comparable to the most comprehensive *eros* that Diotima explains as Beauty itself in the *Symposium*. She claims of the one who can contemplate it, “if any human being could become immortal, it would be he” (211e).

<sup>41</sup> This paradox is wonderfully captured by Benjamin Franklin, who – while trying to practice each virtue of a list he created – discovered that in the process of practicing humility, he noticed that “no one of our natural passions is so hard to subdue as *Pride*. Disguise it, struggle with it, beat it down, stifle it, mortify it as much as one pleases, it is still alive, and will every now and then peep out and show itself. . . . For even if I could conceive that I had completely overcome it, I should probably be proud of my Humility.” *Autobiography*. In *Writings* (New York: Library of America, 1987): 1393-1394.

<sup>42</sup> “Transcending Humanity,” 365-391. The essay was originally written in response to a review by Charles Taylor of Nussbaum’s *The Fragility of Goodness*. Taylor’s review appeared in *Canadian Journal of Philosophy* 18 (1988): 805-814.

<sup>43</sup> Nussbaum, “Transcending Humanity,” 366.

<sup>44</sup> Nussbaum, “Transcending Humanity,” 376.

<sup>45</sup> Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 7.

<sup>46</sup> *Politics*, 1326b; 7. Aristotle makes a similar observation when discussing friendship in the *Nicomachean Ethics* where he argues that “the number of one’s friends should be limited, and should perhaps be the largest number with whom one can constantly associate; since . . . to live together is the chief mark of friendship” (1170b-1171a). On the connection between Aristotle’s conception of friendship and politics, see my essay “Friendship and Politics: Ancient and American,” in *Friends and Citizens: Essays in Honor of Wilson Carey McWilliams*, ed. Nancy Schwartz and P. Dennis Bathory, (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000).

<sup>47</sup> Perhaps no other passage best captures this than when Odysseus warns the beggar Iros of the fragility of human life – although there are many others. There he states,

Of all creatures that breathe and walk on the earth there is nothing more helpless than a man is, of all that the earth fosters; for he thinks that he will never suffer misfortune in future days, while the gods grant him courage, and his knees have spring in them. But when the blessed gods bring sad days upon him, against his will he must suffer it with enduring spirit. For the mind in men upon earth goes according to the fortunes the Father of Gods and Men, day by day, bestows upon them. (18.130-137)

<sup>48</sup> Sophocles, *Antigone*, in *The Three Theban Plays*, translated by Robert Fagles. (New York: Penguin Books, 1984), 77.

<sup>49</sup> The idea of shared remembrance, of course, is drawn from Hannah Arendt’s discussion of death and remembrance in *The Human Condition* (New York: Anchor Books, 1958).

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The organization of the *polis* ... is a kind of organized remembrance. It assures the mortal actor that his passing existence and fleeting greatness will never lack the reality that comes from being seen, being heard, and, generally, appearing before an audience of fellow men, who outside the *polis* could attend only the short duration of the performance and therefore needed Homer and "others of his craft" in order to be presented to those who were not there. [176-77]

<sup>50</sup> John E. Seery, in a probing and, at times, very funny book about death, suggests how such visits to the underworld serve to reinforce our connections to others: "Underworldly accounts have been particularly good at providing a sense of linkage between past and present, for recollecting in the land of the dead the memories of lost lovers, neglected parents, and vanquished enemies." *Political Theory for Mortals* (Cornell: Cornell University Press, 1996), 34.

<sup>51</sup> Seth Benardete notes that Elpenor climbed to the roof in the first place in search of cool air (*psuckhos*), but in the process loses his soul (*psuche*), (*The Bow and the Lyre*, 91).

<sup>52</sup> Page writes "aimless anecdotes about insignificant persons are not at all characteristic of the *Odyssey*..." Page finds the only justification for the story inasmuch as "it forms a link between the story of Circe and the story of the Visit to Hades," and he suggests furthermore "this link too was subsequently forged in order to connect two separate narratives" i.e., between the *Odyssey* and the interpolated *Nekyia*. Denys Page, *The Homeric Odyssey* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1955), 44.

<sup>53</sup> At critical moments in the *Iliad*, Achilles' mortal father is invoked by others in order to remind him of his mortal condition, and hence his connections to other people. Since Achilles is here explicitly described as "like the gods," Priam here seeks also to remind him of his own mortal origins as well.

<sup>54</sup> Benardete, *The Bow and the Lyre*, 93.

<sup>55</sup> Elpenor is remembered in another significant way as well: by including him in the story of his journey to the Phaiakians (Odysseus is telling his own story here), which is "preserved" artistically by the epic poet, Elpenor is remembered every time the epic poem is subsequently told, or read. Indeed, Elpenor has found another form of immortality than remembrance itself, reappearing often in the pages of poetry and literature. See Nasos Vaghenàs, "Elpenore: l'anti-Ulisse nella letteratura moderna," in *Ulisse: archaeologia dell'uomo moderno*, ed. Piero Boitani and Richard Ambrosini (Rome: Bulzoni Editore, 1988).