

CHRISTOPHER SCHLIEPHAKE

Ithaca Revisited – Homer’s *Odyssey* and the (Other) Mediterranean Imagination

Tell me, Muse, of the man of many turns
who wandered long and far after he sacked the sacred town of Troy.
Many were those cities he viewed and men whose minds he came to know,
many the troubles that he suffered in his heart as he sailed the seas,
labouring to save himself and to bring his comrades home.
But his comrades he could not keep from ruin, strive as he might.¹

Thus begins the story of the king from the Western islands of Greece, who, in the late Bronze Age, lost his way while sailing home from a ten-year-long war in the East, but who finally managed to return after another 10 years to restore his rule and to regain his wife and son. The prologue to his story is “as traditional as it is enigmatic”². It opens, like other epics, with an invocation to the Muse, an address to what was believed to be the source of the imagination of artistic creation. And yet, the hero in question is only hinted at in the famous periphrasis *polútropos*, a word that eludes easy translation as much as the hero that it came to connote evades any neat categorization or interpretation.³ “The man of many turns” or “much-turning man”⁴ was imbued with the traits of an early age trickster, a man of disguises, many voyages, and the mythic aura of intricate narratives that, while rich in everyday detail, invoked the realm of the fantastic. The group of stories that were associated with his adventures may have been circulating as early as the Bronze Age and underwent, much like the hero that they described, numerous cultural changes and re-workings, until one of the bards who passed them along assembled them in a narrative that he wrote down in phonetic script.⁵ Both the author and his protagonist have since

* My gratitude to Franziska Waßerberg for her unremitting support and inspiration.

1 Homer: *Odyssey*, edited and translated by Walter Shewring, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1980, 1.1-6.

2 Suzanne Saïd: *Homer and the Odyssey*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011, p. 95.

3 Cf. Edith Hall: *The Return of Ulysses. A Cultural History of Homer’s Odyssey*, London: Tauris, 2012, p. 19.

4 Homer: *Odyssey* (note 1), 1.1.

5 The viewpoint articulated here is part of the neo-analytic tradition according to which there was one author of the *Odyssey*, but multiple, heterogeneous sources from which he drew and which explain the inconsistencies within the text. On the vast scholarship surrounding the ‘Homeric question’ cf. Saïd: *Homer and the Odyssey* (note 2), pp. 7-45. On Homer and

formed the benchmark of the ‘Western’ imagination and have long entered into the transnational canon of world literature.

The author, Homer, and his mythical hero, Odysseus, have, indeed, travelled far and wide since presumably the late 8th or 7th century BCE; they have crossed oceans and were used to literally interpret the geographies, people and experiences of near, and at times, faraway places. In antiquity, the oral poem had already become a cultural artefact, used for schoolboys’ grammatical learning, pictured in mosaics on the walls of aristocrats’ houses, and told in various social contexts – from gatherings in open air amphitheatres to the dingy atmosphere of port town brothels. Greek, and later, Roman colonisers and their Hellenized people adopted and transformed, in ever new ways, the *Odyssey* and made it their own. It became a defining cultural possession of Greek-speaking communities which eventually spread over the vast geographical region that we now refer to as the Mediterranean and its content allows for a glimpse into what interested and fascinated a society of seafarers, traders, explorers and pirates. Many commentators since antiquity have, in fact, identified the *Odyssey* as the ultimate sea-faring poem, both in terms of its maritime themes and socio-historical background as well as its composition in hexameter verse, often associated with the rhythm of waves. Accordingly, personifications of the *Odyssey* were usually depicted on ships and, up to the present, the tales of Odysseus and his adventures resonate strongly with adventures, exploration and travel in unknown or wide spaces.⁶

The Mediterranean Sea, before the advent of satellite images and navigational cartography, was itself just such a vast geography, waiting to be explored and eventually conquered by different people and cultures, whose history has been marked by peaceful co-existence, violent clashes, and cultural transfer processes. In this piece I seek to show the role of the *Odyssey* in the formation of ‘Mediterraneanism’, how it has become connected to the vast cultural memory of Mediterranean culture and its geography. While I suggest that the Homeric narrative and its reception have ascribed multi-layered levels of meaning to the abstract space of the sea and its coastlands, I want to explore, against this background, the relation that the *Odyssey* has to ‘the other’ of this world. ‘Othering’ will thereby be seen as one of its central poetic strategies, offering a complex meditation on cultural identity and ethics – an aspect that will be analysed in a close reading of the famous Cyclops episode, the Cyclopeia, in book nine. Finally, some strands of the complex reception of Homer’s epic will be sketched out in order to show how the poem has been used in colonial contexts and for imperialist ideology as well as the way in which, with the advent of post-colonialism, the reception has taken on another turn and become a central text for discussing cultural alterity and hybridity.

his time cf. the formidable collection of essays in: Homer Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung, edited by Antonios Rengakos and Bernhard Zimmermann, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011.

6 Cf. Hall: The Return of Ulysses (note 3), pp. 7-15.

Revisiting a highly canonized ancient text can help us not only in coming up with new interpretations or in detecting new levels of meaning in it, but can also, I argue, help us in thinking about what the Mediterranean is and how we want to live in it.

The *Odyssey* and the Mediterranean Imagination

Although the *Odyssey* has played an integral role in the formation of what I tentatively refer to as a ‘Mediterranean imagination’, both because of its setting and its stories which lent themselves to adaption by the societies and cultures which would only emerge much later, it is “misleading” to ascribe to it the status of a “foundational”⁷ text. As commentators have noted, it rather represents the outcome of cultural contacts with Ancient Near Eastern storytelling and poetic myth-making in cultures whose area of influence encompassed a region that stretched from the Eastern Aegean to the Persian Gulf. The Sumerian *Epic of Gilgamesh*, the oldest and first great literary text to have been passed down the millennia, preceded Homer and his contemporaries by at least 1000 years. It, too, is a story about travel and adventure with many parallels to the *Odyssey*, involving the help of gods, a visit to the underworld and fights with giants.⁸ Perilous quests, being lost at sea or encounters with fantastic beings, often representing the non-human world, feature prominently in many mythical systems all over the world, but they were certainly a distinctive trait of early Mediterranean storytelling. An Egyptian prose tale called ‘The Shipwrecked Sailor’, which has been preserved on a papyrus of the Middle Kingdom from around 2000 BCE, is also made up of these narrative elements⁹ and attests to the way in which early sea-faring societies rendered and made sense of their experiences through the means of imaginative storytelling and world-making.

The same is true for the oral tradition out of which the *Odyssey* evolved and which had almost certainly been around since the Bronze Age. The ‘Trojan War’ became, in this context, a kind of mythical groundwork to which a series of associated narratives could be attached and which left succeeding bards enough room to both enter and improvise on an age-old tradition. Most likely, the *Odyssey* developed out of a series of so-called *nostos*-stories, which told about the ‘return’ of the Greek heroes that had fought at Troy. If there ever was an individual called Homer, his original genius was to tap into what was circulating all around him and to forge, out of a series of interconnected narratives, an archetypal story, imbuing it with an imaginative quality which still resonates today. In consequence, while the epic has become a repository of

7 Hall: *The Return of Ulysses* (note 3), p. 8.

8 Cf. *ibid.*

9 Cf. *ibid.*, p. 164.

cultural imagination and memory, it served as a cultural archive right from the beginning – an archive both of knowledge and of the age-old traditions and narratives that had been weaved into its complex fabric.

Thus, although the question as to whether there ever was a ‘historical Trojan War’ has been hotly debated in academic and public circles since the early modern age, the issue is, for our subject at hand, not the factual or fictional quality of the events recorded in Greek epic, but rather the fact that they created an imaginary world which has endured over generations and which, even today, has lost nothing of its appeal.¹⁰ In antiquity, subsequent generations took the Trojan War as a historical fact and used it for political argumentation, making it part of their ‘intentional history’;¹¹ and since at least the 5th century BCE, Greeks took the Homeric epics as an interpretative foil to explain a world that they preserved through the lens of binary thinking, West and East, Greek and Asian and/or Barbarian. The reception of Homer’s texts has thus, from the beginning, been marked by the tendency to read them against the background of a real geography and real socio-political developments. The *Odyssey* that has been passed to us can therefore be said to be made up of a series of readings and multiple layers of meaning that constantly shift between an imagined world and its utopia and the socio-historical milieu of changing Mediterranean societies and the places in which they lived.

The latter aspect brings us to the complicated issue of the ‘Mediterranean’ itself. The fact that the *Odyssey* was preceded by at least two millennia of textual productions by cultures that are located in what we now refer to as the Near East is a reminder of where the cultural roots of a ‘Mediterranean imagination’ are to be sought. This aspect brings Marc van de Mierop to note that “at times the Ancient Near East was the Mediterranean world”,¹² that the “limits” of that world “depended on historical circumstances” and that “the small zones” of which it consisted “are connected to one another to an extent that depends on the activities of the humans inhabiting them. The geographical extent of those connections varies – and therefore what can be called the Mediterranean world changes”.¹³ As William Harris puts it, the question of what the “Mediterranean” is, has historically been a “problem of delimitation”.¹⁴

10 Cf. Gregor Weber: *Der Trojanische Krieg: Historische Realität oder poetische Fiktion*, in: *Homer Handbuch. Leben – Werk – Wirkung*, edited by Antonios Rengakos and Bernhard Zimmermann, Stuttgart: Metzler, 2011, pp. 228-256.

11 Cf. Hans-Joachim Gehrke: *Mythos, Geschichte, Politik – antik und modern*, in: *Saeculum* 45, 1994, pp. 239-264.

12 Marc van de Mierop: *The Eastern Mediterranean in Early Antiquity*, in: *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, edited by William V. Harris, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 117-140, here p. 118.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 117.

14 William V. Harris: *The Mediterranean and Ancient History*, in: *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, edited by William V. Harris, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005, pp. 1-44, here p. 4.

The ancient Roman and Greek terms for it,¹⁵ ‘mare nostrum’ (‘our sea’) or ‘he kath’hemas thalassa’ (‘the sea in our part of the world’)¹⁶, included the connotation of the appropriation of space. In fact, Western or Eurocentric historiography has been biased by these terms, equating ancient Greek and Roman history with Mediterranean history.¹⁷ Unearthing the roots of an epic like the *Odyssey* and uncovering the social context and imaginative mythical universe in which it evolved thus poses a challenge to this view and reminds us that the ‘our’, in the Greek and Roman sense, had always been full of ‘others’ from the very beginning.¹⁸

What I refer to as a ‘Mediterranean imagination’ in my essay is, against this background, not to be mistaken for a convenient shorthand for presupposing that there is a kind of cultural “unity”¹⁹ or a uniform imaginary that has been connected to the distinct geography of the Mediterranean world; rather, I employ the term as a way of re-enforcing the idea of the Mediterranean as a zone of contact and of “connectedness”²⁰ that has shown itself not only in violent conflicts or trade routes but also in forms of imaginative world-making, in the texts, stories and cultural artefacts that have constantly shaped and re-shaped one another, transforming the abstract geographical space into a sounding board for different voices and highly divergent world views. Studying works of art that have long been connected to ‘Mediterraneanism’ is, against this background, one strategy for reflecting on the cultural contexts in which these works developed as well as on how they have imaginatively transformed the social energy that inspired them, also posing epistemological challenges and subversive views for dominant social systems. Next to the geographical and material world and dynamic space of the Mediterranean seas and the many ‘sub-Mediterranean’ areas that surround it²¹, the cultural forms of articulation that have entered into the cultural memory and that have originated in this region of the world, can themselves be seen as imaginative spaces in which expressions, meanings and interpretations of what the ‘Mediterranean’ is can be sought and, finally, called into question.

That the *Odyssey* itself has contributed to the idea of the ‘Mediterranean’ and its culture has been clear from the outset. From the 7th century BCE on-

15 Ibid., p. 18.

16 Hecataeus, quoted in Serenella Iovino: Introduction: Mediterranean Ecocriticism, or, A Blueprint for Cultural Amphibians, in: *Ecozon@* 4, 2, 2013, pp. 1-12, here p. 1.

17 Harris: *The Mediterranean and Ancient History* (note 14), p. 2.

18 I hereby paraphrase Serenella Iovino, whose thought-provoking essay in the *Ecozon@* special issue on “Mediterranean Ecocriticism”, a new, vibrant trend in the “Environmental Humanities”, closes with the sentence inspired by Italian writer Franco Cassano: “If it is difficult, to distinctly define a Mediterranean identity, this is for a very simple reason: Our ‘we’ is full of Others” (Iovino: Introduction (note 16), p. 12).

19 Harris: *The Mediterranean and Ancient History* (note 14), p. 26.

20 Ibid., p. 8.

21 Cf. David Abulafia: *Mediterraneans*, in: *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, edited by William V. Harris, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 64-93.

wards, scenes taken from the epic featured prominently on Greek vase paintings which spread, as the Greek colonization of the West began, throughout the Mediterranean coastlands. It was included in schoolbooks and became the basis of education for learners of Greek everywhere, including Renaissance Humanists. For Romans, the epic became an explanation of how culture was transmitted to the West.²² Etruscans, as Farrell points out, believed that Odysseus had brought their people to Italy and saw themselves as standing in a cultural continuity with the Greek hero. The Romans of the Imperial period also drew on this genealogy and interpreted the *Odyssey*, long before Virgil, as a story pointing westward, as a story set in the Western Mediterranean world.²³ Ancient geography thus “took Odysseus ever westward as the Roman Empire expanded and he became the mythical founder of cities in Spain and Portugal”²⁴ – the most famous example being the city of Lisbon (from Olissipo or Ulyssipo, ‘Ulysses’ polis’), which became the starting point for the Portuguese empire of the 16th century. However, one should keep in mind that Odysseus’ adventures “are not known itineraries”²⁵. Whereas the *nostoi* of the other heroes of Troy are set in a real geography, Odysseus’ adventures are played out, for the most part, in the utopia of a fantastical world. Yet, the geographical setting of the epic has itself become the repository of the cultural imagination. In the first edition of his classic tome *La Méditerranée et le Monde méditerranéen à l’époque de Philippe II*, Fernand Braudel remembers the explorations of Victor Bérard who took it upon himself to search for the landscapes of Odysseus’ adventures throughout the Mediterranean space, remarking that we should rather look for traces of the Homeric hero in today’s humans.²⁶

In the Early Modern Age, countless European travellers in the Mediterranean region looked for both – the Hellenistic ideal, embodied in the humans that they encountered on their cruises and that, most of the time, did not meet their expectations²⁷ as well as the storied landscapes of myth which would re-enforce the aesthetic pleasure of their classical reading.²⁸ When Johann Wolfgang von Goethe travelled through Sicily, he read the *Odyssey*, whose “truth

22 Cf. Hall: *The Return of Ulysses* (note 3), p. 77.

23 Joseph Farrell: *Roman Homer*, in: *The Cambridge Companion to Homer*, edited by Robert Fowler, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, pp. 254-271.

24 Hall: *The Return of Ulysses* (note 3), p. 78.

25 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

26 Fernand Braudel: *Géohistoire und geographischer Determinismus*, in: *Raumtheorie. Grundlagentexte aus Philosophie und Kulturwissenschaften*, edited by Jörg Dünne and Stephan Günzel, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2006 [1949], pp. 395-408, here p. 401.

27 Cf. Suzanne Saïd: *The Mirage of Greek Continuity: On the Uses and Abuses of Analogy in Some Travel Narratives from the Seventeenth to the Eighteenth Century*, in: *Rethinking the Mediterranean*, edited by William V. Harris, Oxford: Oxford University Press, pp. 268-293.

28 Cf. David Constantine: *In the Footsteps of the Gods. Travellers to Greece and the Quest for the Hellenic Ideal*, New York: Tauris, 2011.

and beauty were revealed to him with new intensity in the places in which, so he believed, the poem was set”²⁹:

Now that I have here present in my mind these coasts and headlands, gulfs and bays, islands and spits of land, rocks and beaches, bushy hills, gentle pastures, fertile fields, splendid gardens, well-cared-for trees, trailing vines, cloudy peaks and always-smiling plains, cliffs and banks and the all-surrounding sea – now that I have all this, in such variation and variety, only now has the *Odyssey* become for me a living world.³⁰

The perception of landscapes and the reception of classical literature intertwine in Goethe’s account to create an imaginative geography in which the present and the past fuse into one another. We have, on the one hand, the real Sicily, as it shows itself in both a cultivated and non-human nature as well as a Sicily of the mind, imbued with fantasies, memories, and stories that have become attached to it and ascribe meaning to the abstract, perceptible landscape. The Sicily in Goethe’s account can, in this sense, be seen as a stand-in for the Mediterranean with its watery landscapes and diverse coastlands as a whole, for it, too, is a vast geographic region into which different historic accounts and narratives have become inscribed. The cultural imagination constantly works to turn abstract spaces into ‘storied’ places³¹ characterized by present needs and concerns as well as by culturally mediated pasts. The Mediterranean therefore can itself be seen as a ‘storied’ place that is dominated as much by the factual and geomorphological processes that constantly transform it as by the cultural imaginary.

The Mediterranean is a space of relations – both between places as well as between the narratives, memories and fantasies that are attached to these places. Accordingly, it figures as a ‘heterotopia’ in the sense of Michel Foucault, a region that exists in space, but that is likewise marked by manifold temporal ruptures and culturally mediated layers of meaning that follow a logic of exclusion and inclusion.³² The heterogeneous image of the Mediterranean that arises was already present in Homer’s *Odyssey*, in which real and imagined landscapes constantly interact to form a space in which the narrow boundaries between civilization and wilderness, culture and nature, Greek and Barbarian are tested in a fictional medium. From here, they have served as a guide for countless societies and individuals that have read their own experiences of the “Mediterranean” against the background of the Homeric epic – from Roman

29 Ibid., p. 81.

30 Johann Wolfgang Goethe: Werke XI: Autobiographische Schriften III, edited by E. Trunz et. al., München: Beck, 1974 [1786], p. 323 (translation by David Constantine).

31 Cf. Christopher Schliephake: Memory, Place, and Ecology in the Contemporary American Novel, in: Literature, Ecology, Ethics, edited by Timo Müller and Michael Sauter, Heidelberg: Winter, 2012, pp. 95-112, here pp. 95-98.

32 Cf. Michel Foucault: Von anderen Räumen, in: Raumtheorie. Grundlagentexte aus Philosophie und Kulturwissenschaften, edited by Jörg Dünne and Stephan Günzel, Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 2006 [1967], pp. 317-329.

emperors to early modern travellers like Goethe or modern adventurers like T. E. Lawrence, who, when explaining to his publisher why he is the perfect translator of the *Odyssey*, compared his own experiences with that of the mythic hero:

For years we were doing up a city of roughly the Odysseus period. I have handled the weapons, armour, utensils of those times, explored their houses, planned their cities. I have hunted wild boars and watched lions, sailed the Aegean in sailing ships, bent bows, lived with pastoral peoples, woven textiles, built boats and killed many men.³³

The emphatic reception of the *Odyssey* co-relates with an ethnographic interest and an adventurous spirit that combines the mythical quest narrative with a socio-political rendition of the 'other' so that the layers of time are, in Lawrence's account, suspended to create the impression that the Mediterranean of Homer's age is still here, in the present. As such, Lawrence's account is, like Goethe's quoted above, a manifestation of the 'Mediterranean imagination' and a true testament to the way in which an ancient text can, in ever new ways, reach out and influence how we perceive a specific geographic region. How the impulse to meet the 'other' of that region was reflected in Homer's text will be dealt with in the following paragraphs.

Imagining the 'Other' in Homer's *Odyssey*

One can safely say that the *Odyssey* is obsessed with 'othering'. In his study *Memories of Odysseus – Frontier tales from ancient Greece* François Hartog underlines the importance of the idea of frontiers for an early Greek society that was beginning to sail the vast space between what we now refer to as the Black Sea and the Pillars of Hercules in the West, which would remain frontier markers until the Early Modern Age. Travellers, he remarks, were adopted as "guides" and "translators"³⁴ of faraway places and people. There are many navigators, geographers, mercenaries, and philosophers who we know by name and who travelled in a world corresponding to real geographies and socio-cultural contexts. However, since they went beyond the narrow confines of their 'own' world, beyond the landscapes and languages that they knew, their experiences were easily translated in the guise of the highly imaginative vocabulary of myth and folktale. 'Othering' in the Mediterranean has always been, I would suggest, about the "sketching out of"³⁵ identities – constituting the respective 'we' in opposition or, at least, in relation to an 'other' that had

33 Thomas E. Lawrence: *The Letters of T.E. Lawrence*, edited by David Garnett, New York: Doubleday, 1938, p. 710.

34 François Hartog: *Memories of Odysseus – Frontier Tales from Ancient Greece*, Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2001, pp. 4, 5.

35 *Ibid.*, p. 5.

to be rendered in ways which drew on the sign-systems of the cultures in which these identities emerged, but which also had to be imbued with the sense of the strange and unfamiliar. I would suggest that the early Greek epics became repositories of the cultural imagination in exactly this way, that they presented the vocabulary which could be drawn upon whenever Greek-speaking people encountered sailors, lands, or indeed beasts that they perceived as alien.

The *Odyssey* is the first literary example to use the motif of the “voyage” in this way, “as a discursive operator and a narrative device”³⁶ that would help Greek speakers to literally navigate the imaginary border zones between their own world and what lay beyond. It is thus marked by a discursive dialectics constantly moving between a “closure” and an “opening-up”³⁷ of this world, between creating the notion and the sense of a ‘we’ and the recognition that some ‘other’, too, was part of the wider world in which the Greeks sailed their ships. In consequence, that wider world, the Mediterranean Sea, was portrayed “both as one and diverse”, made up of “several heterogeneous spaces, which it separates rather than unites”.³⁸ The narrative trajectory that makes up the *Odyssey* can itself be seen as a “journey through successive spaces”³⁹, as a way of imaginatively testing the very categories by which these spaces were read and could be made sense of. Accordingly, the dividing line between these spaces was not so much marked by the issue of Greek and Barbarian – although that would become an important interpretative measure later on – but by the question of whether that space was ‘cultivated’ by humans, showing the signs of a proto-urban lifestyle and of archaic Greek customs, or alien in the sense that it was either inhabited by savages or non-humans. The geography of the Mediterranean presented thus emerged out of “a series of increasingly distant zones”⁴⁰, finally leading the hero into the realm of the fantastic which no longer had an equivalent in real geography, but was rather set in the utopia of an imaginative otherworld. Here, as Hartog notes, “Odysseus encounters a radical otherness, where the whole matter of boundaries is brought into question, and the categories separating human beings, beasts and the gods are all confused”.⁴¹

One of the emblematic figures in this context is the sea-divinity Proteus, who lived on an island named Pharos, north of the Nile. Proteus is the “archetypal shape-shifter” – his repertoire “includes water and fire as well as every beast on the earth; his labile nature is related to his identification with the mutable element of the sea”⁴². Proteus plays an important role in the return of

36 Ibid., p. 8.

37 Ibid., p. 13.

38 Ibid., p. 21.

39 Ibid., p. 22.

40 Ibid., p. 23.

41 Ibid., p. 24.

42 Hall: *The Return of Ulysses* (note 3), p. 31.

Menelaus from Troy, but the reason why he offers himself as an example of ‘othering’ in the *Odyssey* is because he is in many ways “emblematic of the whole” text, due to the “central position it gives to transformation and disguise – indeed to the acting of parts”⁴³. Odysseus, the protagonist, is a shape-shifter himself, when he returns to Ithaca he does so as a beggar not as a king. As Edith Hall has noted,

the *Odyssey* can itself be said to be a Protean text, a shape-shifting object in itself. The poem has so many strands, some prematurely truncated, others winding through the text to re-emerge later, that it can be safely said to mirror its content in form.⁴⁴

Equally important is its “epistemological dimension: It explicitly discusses the nature of truth and fiction”⁴⁵. Odysseus not only appears in disguise, he is also a crafted liar and arguably the first unreliable narrator in world literature. I would argue that this particular feature of the text, which also sets it apart from the *Iliad*, is not only the side effect of its oral composition from different sources, but also a conscious narrative trait, steeped in the socio-historical contexts of a world in constant change and concerned with the negotiation of identity and with opening up an imaginative space to deal with the heterogeneous and diverse aspects of this world, symbolized by both the wanderings of the hero as well as by the fluid, unstable nature of the sea itself.

As many commentators have noted, the epic “evokes the danger and excitement of traversing unknown seas to distant lands”⁴⁶ and became a central cultural text for a society that began to sail to distant shores for trade or settlement. As Edith Hall puts it, “the resistance that early Greek tradesmen and settlers encountered abroad informs the poem, but it is mediated by the vocabulary of myth, so that the ethnically other is transformed into the supernatural and inhuman”⁴⁷. Nowhere is this clearer than in the famous Cyclops episode that figures prominently within the poem and that has, with its rich visual detail and imaginative force, become a central trope of the imagination of visual artists. The Cyclops episode is a turning point in Homer’s *Odyssey*. The narrative of the action is framed by Odysseus’ stay on the mythical islands of the Phaeacians from which he, in the tenth and last year of his voyage, is about to be brought back to Ithaca. His narration takes the listeners back to the beginning of his voyage. Shortly after their departure from Troy, he and his companions were blown off their homeward course by a storm around Cape Maleia and landed on the shores of the islands of the goats which are devoid of any signs of civilization. Odysseus, the proto-colonizer is, however, quick to

43 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

44 *Ibid.*, p. 43.

45 *Ibid.*, p. 48.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 76.

47 *Ibid.*

note that “the land is not at all bad, and could produce every kind of seasonal crop”.⁴⁸

Curious as to what kind of creatures live on the neighbouring island of the Cyclops, he decides to make an expedition there with some of his best men. They find the cave of the giant Cyclops Polyphemos and start to eat some of his supplies which are neatly ordered. When he returns with his sheep, he closes the entrance to the cave with a giant rock and detects the intruders. When the strangers expect to be treated as guests and be given presents according to the customs, he laughs at them and begins to eat them. Thanks to the cunning intelligence of Odysseus who passes himself off as ‘Nobody’, intoxicates the Cyclops with some wine that they brought along, and blinds him with a sharpened stick, he and his men can flee. It is only when they are at a safe distance that Odysseus states his real name which leads Polyphemos to curse him – a curse that will lead to the long wanderings of Odysseus due to the wrath of Poseidon. This episode is, as Lorna Hardwick has put it, “shaped by the interdependence of the motifs of identity and intelligence, the poetic device of punning and the organising structures of polarities”⁴⁹: nature and culture, wilderness and civilization, freedom and captivity make up the poles that structure the episode and its language, which draws on a vocabulary well known to Greek speakers and included “the social and anthropological categories of *xenia* (hospitality), laws, lifestyle, technical skills and verbal skills”⁵⁰. The ‘difference’ of the Cyclopes is set out, as Norman Austin⁵¹ has noticed, right from the beginning in a series of negatives:

The lawless outrageous
Cyclopes who, putting all their trust in the immortal
gods, neither plough with their hands nor plant anything (...)
These people have no institutions, no meetings for counsels;
rather they make their habitations in caverns hollowed
among the peaks of the high mountains, and each one is the law
for his own wives and children and cares nothing about the others.⁵²

This passage implicitly contains the description of a civilized man who is clearly opposed to the Cyclopes who do not know social institutions or laws, who are neither farmers nor sea-farers. The negation of these qualities has led to interpretations that see in the Cyclopes the ultimate embodiments of ‘other’

48 Homer: *Odyssey* (note 1), 9.131-6.

49 Lorna Hardwick: *A Daidalos in the later-modern age? Transplanting Homer into Derek Walcott's The Odyssey: A stage version*, The Open University, January Conference 1996: *The Reception of Classical Texts and Images*, <<http://www2.open.ac.uk/ClassicalStudies/GreekPlays/conf96/hardwick.htm>>, [accessed September 17, 2014].

50 *Ibid.*

51 Norman Austin: *Odysseus and the Cyclops. Who is who?*, in: *Approaches to Homer*, edited by Carl A. Rubino and Cynthia W. Shelmerdine, Austin: University of Texas Press, 1983, pp. 3-37, here pp. 22-24.

52 Homer: *Odyssey* (note 1), 9.106-15.

in the *Odyssey*⁵³ – an interpretation that is supported by Odysseus’ motif for his visit to the island according to which he wanted to find out “whether they are savage and violent and without justice or hospitable to strangers and with minds that are godly”⁵⁴. Although Odysseus’ discoveries and his descriptions (according to him, the Cyclops is a “monster of a man”⁵⁵ “endowed with great strength and wild with no true knowledge of laws or any good customs”⁵⁶), reinforce the impression of the ‘otherness’ of the Cyclopes, there is another aspect to his story that runs counter to his portrayal and that allows for another interpretation of the episode altogether. Odysseus’ storytelling is motivated by his need to explain why he stayed in the empty cave although his comrades urged him to leave. The Greek seafarers are, in this scenario, not so much explorers, but rather intruders into the home of Polyphemus, which is neatly ordered and which is not as desolate as the master-narrator has us believe, since the other Cyclopes, who live nearby, quickly come to Polyphemus’ cave when he screams for their help. They, too, it becomes clear, are social beings and cultivate their surroundings, albeit in different ways to those of the archaic Greek society in which the epic was sung. It is only Odysseus’ trickery and his command of language that allows him and his surviving comrades to eventually flee.

The deciding aspect which allows Odysseus’ listeners to understand the episode in terms of ‘otherness’ is Polyphemus’ anthropophagy. As Lorna Hardwick points out, these “eating habits [...] map cultural and moral boundaries. On one level, Odysseus asserts his own sense of identity and community in the categories which he uses to interrogate the Cyclops”⁵⁷. On another level, one might add, these very “categories”, presented in a series of polarisations, drew on a language that was taken out of the context of Greek proto-urban lifestyle and a society that was beginning to travel the seas not solely on the grounds of trade and discovery, but also for the purpose of colonizing foreign, faraway lands. “Positioned in these polarised structures, the Cyclops could become a reference point for representations of ‘otherness’”⁵⁸. Not only is he, “at all times, ancillary and subordinate to the representation of the hero himself”⁵⁹, but his anthropophagy “articulates the boundaries between the civilized and savage worlds of Greeks and barbarians as well as between humans and animals”⁶⁰. Dougherty thus interprets the episode against the background of a

53 Cf. Hardwick: A Daidalos (note 49).

54 Homer: *Odyssey* (note 1), 9.174-6.

55 *Ibid.*, 9.187.

56 *Ibid.*, 9.214-5.

57 Hardwick: A Daidalos (note 49).

58 *Ibid.*

59 Ray J. Clare: *Representing monstrosity: Polyphemos in the Odyssey*, in: *Monsters and Monstrosity in Greek and Roman Culture*, edited by Catherine Atherton, Bari: Levante, 1998, pp. 1-17, here p. 7.

60 Carol Dougherty: *The Raft of Odysseus: The Ethnographic Imagination of Homer’s Odyssey*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001, p. 136.

colonizing discourse which rendered the settlement of oversea territories as a “violent process” in which the negative portrayal of the otherness that would be encountered “served to redirect the violence and the transgression involved [...] from coloniser to colonised”⁶¹. The depiction of the ‘other’ of the Mediterranean world in which this colonisation took place produced, in the guise of “an adventure story”, as Hartog notes, a “long-lasting paradigm” for the interpretation and the portrayal of the boundaries of that world and became a repository for the cultural imagination of the ‘other’, a poetic background against which to literally read and negotiate the confines, places and violence that would make up its experiential base. The “poetic anthropology” of the *Odyssey* thus “provided the basis for the Greeks’ vision of themselves and of others”.⁶² However, as I have noted before, it would be wrong to interpret the *Odyssey* as a normative text; rather, the literary epistemology of the multi-layered and complex epic constantly works to question the very moral and linguistic backcloth of the categories of ‘self’ and ‘other’, ‘human’ and ‘animal’, ‘nature’ and ‘culture’. Homer’s epic does not project the question of ‘otherness’ onto the real geography of a Mediterranean space, but rather relegates it to the realm of the imaginary and of language. It is on this realm that subsequent generations have drawn in their respective portrayal of a ‘Mediterranean other’.

Other Odysseys

From antiquity onwards, the *Odyssey* became and has remained one of the central cultural texts of the Western literary canon, it has inspired countless writers and artists from Virgil over Dante to James Joyce, and, as such, it has travelled itself, in ever new disguises and contexts, all over the world and has long entered into the transnational cultural heritage of humankind as a whole. That is to say, now, it belongs to everyone. However, that has not always been the case. When it was adopted first by Romans and later by Renaissance seafarers it was done so under the sign of imperialist ideology and cultural hegemony. It became an integral part of what Edward W. Said has termed the ‘cultural topography’ of imperialism, a phenomenon that Said perceives in terms of geographic ‘location’ as well as linguistic reference to space. According to him, imperialism is not only a phenomenon that works in terms of power relations between centre and periphery, but also in terms of cultural texts that inscribe imperialist ideologies into the lands and cultures of the colonised, thus constantly re-producing inequality on the level of culture as well. However, the tension and distance between metropolis and colony also has the curious effect of opening up new room for cultural creativity and productivity

61 Ibid., p. 137.

62 Hartog 2001, p. 25.

that can lead to new forms of cultural world-making and even to the subversion of hegemonic texts.⁶³ I would argue that the *Odyssey* can itself be seen as an example of this mechanism.

Adopted by colonial powers, it became a central ingredient of imperial curricula and schoolbooks⁶⁴ and featured prominently in the travel writings of proto-imperialist explorers like Columbus or Cook. As Hartog has noted in this context, their discoveries opened up the discursive category of the “savage”⁶⁵. What they encountered beyond the Pillars of Hercules (which featured as a prominent sign of the zeitgeist of the time, as the imaginative border zone between civilization and the unknown awaiting in the West), was a New World – yet, they did not describe this world, at first, in terms of a new language or poetics, but rather in a curious “mélange de fantastique et de familier”⁶⁶. Although the Ancients had presumably never seen these spaces and people, their texts offered a cultural archive for making sense and ascribing meaning to what the modern seafarers saw and would imbue their writings with a rich imaginative quality that was familiar to their audience at home. Columbus wrote of Sirens, Amazons and monsters that he encountered on his travels. Even the complex cultural construction of ‘cannibalism’, a term that was adopted from a Native Caribbean tongue, harked back on ancient myths and ethnographic texts.⁶⁷ It was in this sense that the classical tradition played an integral role in the project of empire building – not only because it had evolved out of cultures that had themselves been colonial powers, but because it offered a language and an imaginary backdrop that helped “in constructing the binary of a European self and a non-European other”, thus influencing “ways of seeing and modes of articulation that are central to the colonial process”.⁶⁸ With its rich imagination of the ‘other’ outlined above, the *Odyssey* offered itself as a central text for this project and became implicated in colonial discourse.

Especially the famous Cyclops episode has remained an influential cultural artefact, constantly re-written and reproduced in colonial (and post-colonial) times. Edith Hall has, in her brilliant reception study of the *Odyssey* *The Return of Ulysses*, sketched out a broad overview of the different ways in which this episode was read and re-interpreted throughout the modern era.⁶⁹ As she points out, “the poem was almost always understood from the perspective of Odysseus the wayfarer”⁷⁰, whereas, citing examples from writers as diverse as

63 Cf. Edward W. Said: *Kultur und Imperialismus. Einbildungskraft und Politik im Zeitalter der Macht*, Frankfurt/Main: Fischer, 1994.

64 Cf. Norrell A. London: *Curriculum and Pedagogy in the Development of Colonial Imagination: A Case Study*, in: *Pedagogy, Culture, and Society* 10, 2002, pp. 95-121.

65 François Hartog: *Anciens, Modernes, Sauvages*, Paris: Galaade, 2005, p. 18.

66 *Ibid.*, p. 35.

67 Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 37-42.

68 Ania Loomba: *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, New York: Routledge, 2005, p. 66.

69 Hall: *The Return of Ulysses* (note 3), pp. 89-100.

70 *Ibid.*, p. 91.

Columbus, Locke, and Darwin, “the Cyclops [...] long represented the savages who inhabited shores ripe for invasion”⁷¹. However, as she also makes clear, “the story doesn’t end here, for the Cyclops has become not only a totemic but a *contested* figure”⁷². In recent, post-colonial literature, starting with the Négritude movement of the 1930s, “instances of the Cyclops becoming a point of identification by oppressed ethnic groups, or anti-colonial polemicists, can [...] be multiplied”⁷³. Writers like Aimé Césaire, Ralph Ellison or Derek Walcott have, all in their distinct ways, used the *Odyssey* as an important intertext of their own work, taking it as the basis for a re-formulation of black or Creole identity and have thereby taken on a new perspective on the Cyclops that is now increasingly seen as the victim of colonial oppression. Yet, it is important to note that their responses do not constitute a coherent or unified anti- or post-colonial viewpoint, but rather “a multitude of postcolonial and anticolonial responses”⁷⁴. I cite them as an example of an “ethos” that Justine McConnell sees at work in the postcolonial re-working of the Homeric epics, namely that they make clear that the ancient texts do “not belong inherently to Europe, that they can be as African, Caribbean, and American, as they are European, as ‘black’ as they are ‘white’”⁷⁵. The *Odyssey* can be seen, against this background, as a primary example of what Stephen Greenblatt and others have termed ‘cultural mobility’, of the way cultural texts can travel between cultures and how they constantly change their meaning once they circulate in different socio-historic contexts.⁷⁶

This latter aspect brings us, in fact, back to what I have referred to as the ‘Mediterranean imagination’. If the *Odyssey* can be said to be an early example of how cultural contacts and the encounter with the ‘other’ have produced a myth that became deeply entrenched in the ways in which ancient people and subsequent generations have read and imagined the Mediterranean world, how does the postcolonial re-working of a text like the *Odyssey* affect this imagination? Can it, in the end, change our perception of what we refer to as ‘Mediterranean’? I think it can. The postcolonial readings of the *Odyssey* can, in this context, be seen as a “writing back” strategy, in which the re-writing and re-reading of canonical texts of the “Western” literary canon can be seen as “counter-discursive practices”⁷⁷ that follow a “revisionary impetus” and can

71 Ibid., p. 92.

72 Ibid., p. 93 (emphasis in original).

73 Ibid., p. 96.

74 Justine McConnell: *Black Odysseys. The Homeric Odyssey in the African Diaspora since 1939*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, p. 3.

75 Ibid., p. 9.

76 Cf. *Cultural Mobility. A Manifesto*, edited by Stephen Greenblatt et. al., Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.

77 Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin: *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures*, London: Routledge, 1989, p. 196.

be interpreted as acts of “reinscription”⁷⁸ in which the colonial periphery transforms the sign- and meaning-making systems of the cultural centre. If “Hellenism” is to be “thought of as one of the modes of Western discourse [...], one of the vocabularies the West uses to think about itself”⁷⁹, then the postcolonial encounter with Hellenism is one way of subverting this traditional self-image and to emancipate the classical tradition from a Eurocentric (or even racist) agenda. It is also one way of inscribing African, Caribbean, Indian or Asian elements or forms of culture into a cultural fabric that had traditionally been associated with a ‘Western’, Greco- or Roman-centric Mediterranean world. The imaginative re-exploration of the ancient texts from various sources and from various geographic regions thus functions to open the notion of the ‘Mediterranean’ up to a re-negotiation that denies, to Western European cultures, an interpretational sovereignty over this space and its cultural archive. In the words of Martin McKinsey, postcolonial writers “are working to re-place the Hellenic in its geographic and cultural matrix”⁸⁰ and to question a viewpoint that relegates the classical tradition to a region narrowly defined as ‘Europe’. They have, in the terms of Said, undertaken the project of a cultural “re-mapping”⁸¹, of inscribing their local geographies into the canonical texts of the colonial centre. The ‘Mediterranean imagination’ that marks a work like the *Odyssey* is therefore imbued with multiple layers and heterogeneous geographies that transform its imaginative space into a transnational one.

The ‘other’ Mediterranean that we can find in both the *Odyssey* and its postcolonial reception is thus one of cultural fluidity, porosity, and, in the end, hybridity. A good example of ‘other’ Mediterranean spaces is, in fact, the Caribbean and its vast geography of archipelagos and islands that have often been compared to the Mediterranean and, to be exact, to the Aegean world. As Emily Greenwood has shown, British travellers had long used ancient Greek epics to literally read the geography of the Caribbean and its people based on ancient texts that had never circulated in this region of the world. James Anthony Froude, for instance, had, in his *The English in the West Indies; or, The Bow of Ulysses* (1888) drawn this connection and had read his own role in the empire building against the background of Homer’s epic, comparing himself to the mythic hero.⁸² According to Greenwood, this reception on the part of the colonisers “had the unwitting effect of making the reinterpretation, or counter-interpretation, of this myth a vital part of the creative imagination of Anglo-

78 Martin McKinsey: *Hellenism and the Postcolonial Imagination: Yeats, Cavafy, Walcott*, Madison: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 2010, p. 10.

79 *Ibid.*, p. 27.

80 *Ibid.*, p. 34.

81 Said: *Kultur und Imperialismus* (note 63), p. 95.

82 James Anthony Froude: *The English in the West Indies; or, The Bow of Ulysses*, London: Longmans, 1888. Cf. Emily Greenwood: *Arriving Backwards: The Return of The Odyssey in the English-Speaking Caribbean*, in: *Classics in Post-Colonial Worlds*, edited by Lorna Hardwick and Carol Gillespie, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 192-210.

phone Caribbean literature”⁸³. In the terms of Lorna Hardwick, the cultural “energy” involved in reception processes “may flow in both directions and when it does the resulting synergy sparks new work”⁸⁴. This can, for example, be seen in Derek Walcott’s famous epic poem *Omeros*, which draws on the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in its mythical re-figuration of a Caribbean world that is, in the end, lifted onto a par with ancient Greece:

Only in you, across centuries
of the sea’s parchment atlas, can I catch the noise
of the surf lines wandering like the shambling fleece
of the lighthouse’s flock, that Cyclops whose blind eye
shut from the sunlight...
and the blind lighthouse, sensing the edge of a cape,
paused like a giant, a marble cloud in its hand,
to hurl its boulder that splashed into phosphorous
stars; then a black fisherman, his stubbled chin coarse
as a dry sea-urchin’s, hoisted his flour-sack
sail on its bamboo spar, and scanned the opening line
of our epic horizon.⁸⁵

This self-referential episode from Walcott’s poem plays with motives taken from Homer’s epics and uses the space of the sea, the travel of the waves, as an interconnecting link between the imaginative spheres of an ancient Mediterranean world and a poetologically re-figured Caribbean world so that both spaces share, in the end, the same “epic horizon”⁸⁶. Walcott’s play on the motif of the “Cyclops” is a recognition of the status of ‘alterity’ that characterizes his poem, how it transforms a well-known literary tradition into a new guise, but, at the same time, it is a rejection of the status of the ‘other’, since the symbol of the Cyclops figure is creatively used to render a “lighthouse”, not the inhabitants of this world. What Sylvia Wynter calls the “Cyclops factor”, that is the status of “alterity” or “other” that the colonisers had imaginatively transposed on the “New World”, their “New Mediterranean”, is thereby undermined and the “dominant Imaginary” is called into question.⁸⁷ Consequently, the use of “ancient texts and cultures” are de-centred from what used to be thought of as their dominant Western, cultural, social and political associations” and “liberated for reinterpretation [...] released from oppressive constructions and exploitation and freed to assume new identities which are not

83 Ibid., p. 195.

84 Lorna Hardwick: *Refiguring Classical Texts: Aspects of the Postcolonial Tradition*, in: *Classics and Colonialism*, edited by Barbara Goff, London: Duckworth, 2005, pp. 107-117, here p. 108.

85 Derek Walcott: *Omeros*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1990, p. 13.

86 Greenwood: *Arriving Backwards* (note 82), p. 198.

87 Sylvia Wynter: *A Different Kind of Creature: Caribbean Literature, the Cyclops Factor and the Second Poetics of the Propter Nos*, in: *Sisyphus and Eldorado: Magical and Other Realisms in Caribbean Literature*, edited by Timothy Reiss, Trenton: Africa World Press, 2002, pp. 143-167, here p. 157.

limited by the dictates, values and material culture of colonial appropriators".⁸⁸ Although Hardwick's résumé may come across as too optimistic, since classical works are still very much tied to their 'Western' canonical appropriation, it is nevertheless a reminder of the emancipatory quality of that 'other Mediterranean imagination' which constantly works to imbue the classical texts with new meanings and to re-inscribe new geographies into its imaginative framework. What has, in academic circles, become referred to as "black classicism"⁸⁹ is thus a challenge to Eurocentric world-views and one-sided cultural appropriation both of the classical tradition and of space. Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson have, against this background, coined the term 'Black Aegean' to describe the Aegean as a site of transit and transfer where cultural contacts and re-figurations of classic tragedies by African authors work to create new images and to uncover new layers of meaning within an old tradition.⁹⁰

The image of the Mediterranean as a "fluid and multi-directional" zone of linked or networked sites which trade in representations of Ancient Greece"⁹¹ becomes an apt way to characterize what I have, in the course of this essay, referred to as a 'Mediterranean imagination'. Revisiting an ancient text like the *Odyssey* and its manifold and heterogeneous reception over the centuries is one way of exploring the cultural frameworks of the Mediterranean world and of showing that it is indeed multi-polar and multi-layered. 'Others' have been written into and have inscribed themselves repeatedly into this cultural palimpsest so that it is, like the tidal nature of the sea itself, ever-changing and dynamic. As I have tried to make clear, it is also mobile. In the guise of ancient texts, the 'Mediterranean imagination' has travelled all over the world so that the 'Mediterranean' can be found in spaces and cultures that are, geographically, very far away. Imaginatively, however, these spaces and cultures have themselves become part of that 'Mediterranean imagination', constantly transforming its frameworks. Recognizing this 'other' Mediterranean has far-reaching ethical consequences, since it questions the narrow boundaries on which the Euro-centric image of the 'Mediterranean' and, in the end, a European identity is formed. Re-figuring this identity and image as open and fluid is one way of engaging with the hegemonic, closed-off systems that agencies like Frontex try to install on the imaginary border zones of what is commonly referred to as Europe. Even in this context, an ancient myth like the *Odyssey*, with its literary epistemology and the complex negotiations between appear-

88 Hardwick: *Refiguring Classical Texts* (note 84), p. 109.

89 For a concise overview and introduction into the field cf. Christopher Schliephake: *Die Blendung des Kyklopen – Antikenrezeption und (post-)kolonialer Diskurs*, in: *Mitteilungen des Instituts für Europäische Kulturgeschichte* 22, 2014, pp. 13-34.

90 Barbara Goff and Michael Simpson: *Crossroads in the Black Aegean: Oedipus, Antigone, and Dramas of the African Diaspora*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 1-37.

91 Barbara Goff: "Your Secret Language". *Classics in the British Colonies of West Africa*, London: Bloomsbury Academic/Bristol Classical Press, 2013, p. 6.

ance and reality, can help us in finding ways of dealing with the 'other' of that world. When Odysseus lands, shipwrecked and in an abysmal state, on the mythical island of the Phaeacians and is found by Nausicaa, the daughter of the king of the island, she does not run away in horror, but turns toward him, saying that:

Stranger, since you seem to be neither an evil man nor a witless,
and it is Zeus himself, the Olympian, that gives happy fortune to men,
both to the good and the evil, to each man as he will;
so to thee he has given this lot, and you must in any case endure it.
But now, since you have come to our city and land,
you shalt not lack clothing or anything else of those things
which befit a sore-tried suppliant when he comes in the way.⁹²

Now in our times, with the Mediterranean becoming the stage of tragic odysseys again, her words have an eerie resonance. We should listen carefully.

92 Homer: *Odyssey* (note 1), 6.187-193.