

Ulysses's Journey and Homer's *Odyssey*: An Eternal Return

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Abstract

Homer's *Odyssey* provides a perfect case for showing the eternal return of the Greek myths in contemporary literature, and culture: tales of Ulysses's journeys have always been popular, till nowadays. He is the only survivor of an entire crew: he safely arrived home alone, and soon left, heading for a new journey. Today, in a way, he keeps coming back, on and on: in all sort of books, in fine arts, inside and outside theatres. Ulysses and his myth are also "surfing the web", as I proved with a recent survey on the use of the terms 'Odyssey', 'Odysseus', and 'Ulysses', on the Internet.

Moreover, the last decades recorded, all over the world, an increasing amount of modern versions of *Odyssey*, and related myths. I focus particularly on the most recent translations and adaptations for the stage: many of them are dedicated to those who did not come back home – unlike Ulysses – or did not survive at all. In 2010, for instance, the Italian playwright and director Marco Martinelli wrote *Rumore di Acque* ("Noise in the Waters"), a play later translated into English, French, German, and other languages. Ulysses's myth and its happy end are reversed, in his antiheroic *Odyssey*, inspired by the tragic death of immigrants, in the shipwreck of their boats, while they try to reach Southern Italy and Sicily. The play was staged in Lampedusa – the island on Italy's Southern border where many ships land, and countless corpses are found – and it is still on tour in Europe, Africa, and U.S. Meanwhile, other international projects inspired by Ulysses's journeys tell us the "Odyssey of Nobodies", while thousands of unnamed sailors keep challenging the waves, as they have done since the Minoan Age, across the Mediterranean Sea.

Keywords

Homer; *Odyssey*; Ulysses; Travel; Shipwreck.

1. A never-ending journey.

Among ancient myths, and figures, those which appear in the so-called Homeric poems (*Iliad* and *Odyssey*) are increasingly popular, worldwide, especially in the past decade, thanks to translations, adaptations, performances, and public readings.¹

Not only epic poems can count on a large audience, but they are the object of more and more reception studies in recent years: international conferences, essays on

single authors or specific aspects, collections of studies on a range of examples all over the world.

The complex interaction between epic, drama and performance (especially ‘durational performance’) is well-synthesised in the Call for Papers of the Panel “Performing Epic/Epic Performance” at the Tenth Celtic Conference in Classics:

Especially interesting are those adaptations that attempt to capture the ‘epicness’ of the original: National Theatre of Wales’ *‘Marathon’* production of Christopher Logue’s War Music; Stathis Livathinos’ five-hour *Iliad*; the Almeida’s day-long readings of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. Outside of Homeric adaptations, durational performances have become more popular and internationally recognised, including those based on the Classics, like Sean Graney’s *All Our Tragic* or Jan Fabre’s *Mount Olympus: To glorify the cult of tragedy*, and others not, like Taylor Mac’s *24-Decade History of Popular Music*. How can contemporary durational performance lend new insight into the Homeric performance tradition?²

The reception of the *Odyssey*, in particular, rapidly expands across all genres and medias, from cinema to TV, and radio, from children books to comics. On these premises, of course, it would be impossible to treat adequately all aspects of this heterogeneous field, in the limited space of this article. Therefore, this article will expose the main thread of my research on some aspects of the contemporary reception of Homer’s *Odyssey*, and on the common use of the terms ‘*Odyssey*,’ ‘Odysseus’ and ‘Ulysses.’ Secondly, some trends and key-themes in reception will be analyzed, with examples, particularly on the international scenes: on stage, the *Odyssey* is adapted and played worldwide, with a remarkable frequency. Thirdly, a special attention will be given to some theatre productions of the past fifteen years (variously connected not only to the *Odyssey*, but also to ancient and modern routes across the Mediterranean Sea), with a brief account of the most relevant cases.

Before focusing on reception, it is worth remembering that the two surviving poems were originally part of a larger ‘epic cycle’; an extensive narration of the Trojan War and of many related myths, regarding the heroes who took part in it.³ Some of them came back home from Troy, and their adventurous homecoming was sung in a few distinct poems known as “Nostoi” (literally “Returns”). Only one of these poems survived, the *Odyssey*. Its very name is meaningful still today, trespassing all boundaries of space and time, and becoming even more popular than the hero himself: Odysseus, aka Ulysses, King of Ithaca.

Notoriously, he came home from Troy, alone, after a decade spent in travels on the sea: meanwhile, unfortunately, he lost all his ships and comrades. He survived, and he is the only eye-witness of his journey. He (a notorious liar, according to epic and tragic tradition) is in charge of telling us what happened, and carrying the memory of those who perished at Troy, or died in the waves.

The happy ending of the poem reflects the good luck of its hero (or anti-hero)? The question is open). But the war and the journey, over two decades, have left

permanent scars on his skin.⁴ Ulysses comes home, at last, but the price is high in terms of human lives and sufferings. The seafaring is particularly tragic, for the perils he has to face and for the death of his comrades in arms.

2. Ancient words, modern travellers.

The ambivalent legacy of the Homeric hero, and of his adventurous journey, is still visible today all over the world: not only in books, comics, on screen and on stage (as many studies testify), but in a more pervasive, immediate way. The deep roots of Homer's legacy lie even in current words of everyday life.

This is precisely the starting point of my research: many terms related to my subject are still in use, with a striking variety of meanings. In order to show it, as a first step, I searched on the Internet 'Odyssey', 'Odysseus' and 'Ulysses': most references are related to travel, of course, to seafaring, sailing, homecoming. But they are also popular names for tools, cars, videogames, cruise companies, leisure places, camping sites, hotels, etc. However, the lists of places, objects, persons, events may change consistently from one language to another. Even the numbers of occurrences vary if I look for the same terms in different languages. In English, for instance, I find 10.400.00 results for 'Odysseus' and 23.900.000 for 'Ulysses', thanks to Joyce's novel which occurs on top on <https://www.google.it/> (Last accessed 28 August 28 2017).⁶ The name of the hero, in a larger view, fits also a variety of places, objects and events, more or less related to the concept of travel, discovery, and adventure (such as hotels, ships, travel agencies), but also to learning and getting to know people and places (reviews, TV show, schools, etc.).

As for 'Odyssey' I find 184.000.000 results, including many possible definitions, often ambiguous, suspended between positive and negative meanings, such as "an adventurous /unfortunate journey", "a long journey full of adventures".⁷ On top of the list, after the Homeric poems, stands a recent adaptation written by Simon Armitage, directed by Bob Wilson and produced by the National Theater of Greece and the Piccolo Teatro (Milan). Across the world, theatres and other public spaces host performances and lectures of the poem: at the University of Almeria (Spain), for instance, various chapters have been performed in Spanish over a few years, and are available online.⁸

There are also hundreds of references to other adaptations of the poem, on stage and on screen, which usually include well-known masterpieces of different *genres*, from graphic novels to science-fiction movies, such as Stanley Kubrick's *2001: a Space Odyssey* (1968).⁹ Perhaps under his influence, the name of the poem is quite frequent in cinema. As the most celebrated movies and TV series have been already analysed by many critics, I will focus here on less known examples, which borrow their name from the *Odyssey*, in order to verify if they share meanings, implications, and concepts.

In July 2009, Scottish newspapers described as "*an Odyssey in the Highlands*" a travelling movie festival named '*Pilgrimage*' (meant as a mix of *pilgrim* and *image*).¹⁰ Historical, classical movies were shown inside a mobile cinema on wheels, which travelled through the Highlands; once a day it was also 'pulled', with ropes, by the

walking pilgrims. In this case, the definition of “Odyssey” was clearly associated to the concept of travel, but also to the effort, and to the passion for cinema, which moved the participants. The festival was created and led by the Scottish actress Tilda Swinton and by the Irish director Marc Cousins. Significantly, the same director later wrote and directed an ambitious and artistic documentary in fifteen episodes: “an epic journey through the history of cinema” entitled *The Story of Film: an Odyssey*.¹¹

My third, and last example outside theatre, is a TV series produced by NBC (premiere April 5th 2015), simply called *Odyssey* in UK and, quite significantly, *American Odyssey* in the U.S. It was meant as a modern-day take on the *Odyssey*, according to its authors. The leading character is a female U.S. soldier, the only survivor of her military unit. She has to go back home, alone: “A soldier. A mother. Betrayed. Her *Odyssey* begins”, says the trailer (released on March 6th 2015). The series was not lucky as the archetype, it had poor reviews, and it was canceled at the end of season One.¹² I wish better luck to another *Odyssey*, a NASA Exploration Project (still ongoing, on the seas of Mars), and to many other enterprises (tour operators, guides, travel agencies) and safe shelters for ‘adventurous’ travelers, all named after Homer’s poem.¹³

To my knowledge, there is no evidence of any scientific bibliography on the current use of terms related to Homer’s *Odyssey*. My research is still in progress, but I may just outline some major trends.¹⁴ First, some differences may be observed between the terms regarding the poem and the eponymous hero. The name *Odyssey* seems more ambivalent and ambiguous, as it may be possibly connected to journeys of all kind: not only by sea, and not necessarily of home coming, and – most notable – mainly adventurous travels, bad experiences, dangerous missions, one-way journeys, with no possible retreat.¹⁵

Compared to these implications, often related to collective characters, “good vibrations” are more frequently connected to a single traveller who follows the example of Ulysses, the hero who survived. As a talisman, a brand, or a trademark, he lends his name to TV shows, novels and enterprises, but also to fortunate missions of exploration, adventure, and quests of a man seeking himself. For instance, the oldest and most popular TV show in Italy dealing with nature, science, travels, and knowledge, by Piero and Alberto Angela, is called *Ulisse. Il piacere della scoperta* (“Ulysses. The Pleasure of Discovery”).

My hypothesis is that such a wide range of meanings and examples is connected to the very nature of Homer’s poem. First of all, notoriously, it is an oral composition, meant to be sung in portions, pieces, and episodes. The lack of continuity is part of its fascination, and beauty: not only the theme itself, a journey, but also the facts, the characters, the very language consistently change and continuously vary throughout the poem. Every element, character, or place of the poem seems to contain its opposite: on top of the list there is of course Ulysses, the “man of many devices” (“*polytropos*”, as stated in *Odyssey*, 1.1), a warrior, a brave captain, a rascal, and a liar, who inspired many modern figures of sailors, refugees, travellers, with his ambiguous nature of hero, and anti-hero.

Secondly, the destination of Ulysses's journey is, of course, home. He misses his island, his family, his house, his fireplace, his people: in one word, what is most familiar to him.¹⁶ The centre of this complex universe is recognizable in a woman: Penelope, the ideal wife, the safe shelter, where Ulysses keeps heading to. Yet, her words and especially her dreams (such as the symbolic dream where the eagle kills the gees, *Od.*19.655-695) may reveal – at a careful glance – inner doubts, secret fears, and ambivalent desires.¹⁷

On the other hand, Ulysses is constantly refrained and driven away from home, not only by the god of the sea Poseidon, his main opponent, but also by a mysterious force, inside him: it compels him to sail away, towards new lands, new discoveries, and new adventures. He will leave again, soon after his return, as we are told at the end of the poem. His most negative features as shown by Homer and even more in Attic tragedy (he is depicted as a liar, a traitor, and a rascal) are balanced by his qualities, including curiosity and courage, which allow him to become a symbol of the modern man, always in search of something he cannot have.

In this perspective, I suggest to look at the whole poem and its reception as somehow suspended between two poles: the certain, familiar Island (Home) the uncertain /Unfamiliar /Unknown (Sea), where Ulysses keeps travelling without rest. And 'Ithaca' may be considered the treasure of travel itself: another Greek poet, Constantinos Cavafy, described it perfectly in his poem *Ithaca*.¹⁸

3. An audience of all ages.

For the reasons listed above, in my opinion, the *Odyssey* encourages free adaptations, very different from one another: even the most celebrated elements – the Hero, the Homeland, the Family, the Return – are not quite what they seem at first. The multiple aspects of Ulysses's journey inspire artists with a variety of solutions, stimulate their creative invention, and the combinations of different medias and genres: somehow, it is a puzzle that any artist, playwright, or director can dismantle and reconstruct, each time in a different shape. According to their inspiration, context, media, and language, they may develop one or more aspects, or characters, of the original poem, in order to reach audiences of all ages and cultures.

In this regard, I may cite here just a few Italian examples, with different targets, outside theatre. In the past years, the archaeologist and journalist Valerio Massimo Manfredi published a few best sellers, free adaptations of Ulysses's tales, under the title *Il mio nome è Nessuno* ("My name is Nobody").¹⁹ In turn, his novels inspired an illustrated book, *Odisseo* ("Odysseus") by Valerio and Diana Manfredi (Mondadori Electa, 2014) and a theatre adaptation by Francesco Niccolini: *Il mio nome è Nessuno – L'Ulisse* ("My Name is Nobody – Ulysses"): it was recently staged by Alessio Pizzech, with a well-known Sicilian actor, Sebastiano Lomonaco, in the leading role.²⁰

Apart from theatre, I may also cite other examples of genres and media which cannot be treated here: Homer's *Odyssey* has always been a popular theme for illustrated books and children games. For instance, a popular adaptation for children may have inspired Joyce's *Ulysses* (see Hall 2012, 26). Today, the poem keeps entertaining an

audience of all ages in books, comics and graphic novels: a sign of its popularity is the name of a world-famous Japanese *manga*, *Nausicaa*, by Miyazaki, and the related cartoon (1982-84), although not directly inspired by Homer. As for comics, many authors adapted the whole poem in all languages (such as Thomas and Tocchini 2012) while others focused on some episodes (Harambat 2014, for instance, starts when Ulysses lands on Ithaca's shore).²¹ As for opera, I shall briefly recall *Outis* by Luciano Berio, libretto by Berio and Del Corno, dated 1996.²²

Needless to say, Ulysses's adventures also inspired blockbuster movies and TV series: as a first example, I may cite a 1954 movie *Ulisse* by Mario Camerini with an all-star cast: Kirk Douglas, Anthony Quinn and Silvana Mangano were playing respectively Ulysses, Antinous, and the double role – quite interesting choice – of Penelope /Circe.

Other free adaptations for the screen – all very different from the archetype – do not preserve the original text, but focus on the core idea of homecoming, and on selected episodes of Ulysses's adventurous journey. They include, for instance, *Nostos* by Franco Piavoli (1989), *Ulysses's Gaze* by Theo Anghelopoulos (1995), *O Brother where art thou?* (2000) by Joel and Ethan Cohen. Among TV series, the Italian *Odissea* by Franco Rossi (1968) has been repeatedly defined by Martin Winkler “the greatest screen adaptation of Homer” till today. Now available in DVD, it keeps fascinating an audience of all ages, including children.²³

As for other genres, it is worth mentioning an ambitious project still in progress: *Odisseo: re-mapping-Sicily* by the Sicilian choreographer Roberto Zappalà and his company, from Catania (Sicily). Their first stunning production, named *Naufragio con spettatore* (“Shipwreck with Spectator”), significantly bears the same title of a 1979 essay by Hans Blumenberg, inspired by Lucretius's *De Rerum Natura* (“On the Nature of things”).²⁴ Zappalà's choreography is based not only on this book, but on many iconographic models: first of all, a well-known painting by Géricault, inspired by a real, historical shipwreck, *The Raft of the Medusa*.²⁵ Two dancers, mostly lying on the ground, on an imaginary raft, mime the shipwreck of Ulysses's ship – or any modern ship – in a desperate effort to survive, with a tragic, shocking end, including cannibalism.

This outstanding case brings us to the core of my study. The dangers of troubled waters play an important role in the Homeric reception, and they somehow balance, as a counterpart, the hero. The sea, indeed, may be considered as the second leading character of the poem, but it also dominates an epic genre – the adventurous journey – tightly connected to our times, and to the tragic shipwrecks across the Mediterranean. In my opinion, the present-day mass movements are among the most important causes of the revival of *Odyssey* worldwide.²⁶ Therefore, I find particularly interesting those adaptations, which show a stronger connection both to the ancient Homeric routes, and to the troubled waters of present times.

Regarding the sea, specifically, two recent case studies are worth mentioning: *Odissea: un racconto mediterraneo*, (“Odyssey, a Mediterranean Tale”) created by Sergio Maifredi (Teatro Pubblico Ligure) and *Meeting the Odyssey* directed by Michele Losi (Scarlattine Teatro). They are both collective projects, each covering many years,

which choose the sea as their main stage: they go out of theatres, and re-create Ulysses's journey on the shores and in the waters of Northern and Southern seas.

The first director, Maifredi, has been working in the past years with teachers and scholars on most chapters of the Homeric poem. He gathered, in time, many well-known Italian actors, singers, storytellers, such as the folksinger Roberto Vecchioni (Politeama Theatre, Genua). As a general rule, Maifredi led them to read (or sing) one or more books of the poem, with music inspired by the Mediterranean folk songs. They do not respect the original sequence of the poem, but rather – as in the original contests of *rapsodoi* – the unique nature of the open-air, oral performance on the sea: each time different, unpredictable, and inspired by the location, the art of improvisation, the personality of each performer, the feeling with the audience, and the interaction with other performances. The project, so far, has been travelling back and forth on the Italian coasts, from the Northwestern coasts to Southern Italy and Sicily.

In the summer of 2014, for instance, the Theatre Festival “Orestyadi di Gibellina” hosted an all-star cast of performers: Moni Ovadia (*Odisseo e la gara dell'arco*, chapter XXI), Giuseppe Cederna (*Odisseo e i Feaci*, canti V-VIII), Vincenzo Pirrotta (*La partenza*, chapter IX; *Scilla e Cariddi*, canto XII), Gioele Dix (*I canti di Telemaco*, chapters I-IV), Maddalena Crippa (*Penelope*, chapter XXIII).²⁷

In the summer of 2015, other brilliant performers read or sang chapters from the *Odyssey*, and the *Iliad* and other texts, on many shores of Italy, but also in ancient and modern theatres: Davide Enia (*La discesa agli Inferi*, chapter XI), Ascanio Celestini (*La strage dei Proci*, chapter XXII), Amanda Sandrelli (*Calipso*, chapter V), Tullio Solenghi (*Odisseo e Penelope*, chapter XIX), David Riondino e Dario Vergassola (*I patti di pace*, chapter XXIV).

The second international project, even more focused on the sea, is *Meeting the Odyssey. An Adventure beyond Arts, Myths, and Everyday Life in Europe* (2013-2016). For three summers, several theatre crews have been travelling on a historical sailboat, called ‘Hoppet’ (‘Hope’): it sailed from Saint Petersburg across the Baltic Sea and the channels of Europe (2014), reached Northern Italy, stopped in Sardinia and Malta (2015), and in the summer of 2016 headed towards Greece (where the last performances were scheduled in July). The project involved dozens of theatre companies, hundreds of participants. It included conferences, meetings, events, exhibitions, a few big productions (with an international cast), and “instant performances” (site-specific theatre workshops, led by professional actors, with local inhabitants).²⁸

Each show or workshop explored a different theme of the *Odyssey*, in connection with local, present issues (immigration, friendship, hospitality, sexual prejudices etc.). For instance, the 2014 production *Waiting for the Rain* premiered in Opole, a Polish town whose male inhabitants mostly left decades ago in order to work abroad. The script therefore focused on the feelings of women and children who keep waiting for their relatives, like Penelope and Telemachus. As for the Italian tour, the first instant performance (Milan, May 23 and 24, 2015) was based on a workshop with Italian and foreign students of various high schools: it was freely inspired by the Sirens myth,

read by the teenagers' point of view, in order to show some ambivalent aspects of today's stereotypes on women and on their relationships with men.

The second Italian production, *sbarchi un' Odissea* ("landing an *Odyssey*", May, 2015) counted on an international cast and on a quite unusual location: the first open-air theatre built on the shore of the Navigli Channels. The set recreates a modern disco (Ithaca's palace) where Penelope and Telemachus dance, as Ulysses lands silently in the night, alone, on his sailboat. In the third production, *Nausicaa. Io sono io* ("Nausicaa, I am I") by the Sardinian theatre company Cadadieteatro (July and August, 2015), Nausicaa and her family host a chorus of refugees of past and present times (including Ulysses, but also Hector's widow, Andromache).²⁹

To sum up, the two projects recreated Ulysses's journey, although in different ways: the first gathered public readings of the poem (*Un racconto mediterraneo*, "A Mediterranean Tale"), the second commissioned adaptations of Homer's poem (*Meeting the Odyssey*): they both mirrored its complexity and richness, as a joint effort of many artists, comparable to ancient *rapsodoi*.³⁰

4. Towards Ithaca

Compared to these projects, most adaptations focus on partial points of view, on one, or few, key-ideas or characters, excluding others: on these premises, I have tried to classify some of the most recent productions of the *Odyssey*, on the basis of the main themes or characters treated.

First of all, as I said before, many theatre productions deal with the navigation on the Mediterranean Sea: some of them share a positive attitude towards sailing and travelling, connected to adventure, the desire of knowledge and discovery, the pleasure of telling tales. In this category, for the type of narrative and the nature of audience, I found many examples among the most recent and successful in Italy. On one side, there are small productions for selected audiences, especially for children: I just cite *Canto la storia dell'astuto Ulisse* ("I sing the story of astute Ulysses") by Flavio Albanese (Piccolo Teatro, Milan), *Odissea viaggio nel teatro* ("*Odyssey*, a journey in theatre" and *Odissea per bambini, viaggio nel teatro per venti bambini di tutte le età* ("*Odyssey* for children. A journey in theatre for twenty children of all ages") by Teatro del Lemming, Rovigo; on the other side, on a wider scale, a well-known example is the Greek-Italian *Odyssey* directed by Robert Wilson, based on the script by Simon Armitage translated into modern Greek.³¹ After the premiere at Athens (2012), and a sold out in Milan (2013), the show returned to Piccolo Teatro (Milan) in October 2015. Its huge success has many causes: the cast, the scenes, the live music, but also Wilson's fast rhythm, and Armitage's brilliant style.

Here, in particular, the *Odyssey* becomes part of a collective heritage, regarding adventurous journeys: a fascinating universe, which includes many modern and ancient narration of travel, not only by sea: from Sinbad to Jules Verne, from comics to science fiction. The homecoming of Ulysses, perhaps, loses a part of its original bittersweet taste, especially for the tragic death of the crew. What counts is the joyful, thrilling, even childish pleasure of storytelling. The show perfectly matches the various

expectations and tastes of an international audience and attracts, moreover, for its 'fantastic' characters: i.e. dangerous women, seductive witches (Circe), bizarre creatures, hybrids (the Sirens), and monsters (the Cyclops).³²

In this regard, another branch of tradition was born from Homer's *Odyssey* IX and from Euripides' satyr play *Cyclops*. Sicily, in particular, claims to be the homeland of Cyclops's legend, and it hosts many recent versions of their myth, including some in Sicilian dialect: such is the case of '*U Ciclopu*' ("The Cyclops", 1914), by the Nobel Prize Luigi Pirandello, wonderfully adapted for the modern stage, directed and played by Vincenzo Pirrotta (Palazzolo Acreide, Greek theatre, 2005).³³

Another Sicilian dramatist, in his long career, has been translating classical patterns into his own 'personal language': the artist Emilio Isgrò, known since the Eighties for his monumental trilogy *Oresteia di Gibellina* ("Gibellina's *Oresteia*"). Among his masterpieces are the experimental novel *Polifemo* ("Polyphemus", 1989), and the monologue *Odissea cancellata* ("Cancelled *Odyssey*", 2004).³⁴ The most distinctive feature of his works is the ambivalent treatment of both figures, Ulysses and Polyphemus: they both share bad and good instincts, qualities and virtues, doubts and vices.

In Sicily, again, a modern version of the Cyclops's tale was written and played by a master of 'cunto' (a Sicilian technique of oral performance) and of Puppet Opera ("Opera dei pupi"): Mimmo Cuticchio.³⁵ From Palermo, too, comes the director and actress Emma Dante, former artistic director of the classical festival at Teatro Olimpico (Vicenza), with her free adaptation of Polyphemus's myth: *Io nessuno e Polifemo: intervista impossibile* ("I, Nobody, and Polyphemus: an impossible interview").³⁶

One year later, the same theatre in Vicenza hosted a new version of the *Odyssey*, directed by Emma Dante: *Odissea, movimento n.1* ("*Odyssey*, Movement 1", September 26-27, 2015).³⁷ The title indicates the beginning of a cycle. Indeed the script is based on the first books of the poem, and it opens with Penelope and Telemachus waiting for Ulysses. The plot seems frozen in a suspended action, as in other modern plays mostly focused on the last chapters of the poem, such as *Ithaka* by Botho Strauss (1996), all set in Ulysses's palace.³⁸

A comparable emphasis on the mother /son couple, and on those who spend their lives waiting, may be found in other works either focused on collective figures, such as *Waiting for the rain*, and the Greek poem by Yannis Ritsos *The old Women and the Sea* (1958),³⁹ or dedicated to single characters, such as three recent Italian monologues respectively entitled *Penelope* by Paolo Puppa (played, among others, by Laura Curino)⁴⁰, *Odiséa. Lettura selvatica*, ("Odyssey, a wild reading", by Tonino Guerra,⁴¹ and *Odissea* by Mario Perrotta (2013).⁴²

Other plays focus on Ulysses's homecoming and on the family reunion. Three different examples of this category have been recently staged in Milan: *sbarchi un'Odissea* ("landing an *Odyssey*") by Michele Losi (cited above), *Ulisse: il ritorno* ("Ulysses: the homecoming", a 2013 production, by Corrado d'Elia, reprised on May 5-18, 2015) and *La casa – Odissea di un crack* ("Home. An *Odyssey* of a crack") by La

Fionda Teatro (reprised on July 13th, 2015).⁴³ All these productions freely reinterpret and update the Greek poem. The first one can count on an international cast who speaks very few words, but takes advantage of places, sounds, music and dance: at night, in a real harbor (the Navigli shore) a real ship silently carries Ulysses to his palace, where a wild party is going on, and Penelope is dancing with her Suitors; the second adaptation combines ancient and modern texts, including film scripts (such as *Ulysses's Gaze*, cited above); the third one is a witty dialogue between two female actresses – a bored old couple of Ulysses and Penelope, trapped inside their house – with hints of parody and mockery which recall more Beckett's *Happy Days* than Homer's *Odyssey*.

5. One-way ticket

At the end of our journey, let us focus on those productions, which inspired the first steps of our research. They are dedicated to Ulysses's crew, and to all those seafarers who tragically perish nowadays, while trying to go North, or West, from Africa or from Syria. Most of them lie under the Mediterranean, their bodies are missing, their names are unknown.

A multitude of Nobodies. The dead ones, in the *Odyssey*, are not only in book XI (*Od.* XI 46-800): they are everywhere, around Ulysses, in the waves, in Ithaca's palace, before their descent into Hades.⁴⁴ In this sense, Isgrò's *Odissea cancellata*⁴⁵ could be interpreted as a nightmare or delirium, where all voices are ghosts or visions of Ulysses's hallucinated mind. Or, maybe, even the hero is nothing more than a spirit, wandering with Aeolus' winds, on the waves of the Mediterranean Sea.⁴⁶

In the past decade, after Isgrò, the 'tragedies of the seas' evoke, unfortunately, Homeric echoes in the minds of artists. They rapidly increase: not only the number of productions directly connected to the *Odyssey*, but also those focused on the troubled waters of the Mediterranean Sea. The first example may be the Sicilian artist Mimmo Cuticchio (cited above), who created an oral performance ('cunto') inspired by Homer's poem (*L'approdo di Ulisse*, "Ulysses's landing", Linosa, 2011).⁴⁷

The ancient model is less explicit, but always present, in other plays which depict contemporary shipwrecks with epic tones, comparable to the *Odyssey*: *La Nave Fantasma* ("The ghost ship"), by Giovanni Maria Bellu, Renato Sarti and Bebo Storti (2004),⁴⁸ *Trilogia del naufragio* ("Shipwreck Trilogy", by Lina Prosa (2007-2013),⁴⁹ "Noise in the Waters" by Marco Martinelli (2010).⁵⁰

This last production deserves special attention: in 2008/2009, while Martinelli worked in Sicily, and sailed the troubled waters of the Mediterranean, he created his text as a nightmare, ultimately inspired by Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. He imagined a General, possibly similar to Colonel Gaddafi, but symbolically meant as a demon of the Abyss, a Poseidon or Hades of our times. In the original production, he is played by a young dynamic actor, Alessandro Renda, with the support of traditional tunes (from Arab and Sicilian folk music repertoires) played live by two Sicilian musicians "the Mancuso Brothers". The text is a litany, a funeral oration: for one hour, the General keeps scanning numbers and names. Little by little, the audience knows what they

mean: he is counting the missing ones, the dead corpses lying under the Mediterranean Sea.

The original production premiered in Mazara del Vallo, a maritime border town in Western Sicily (2010); it was reprised several times in Italy and abroad, and in particular in a symbolic place: Lampedusa, an island just off Sicily, a landing point for thousands of immigrants. There, *Rumore di acque* was last staged in 2014, on the first anniversary of a most tragic shipwreck (October 3rd, 2013).

In the past years, Martinelli's text has been performed many times, in Italian, French, English, German, Portuguese, Spanish, and Romanian; it is still on tour, either directed by Martinelli or by other directors worldwide: all over Europe, in Senegal, in Chile and in the U.S.⁵¹ It will also be staged at Washington DC, under the patronage of the United Nations, by a Jacopo Rampini: he asked Martinelli if in his production the General could act and be dressed as Donald Trump... and of course the permission was granted!

While walls are planned and built on the borders between U.S. and Mexico, as well as in Eastern Europe, the issues concerning migrations and refugees become everyday more and more dramatic and urgent. Martinelli reminds us, in every possible occasion, that the numbers listed in his drama are not hyperbolic. They are real persons, dead or missing: we know of many thousands, but they should be more. Their number keeps growing, unfortunately, while this play (as well as others on the same subject) is being translated and staged. The figures evoked here, with or without names, are celebrated, remembered, sung, as in a non-religious funeral rite.

6. Epic and tragic journeys.

On the route I have traced so far, the Homeric reception meets another ancient archetype: the Attic playwright Aeschylus, in his tragedy *Suppliant Women*, dramatically follows the adventurous 'odyssey' of a chorus of women refugees from Africa to Athens, where they seek – and fortunately find – a shelter. Aeschylus's tragedy too recently inspired many adaptations: *Die Schutzbefohlenen* ("The Suppliants") written by the Austrian playwright Elfriede Jelinek (2013) has been staged several times since 2014 in Austria, Germany, and Italy (by Claudio Longhi, at the University of Bologna)⁵².

In Sicily (a crucial crossroad, as I have showed), two stunning theatre productions mixed the ancient tragedy with the real stories of contemporary refugees: the former was called *Supplici a Portopalo* ("Suppliants at Portopalo", from the name of the town cited above, located on the extreme Southern point of Sicily), directed by Gabriele Vacis, and performed by the talented Sicilian actor Vincenzo Pirrotta (2009);⁵³ the latter, written in Italian, Sicilian dialect and modern Greek, was directed by Moni Ovadia, Mario Incudine and Pippo Kaballà, and produced by INDA Foundation (Syracuse). In the summer of 2015, it was watched by thousands spectators, with great success, at the most ancient Classical Festival in Italy.⁵⁴

While the directors were planning the show, they met some of the refugees who had just landed on Sicilian shores, a few miles from the ancient Greek theatre where

The Suppliants was staged: the refugees were invited to seat in the front rows, to watch the tragedy, and to join the crew at the end of the show. In the same days, INDA Foundation also organized a public reading of ancient and modern texts on a special “Refugee Day”, which is still celebrated every year, in the archaeological area of the ancient Greek city: the number of participants, citizens and refugees keeps growing.

Like Ovadia, Martinelli and the other directors cited above are aware of the responsibility of European countries in this situation, and of the burden we all have to carry. As a conclusion, I would like to cite the words of the project manager of *Meeting the Odyssey*, which express the feelings and the commitment shared by most artists involved in their productions, and by many others we know: “We, the artists of *Meeting the Odyssey*, dedicate this tour and all the performances to those who, unlike us, are not able to return home nor travel further with the winds. You are the real Odysseuses of today, and we wish you will find shelter in Europe or peace in your country very soon”.⁵⁵

In ancient myths, Ulysses made several choices: when he left Ithaca, heading to Troy, and when he came home. Others have no choice. They never arrive, nor come back. How many? No one knows. The shipwrecks continue, and the tragic count is still increasing every day. My research is still in progress, as the *Odyssey* is adapted and staged more and more.

Meanwhile, artists, directors, playwrights, journalists, writers, and classical scholars work side by side in order to keep the world’s attention on this huge contemporary tragedy. One last example: on April 7th and 8th 2017, Andrea Palladio’s Teatro Olimpico (Vicenza) hosted the latest edition of a festival called “Classici Contro”, which the University of Venice has been organizing since 2010⁵⁶. Under the title “Utopia (Europa)”, this new cycle of events, shows and conferences focused on ‘Xenia’: a key-concept, in ancient Greek society, of sacred and mutual hospitality: we all have to do our best, in order to prevent shipwrecks and casualties, to give the refugees a shelter, to allow them to go back to *their own* Ithaca, and finally find peace at home.⁵⁷

Notes

1. For a general introduction to Homer’s *Odyssey* see Finley 1954; Rubens and Taplin 1989; Ahl and Roisman 1996. On Homeric reception, see the works cited at the end of this article, such as the surveys by Stanford 1954; Stanford and Luce 1974; Boitani 1992, 1998, 2016; Luther 2005; Graziosi and Greenwood 2010; Cavallini 2010; Hall 2012; McConnell 2013; Belloni, Citti, De Finis, 2014. About Italy, in particular, see Nicosia 2003; Ciani 2014 and the essay by Sotera Fornaro, *L’ambiguo ritorno: sondaggi su Omero nella letteratura italiana del Novecento*, in Cavallini 2010, 9-38. Among my works, see Treu 2009a, Treu 2016, Notti and Treu 2017 (forthcoming), Ieranò and Taravacci 2017 (forthcoming). See also the programme of the APGRD conference *Performing Epic into 21st century* (APGRD, Oxford, September 18th - 19th, 2014: www.apgrd.ox.ac.uk [Last accessed 28 August 2017]).
2. The conference, co-hosted by McGill University and Université de Montréal, took place on 19th – 22nd July, 2017 in Montreal, Canada. <http://>

- www.celticconferenceclassics.com [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. On *Mount Olympos*, by Fabre, and *Santa Estasi*, another “durational performance” by Antonio Latella, see also Giovannelli (2016).
3. For an accurate analysis, and bibliography, see Burgess (2001). See also Finley 1954 and Ieranò (2015, 171-173).
 4. Ancient epic poems have inspired, among others, the well-known works by Jonathan Shay about the trauma suffered by ancient and modern veterans, since the Vietnam War till today. On Ulysses in particular see Shay (2002), on the war trauma in the modern reception of Sophocles’s *Ajax* see Treu (2017a).
 5. My research on the stage reception of Homer’s *Odyssey* started in 2009 and is still in progress: see Treu 2009a, 2014, 2015a, Ieranò and Taravacci 2017 (forthcoming), Notti and Treu 2017 (forthcoming). Given the target and the themes of this article, I prefer to use the Latin name (Ulysses), rather than the Greek one (Odysseus), as it is by far the most largely used in reception (for a survey on terms, see Treu 2015e).
 6. Actually, Ulysses is still sailing not only across the Mediterranean, but he is also “surfing the internet” (the expression was created by Jean Armour Polly, on March 17th 1992, by mixing “*Information surfer*” and “*channel-surfing*” with a TV remote control: cfr. <http://public.wsu.edu/~brians/errors/surfing.html> and <http://www.netmom.com/about-net-mom/23-who-invented-surfing-the-internet> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]).
 7. See for instance <https://www.merriam-webster.com/> [Last accessed 28 August 28 2017].
 8. See the description of the research project and the podcast series, online, at <http://www2.ual.es/redesliterarias> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
 9. On Kubrick’s movie, see the essay by Giorgio Ieranò *Ulisse alla deriva: l’epopea tragica di Stanley Kubrick*, in Cavallini 2010, 133-152. For other movies and TV series directly related to Homer, which have been already analysed by critics, and cannot be treated here, see bibliography below, and particularly the essays by Martin Winkler.
 10. See for instance <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2009/aug/02/tilda-swinton-mobile-cinema> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
 11. The episodes (one hour each) were written and directed by Cousins, first shown in cinemas (2011-), now available in DVD.
 12. See for instance the review at <https://www.theguardian.com/tv-and-radio/tvandradioblog/2015/sep/11/a-bumpy-journey-for-anna-friel-have-you-been-watching-odyssey> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
 13. See respectively the websites of the NASA project “2001 Mars Odyssey” (<http://mars.nasa.gov/odyssey/>), of the Odyssee hostel in Berlin (<http://www.globetrotterhostel.de/>), of the Odyssey hotel on the Greek island of Kephallonia, opposite to Ithaca (<https://hotelodyssey.gr/>). [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
 14. See bibliography below, and particularly Treu, 2009a, 2017 (forthcoming), Notti and Treu 2017 (forthcoming).
 15. Another dangerous, yet successful, military retreat – narrated by the Greek historian Xenophon in his *Anabasis* – inspired, in turn, a remarkable case: *The Warriors* (a novel by Sol Yurick, 1965, and a cult movie by Walter Hill, 1979: see Treu 2017a, 67-68).
 16. The English term ‘homely’, and the German ‘*heimlich*’ - from ‘*Heim*’, ‘home’ - share the same root of ‘*Heimat*’, ‘Homeland’.

17. About Penelope's dreams, in comparison with those of Attic tragedies, see Treu 2006. For some relevant adaptations, particularly regarding Penelope and the homecoming, see Knight 2016.
18. The whole text is online at <http://www.cavafy.com/poems/content.asp?cat=1&id=74> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
19. The story of Ulysses is divided by Manfredi in two parts (before and after the Trojan war) – *Il giuramento* ("The Oath", 2012) and *Il ritorno* ("The return", 2013) – ideally followed by a third novel, *L'oracolo* ("The Oracle" which was originally dated 1990, re-written and set in a different context.
20. Première at Plautusfestival, Sarsina, 11th August 2015, Italian tour in 2015/2016. See the online reviews at <http://www.sipario.it/recensioniprosah/item/9477-il-mio-nome-e-nessuno-l-ulisse-regia-alessio-pizzech.html> and http://www.dramma.it/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=18973:il-mio-nome-e-nessuno-l-ulisse&catid=39&Itemid=14 [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
21. Among children books, see for instance Codignola and Papini 1999 and 2014, Cinquetti and Guicciardini 2014. As for comics, for a general survey see the essays by Massimo Manca (*Omero a fumetti*, in Cavallini 2010, 269-289) and by Thomas E. Jenkins (*Heavy Metal Homer*, in Kovacs and Marshall, 2011, 221-235). There are also three fictional characters named 'Ulysses' in Marvel comics: see [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulysses_\(comics\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ulysses_(comics)) [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
22. The first part is online at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GCMVQatMW1M> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
23. For examples in cinema and TV see Hall, 2012, 29, and most of all about Franco Rossi's *Odissea* see Winkler, "Franco Rossi's *Odissea*: The Greatest Screen Adaptation of Homer", online at <https://camws.org/meeting/2009/program/abstracts/03A2.Winkler.pdf> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. See also other essays by Winkler in Cavallini 2010, 153-163, in Knippschild and García Morcillo 2013, 133-153 (see more at: <http://www.bloomsbury.com/us/seduction-and-power-9781441177469/#sthash.Ed1qlMUG.dpuf> [Last accessed 28 August 2017], and Winkler 2015, 154. For a remarkable, personal souvenir about Rossi's *Odissea* see Ieranò, 2015, 227-230.
24. Blumenberg 1979.
25. World premiere in Catania on August 31st 2010, reprised at Festival MilanOltre, Milan, in autumn 2016. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E6uggrJ58uw>, <http://www.scenariopubblico.com/compagnia-zappala-danza/> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
26. See bibliography below, and particularly Treu 2009a, 2014, 2015e.
27. For updated information see <http://www.teatropubblicoligure.it/> [Last accessed: August 28th, 2017], Ieranò and Taravacci 2017 (forthcoming). About the Festival "Orestyadi" see <http://www.fondazioneorestiadi.it/orestiadifestival/calendario.html> [Last accessed 28 August 2017], Isgrò (2011, 9-67) and Garavaglia 2012.
28. See www.meetingtheodyssey.eu [Last accessed 30 August 2017]). See also Treu 2014 and 2015b.
29. See <http://www.cadadieteatro.com/2015/10/15/nausicaa-io-sono-io/> [Last accessed 30 August 2017]. I thank the team of *MeetingtheOdyssey*, Cadadieteatro and the staff at the Olbia performance (August 13, 2015).
30. Another international project, *Odyssee Europa* (2010) created by Christoph Ramsayr, was a theatre journey in six episodes across the Germany (spectators were following

- Ulysses on a bus, and travelling across a former industrial area); the paper by Sotera Fornaro, *L'ambiguo ritorno: sondaggi su Omero nella letteratura italiana del Novecento*, in Cavallini 2010, 9-38 (cited above, n.1).
31. For these productions, see respectively <https://www.piccoloteatro.org/it/2016-2017/canto-la-storia-dell-astuto-ulisse>, <http://www.teatrodellemming.it/>, <http://www.piccoloteatro.org/it/2015-2016/odyssey> [Last accessed 30 August 2017], Tentorio 2013, Frattali and Pietrosanti 2014.
 32. Wilson, in a meeting crowded with students (Università Statale, Milan, October 1st, 2015), confirmed that his key-idea was “a fantastic journey for the 21st century”, and he asked the actors “to tell the story to a child, to a little boy or girl in the audience, like a bed-time tale with scary monsters and terrible moments”.
 33. For Pirandello’s text, see Pagliaro 1967. About Pirrotta see Rimini (2015, 117-120, 130), Treu 2006, and 2016, 229-31.
 34. See respectively, on Isgrò’s *Polifemo*, the paper by Sotera Fornaro in Cavallini 2010 (cited above, n.1); on *Odissea cancellata* Isgrò (2011, 79-82, 495-52), and Ieranò and Taravacci 2017 (forthcoming). About Gibellina see also Garavaglia 2012.
 35. See http://www.figlidartecuticchio.com/cuticchio_Mostro.swf [Last accessed 28 August 2017], *Cuticchio and Licata* 1993, Rimini (2015, 131).
 36. On Emma Dante see Barone 2014, Giovannelli 2014, Piovan and Brazzale (2014, 9, 15-41).
 37. See <http://classici.tcvi.it/it/eventi/2014-2015/68-ciclo> [Last accessed 28 August 2017] and Treu 2015d.
 38. On the Italian production of this play, directed by Luca Ronconi, *Odissea doppio ritorno* (Ferrara 2007 – Milano 2008) see Iannucci 2007.
 39. An adaptation of this poem, “*Le donne e il mare*” (“Women and the Sea”) was staged at the Venice Theatre Biennale: see Treu (2009a, 177).
 40. See for the text Puppa “(2000, 69-80).
 41. See <http://www.teatrodellealbe.com/eng/spettacolo.php?id=63> [Last accessed: August 29th, 2017] for the adaptation directed by Marco Martinelli, with Roberto Magnani (2009).
 42. On Perrotta see Treu (2009a, 165-167). The *Odyssey* is also a recognizable model, although not explicit, for Perrotta’s new project on migration: *Versoterra*, 30th September-2nd October 2016: see <http://versoterra.it/>, <http://www.stratagemmi.it/?p=9272>, and <http://www.marioperrotta.com/> [Last accessed 30 August 2017].
 43. See respectively for *Ulisse il ritorno*, Treu 2013a, and Viccei 2013; for *La casa. Odissea di un crack* Treu 2015a [Last accessed 30 August 2017].
 44. Ulysses’s descent into Hades recently inspired a modern production, *Nekyia* by Michail Marmarinos (Epidauros Festival, 24th-25th July, 2015) where his Greek company interacts with dancers and musicians of NO theatre, from Japan: see the online review by Tentorio, 2015 [Last accessed 30 August 2017].
 45. Cited above.
 46. About Isgrò’s *Odissea cancellata* see Ieranò and Taravacci 2017 (forthcoming).
 47. See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YP5tX3J7P-Q> and http://www.egramma.it/eOS/index.php?id_articolo=790 [Last accessed 30 August 2017].
 48. The play is based on the investigation led by the Italian journalist Giovanni Maria Bellu, regarding a mysterious shipwreck dated December 25th, 1996, denounced five

years later by a fisherman from Portopalo (Sicily). The play is still reprised on stage (see <http://www.teatrodellacooperativa.it/distribuzione/la-nave-fantasma/#> [Last accessed 30 August 2017]). Meanwhile, the story inspired a book (Bellu 2004) and a TV movie in two episodes recently broadcasted by RAI 1 (the first and flagship channel of RAI, Italy's National Public Service Broadcaster): *Ifantasmì di Portopalo* ("Portopalo's ghosts"), Rai1, August 20th – 21st, 2017. Another "Odyssey of Nobodies", called "Bilal" was written by an Italian journalist (Gatti 2008) and inspired, in turn, the theatre production *Bilal*, directed by Annalisa Bianco: see for a general survey Fornaro 2016 [Last accessed 28 August 2017].

49. Prosa 2013 is another good example of ancient myths turned into modern stories on stage. The three chapters of her tragic trilogy ("Trilogia del Naufragio"), regarding immigrants of our times, were recently reprised in France and in Italy: for instance at Piccolo Teatro, Milan, respectively in 2015, 2016 and 2017 (<https://www.piccoloteatro.org/it/2016-2017/lampedusa-way> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]).
50. On *Rumore di Acque* see Martinelli 2010, and Teatro delle Albe website (repertory): <http://www.teatrodellealbe.com/eng/spettacolo.php?id=65> (English version) and <http://www.teatrodellealbe.com/eng/teatrografia.php?id=1> for the updated list of performances and bibliographic references [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. I thank Martinelli, Renda, and all their staff for their splendid job, and constant support. Several videos are also available online, on Vimeo and Youtube (including a movie by Alessandro Renda, *Mare bianco*), see <https://vimeo.com/85579977> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. See also Treu 2010 and 2013b. On the same subject, the contemporary shipwrecks, see also the documentary *Summertime* by Marcella Vanzo (2007, 14').
51. The English version, by Thomas Simpson, is online at <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/95d7c407#page-39> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. The French version, *Bruits d'Eaux* has been staged several times, in France and Belgium, in the past six years: see the videos online, for instance <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TiB1Xt-7Zlc> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]. The German version *Wassergerausch*, was staged in Bremen with Michael Meyer: he will also be on stage at CISIM (Lido Adriano, Ravenna), in a half-German, half Italian text with Alessandro Renda. The English version, by Tom Simpson, was staged in Chicago, in New Jersey, in NY (La Mama), and in Milwaukee with a new score by Guy Klucevsek ("functioning as a Greek chorus", according to Mike Fischer, "In theater Gigante's play, African refugees refuse to be counted out", *Journal Sentinel*, Milwaukee, 2nd October 2015, <http://archive.jsonline.com/entertainment/arts/in-gigantes-play-african-refugees-refused-to-be-counted-out-b99584820z1-330431851.html> [Last accessed 28 August 2017]).
52. See the University Website <http://www.dar.unibo.it/it/ricerca/centri/cimes/14-15/teatro/calendario/schutzbefohlenen> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
53. See Rimini (2015, 146) and Pedersoli 2010. The show was reprised by Pirrotta at Turin, Italy, on September 26th, 2016.
54. See Treu 2015c, and <http://www.indafondazione.org/it/> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
55. <https://www.meetingtheodyssey.eu/> [Last accessed 28 August 2017].
56. See <http://lettere2.unive.it/flgreca/ClassiciContro.htm> [Last accessed 30 August 2017].
57. I thank Wendy Lloyd and Erika Notti for their help and support.

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