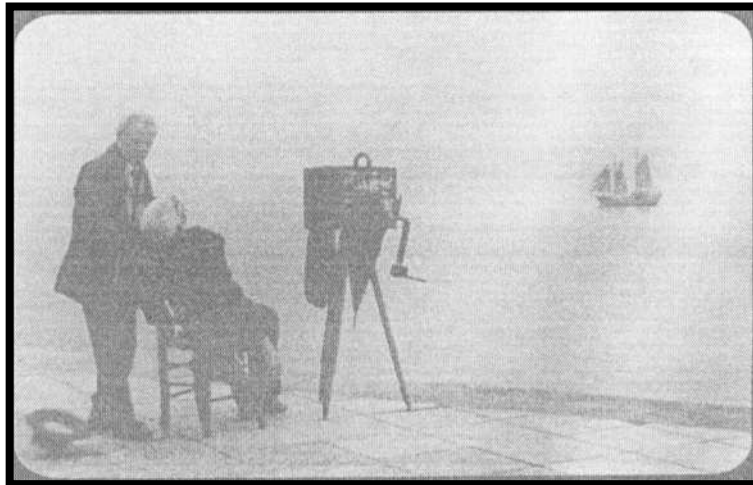


# The wandering of Homer's or any other Ulysses: Necessity or choice

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“Thessaloniki – December 1954: a vessel starts its journey and a wandering photographer dies just at the time that he is trying to capture the moment. This is how a dialogue starts that will become the pretext for another journey”. This is a scene recorded in “Ulysses Gaze”, a film by the Greek director Thodoros Angelopoulos, which was projected and awarded in Cannes in 1995. The director of the film stated that the inspiration for the title of the film was the Italian sculptor Giuseppe Manzu who had wished his last work to be Ulysses' gaze, for he believed that the entire human experience is reflected in his gaze. The film is about the wandering of a person from Greece in the northern countries of the Balkans in order to discover three unedited films of the Manakia brothers, the first film makers in



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Greece and the wider parts of the Balkans at the beginning of the twentieth century. Angelopoulos' hero, like a modern Ulysses, confronts different difficulties and problems which have to do with his wandering in regions where riots, violence, police controlling and curfews prevail due to intense political and border changes. In the meantime, despite all those difficulties and problems moments of acquaintances and creative coexistence with other people intervene in terms of cooperation, friendship and love affairs. Moreover, the element of loss and death is emphasized as it is directly woven into life, as is the element of love in the two – fold theme: love and death. Indeed, through traveling, which is the subject – matter in his films, T. A. reveals his tragic attitude towards life. He manifests his agreement with Heraclites' suggestion that it's impossible to cross the same river twice, by taking the leading role from "being" to "becoming". His work, though, is tragic because the journey, prevailing in life and knowledge, is a route with no way out, where the man himself constantly struggles with opposing views. In other words, this journey is to become a farewell, a bridge between arrival and departure, which is exactly the director's aim: a meeting of two gazes, the beginning and the end of the twentieth century, in the records of the twentieth century Balkan history, together with the history of the cinema of the twentieth century, linked with the wanderer, the hero of the film searching for truth. In fact, Angelopoulos repeats the same story of the epic poet, Homer, taking Ulysses as the archetype. Homer, though, focuses on the narration, the description of facts and events, in other words, more than the general sentimental and psychological state of his hero. He refers, of course, to Ulysses' nostalgia for his country, Ithaca, and his family – especially his wife Penelope and his son Telemachus – but this reference functions as a moving force for an adventurous voyage and is important for the plot. Nevertheless, Ulysses' ten year adventure, even if it is characterized by a natural cause of nostalgia for beloved areas and beloved persons, being a very long voyage cannot exclude other emotional situations defined by other causes and eventually forming particular choices. Besides, any man could be Ulysses that is an existence that runs a route through time, obviously having a past, present and future – in other words he lives in the past, present and future – and in this effort to exist through action, depending on situations, he expresses certain desires conflicting most of the time with his remote objectives. It so happens what Aristotle says in his work "Of soul" that logic forces us, being humans who have a sense of time, to resist by looking into the future, while desire itself dictates to us to seek something thinking of the present; the pleasure of the present time seems to be the absolute pleasure and the absolute good, as man is unable to foresee the future. Even in the Homeric description, then, we can detect elements that show Ulysses as a human being with needs and desires connected with his direct present, and not only his nostalgic mood related to future aims.

Starting with the issue of desire for knowledge and communication, Ulysses in rhapsody Z of *Odyssey* ignores being shipwrecked, and asks Nauseka for information about Faeakes' island and its people saying: "Having endured much, I chanced on you and I don't know other people who reside in this country and enjoy living here. Come on, show me the town....". Moreover, Ulysses himself, when he describes his adventure with Polyphimos, the Cyclops, in rhapsody I, says: "and then my shipmates would urge me... to set sail immediately. But I didn't listen... I wanted to see him and receive his hospitable presents. This willpower for direct contact with the knowledge of the present situation is further elaborated by Dantis presented as Ulysses' irrevocable need in his "Hell" saying: "When I left for Gaeta, unburdening myself of Kirca, who had kept me for longer than a year, neither my son's sweetness, nor my sympathy for my aged father or the fair love that would please Penelope, could quench the thirst burning inside me to become acquainted with passions and virtues of a man in the world. Brothers, I cry out, you who came out here in the west, facing myriad dangers, in this short span of life, do not refuse the path to the sun.... respect your noble sperm: you have been created not to be animals but to follow knowledge and virtue." Furthermore, the Greek poet Konstantinos Kavafis refers to the above short term pleasure of knowledge, even projecting its materialistic dimension, when he urges every future Ulysses saying: "You'd better stop at Phoenicians' trade shops and get pretty goods, mother-of-pearl and coral, amber and ebony and hedonic perfumes of all kinds." Another issue, that Homer points out with discretion in *Odyssey*, is the issue of Ulysses' willpower to experience passion and danger. In the first case, in rhapsody M, he has an intense desire to indulge in Sirens' seducing song. The fact that he had taken all precautions

even forbidding his shipmates to untie him despite begging them doesn't mean that he suffered less. Besides, this risky attitude is also confirmed by his desire to take a close look at Scylla, the mythical monster that ate six of his shipmates directly in front of him.

But both the descent into Hades and his acquaintance with the underworld – without always being dictated to by fate – indicates a man who disregards every danger in the face of the possibility that is given to him to get to know the real face of death first hand. For although he could have been limited to the oracle of the seer Tiressia and return, he doesn't resist the temptation to encounter his dead friends and his mother, as well as legendary characters, such as Hercules, and share with them the drama of the underworld. A comparable reference to the acquaintance with the mystery of death occurs in the *Odyssey* of James Joyce when Leopold Bloom accompanies his friend who has died unexpectedly to his last residence. Here, of course, the contact with death is more adapted to human measures as it occurs only by being part of the mourning process. It shows, however, the special relationship between mankind and death as one of his axes and as one of the greatest existential questions. This brings us to the second axis which is called "love" so that we can see how the one situation of the Homeric hero functions. Throughout his journey, Ulysses will be inspired by the love of two goddesses, the witch Circa and the nymph Calypso and also by a queen to be, Nauseka. Homer, of course, refers to love without any response on the part of Ulysses. Despite that fact, he is presented as living an experience with them; as enjoying their indulgences and as sleeping with the two goddesses. The continual reference to Ulysses' nostalgia for Penelope and his long term desire to be with her again, therefore, does not contradict with his immediate desire for love. This desire is expressed moreover both in his polite and complimentary behavior towards the three women and in his recognition of their superior natural beauty as well as his disposition not to reveal their existence to his wife. The fact, nonetheless, that from his ten years of traveling he stayed for seven years on the island of Kalypso must have some connection with his personal choice. That which must be emphasized is that the reason for his relationship with the three women is not only one of bodily attraction and erotic lust but also of a more general communicative disposition. Proof of this is the fact that what matters to him is his untidy appearance when he meets Nauseka and takes care to adjust it, as well as when parting he promises that he will remember her forever. In the cinematic version of Thodoros Angelopoulos it is within this platonic relationship of Ulysses with Nauseka that Ulysses' personal desire is depicted more clearly when Ulysses requests the young girl to wait for him.

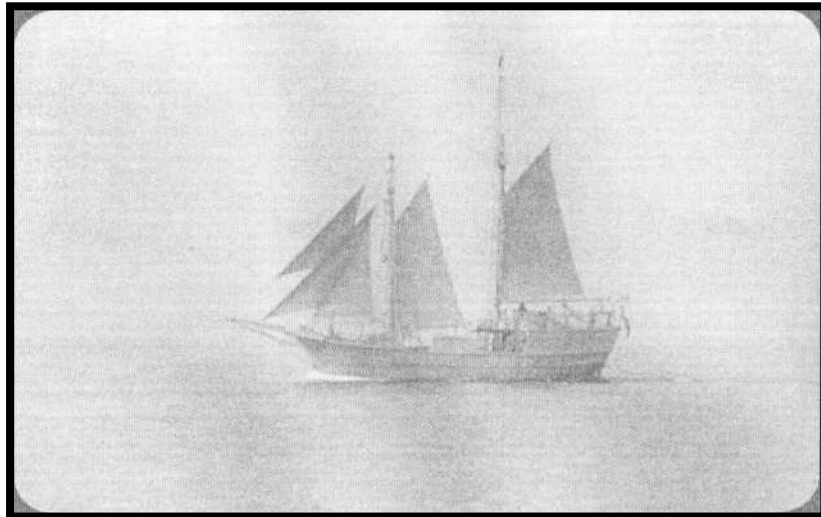
What is it, therefore, that determines the Homeric journey or whatever *Odyssey* towards Homeric or whatever other Ithaca? Clearly, a desire to return to stable and secured values or to discover and conquer



something new will always function as the motivating force. It is this motivating force, anyway, that is nourished by a continual reminder because when recalling something which induces pleasure, we try with passion to believe it to be the present.

But that present functions more with a background of imagination and of a dream world and for that reason, in many cases, that which follows in the course of existence and real time is cancelled and excluded from the real present. It maybe the case that the initial acute desire to return, nostalgia, or the achievement of any objective remains and functions as a guide for the journey, but what cannot be ignored are other smaller desires that interrupt along the journey and participate substantially in the aesthetic, psychic and spiritual indulgence of the traveler. That, in other words, which in other cases Freud called overwhelming desire which comes into sharp contrast with other desires of the subjective and demonstrate invariance in the moral and aesthetic values of his personality, functions also in the case of Homeric and whatever other Ulysses with the meaning of an unexpected, present and daily desire. This desire is a steadfast part of man's nature which wants to live in the present and from this angle, we can say that the choice of a perpetual seduction, of a journey with no end, is determined since the journey is an embodiment of the person Ulysses of whom the gaze wants to embrace eternity.

In the cinematic version of this Ulysses, Thodoros Angelopoulos expresses his own opinion with the divulging monologue of Ulysses: "When I return, it will be with another man's clothes, another man's name. My coming will be unexpected. If you look at me unbelieving and say: *you are not he*, I'll show you signs and you will believe me. I'll tell you about the lemon tree in your garden, the corner window that lets in the moonlight. And then signs of the body, signs of love, and as we climb trembling to our old room, between one embrace and the next, between lovers' calls, I will tell you about the journey all the night long and then all the nights to come. The whole human adventure between one embrace and the next, between lovers' calls. The story that never ends....."



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