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THE SON OF HOMER – EZRA POUND’S *ODYSSEY*

ABSTRACT. Schade Gerson, The Son of Homer – Ezra Pound’s *Odyssey* (*Syn Homera – ‘Odyseja’ Ezry Pounda*).

Ezra Pound was obsessed with Ulysses. He identified with him throughout his *Cantos*, a work Pound opens by stealthily reworking a passage from an obscure 16th-century Latin translation of Homer’s *Odyssey*. The son of Homer Pound, Ezra led a Ulyssean life in various senses – leaving his home country only to return after his adventures, simulating madness, telling lies. He shares the lying and the way of life with his contemporary Lawrence of Arabia. Both translated the *Odyssey* and both, like Ulysses, lost all their friends (or alienated nearly everyone). All three were much despised for their habits, Ulysses in general by the Greek classical tragedians, Pound in particular by George Orwell, and Lawrence by practically everybody.

Keywords: multi-layered intertextuality; Alfred Tennyson; Andreas Divus Justinopolitanus; Palamedes.

*I don't know that one can read any trans. of the Odyssey.
Perhaps you could read book XI.
I have tried an adaptation in the 'Seafarer' metre, or something like it,
but I don't expect anyone to recognize the source very quickly.*

Ezra Pound, Letter to Iris Barry, London July 1916 (Paige 1951: 137)

PROLOGUE

“Pound seems to have plumped definitely for Fascism, at any rate the Italian variety” George Orwell stated in 1940.¹ And Pound was not alone. William Butler Yeats, “if he had lived longer” Orwell speculated, “would necessarily have followed his friend Pound”.² Thomas Stearns Eliot, too, though remaining

¹The article is an enlarged version of a lecture, which formed part of a public reading of Homer’s *Odyssey*. In the eleventh hour, a helpful anonymous referee prevented some shortcomings and ambiguities.

Orwell 1968, i 558. “Now shouting anti-semitism on the Rome radio” (ii 240, from 1942), Pound becomes more and more a sort of “quisling” he continues (iii 392, from 1945). Probably, Orwell pondered, “Pound did sell himself partly for prestige, flattery and a professorship”, having “a most venomous hatred for both Britain and the U.S.A., where he felt that his talents had not been fully appreciated” (iii 106, from 1944).

²Orwell 1968, ii 314, from 1943; Yeats died in 1939.

aloof, “if forced at the pistol’s point to choose between Fascism and some more democratic form of Socialism, would probably choose Fascism” Orwell feared.³ To Pound, never good at breaking ice with the British, let alone with such a symbol of Englishry as Orwell, this pamphleteering and denouncing came as no surprise. To him, England did already in 1935 resemble a “mortician’s parlour”,⁴ a corpse’s halfway state between two worlds, not far from the Underworld, already close to its entrance.⁵

Yeats, Eliot, and Lewis are to return decades later in Pound’s *Canto* 98, published in 1959, one of the last in his series of which the first were published in 1925, on which Pound was working already for more than ten years, then, and which begins by Odysseus’ visit to the Underworld. His fellow poets form part of Pound’s imagination: while he is Odysseus,⁶ they are his comrades. All began with a 16th-century Latin translation of the Underworld-book of Homer’s *Odyssey*, which Pound discovered by chance. It happened in Paris, during the odyssey of Ezra Pound, whose father’s name was Homer.

I

The beginning of *Canto* 98 is condensed, paratactic. Leucothea appears, the Homeric ‘white goddess’, whom we know from Homer’s *Odyssey* (5. 333–5): a sea-goddess identified with Ino, daughter of Cadmus. Then, in Homer, she takes pity on Odysseus adrift and in distress, giving him the shawl (5. 351) that protects Odysseus against Poseidon. When he scatters Odysseus’s raft, Odysseus takes off the clothes which Kalypso has given him; he then ties the shawl under his chest, flings himself into the sea, swimming for all he can (5. 375). Now, in Pound, we hear of her again (98. 8 & 50sq.): “Leucothea gave her veil to Odysseus [...] She being of Cadmus line, the snow’s lace is spread out like sea foam.”

The narrative, however, takes a new turn, continuing thus (98. 52sq.):

“But the lot of ‘em, Yeats, Possum (i.e. Eliot), and Wyndham had no ground beneath ‘em.”

³Orwell 1968, i 558, from 1940. Orwell’s left-winging, however, was to some only skin-deep. Or as Pound’s close friend Wyndham Lewis put it (Lewis 1952, 183): “Had Orwell been of German nationality who can doubt that he would have been an S.S. man.” Fascism became attractive to all of the group, indeed, i.e. Yeats, Pound, Eliot, Wyndham Lewis, and to D.H. Lawrence, as well. With the exception of Yeats and Pound, these writers all finally rejected fascism; v. Ferrall 2001, 43–70, on Pound and ‘the Jews’.

⁴Paige 1951, 360; from a letter to Eliot.

⁵Given that perspective, Orwell can be only part of “a conspiracy against him throughout the English-speaking countries”, as Orwell himself surmised (1968, iii 106, from 1944), carrying out a smear campaign.

⁶On this often discussed identification v., e.g., Wilhelm 1990, 348.

In other words: while his fellow poets have no chance of surviving Poseidon’s huge wave crashing down on them, Odysseus manages to carry on his project. He is protected by a goddess because he has something to say that is worth saying. Therefore, he must reach what he is aiming at, and “Leucothea emerges as the sacred figure who can withstand the swirling waters to guide the poet on a sea voyage”.⁷

Like Odysseus, the poet is a versatile, dynamic navigator. Pound expresses this idea already in his first *Canto*, right from its beginning. At the end of this *Canto* we hear that Odysseus shall return but lose all companions (l. 66–8) – as Pound did who returned to the States but lost all companions. Before that can happen Odysseus relates how he poured libations, how he sacrificed a sheep to Tiresias (l. 24): “Then prayed I many a prayer to the sickly death’s-heads”, and then they do appear (l. 29–37):

Souls out of Erebus, cadaverous dead, of brides / Of youths and of the old who had borne much; / Souls stained with recent tears, girls tender, / Men many, mauled with bronze lance heads, / Battle spoil, bearing yet dreary arms, / These many crowded about me; with shouting, / Pallor upon me, cried to my men for more beasts; / Slaughtered the herds, sheep slain of bronze; / Poured ointment, cried to the gods, etc.

Pound reworked the text several times. An earlier version differed much;⁸ it formed part of Pound’s long essay on some early translations of Homer, published in 1918.⁹ Another version of this text, published in 1915, has still a slight variant.¹⁰ The more recent (and orthodox) version is characterised by an even more ‘tumbling’ rhythm than the older one, resembling an Old English poem of some 100 lines that discusses the miseries and the attractions of life at sea, *The Seafarer*. Yet, Pound’s text is in fact a translation or adaptation as he put it, from Latin:¹¹

congregataeque sunt / Animae ex Erebo cadaverum mortuorum, / Nymphaeque iuvenesque et multa passi senes, / Virginesque tenerae, nuper flebilem animum habentes, / Multi autem vulnerati aereis lanceis / Viri in bello necati, cruenta arma habentes, / Qui multi circum foveam veniebant aliunde alius / Magno clamore, me autem pallidus timor cepit. / Iam postea socios hortans iussi / Pecora, quae iam iacebant iugulata saevo aere, / Excoriantes comburere: supplicare autem Diis, etc.

Pound cannot remember exactly when he got hold of this text:¹² “In the year of grace 1906, 1908, or 1910 I picked from the Paris quais a Latin version of

⁷ Flack 2015, 156.

⁸ The so-called *Ur-Canto III*, to be substantially reworked and reedited by Pound; cf. Flack 2015, 40sq.

⁹ Eliot 1954, 263.

¹⁰ Bush 1976, 71, 131.

¹¹ Eliot 1954, 260sq.

¹² Eliot 1954, 259.

the *Odyssey* by Andreas Divus Justinopolitanus (Parisiis, In officina Christiani Wecheli, MDXXXVIII), (...). I lost a Latin *Iliad* for the economy of four francs, these coins being at that time scarcer with me than they ever should be with any man of my tastes and abilities.”

Enigmatically and abruptly, two lines at the end of Pound's first *Canto* mention Divus' work (l. 69sq.): “Lie quiet Divus. I mean, that is Andreas Divus, / In officina Wecheli, 1538, out of Homer.” Divus' translation renders a passage from the opening of the *Odyssey's* Nekyia (ll. 37–46):¹³

And there gathered from out of Erebus the spirits of the departed dead – young brides and boys yet unmarried, old men of much suffering, innocent girls with the grief fresh in their hearts: and there were many wounded with bronze-tipped spears, men killed in battle and their bloodied armour still on them. From all over they came flocking round the trench with an eerie noise, and terror took its pale grip on me. Then I called to my companions and told them to flay the two sheep that lay there slaughtered by the pitiless bronze and burn them in sacrifice, with prayers to the gods.

Thus, literally and metaphorically, the poet entered the Homeric Underworld, sometime around 1906, 1908, or 1910. Henceforth he started, he alone being given artistic gifts. In his *Cantos* the double entendre as well as Pound's “cultural overlaying”¹⁴ can hardly pass unnoticed, i.e. his giving to a Greek tale, with a mixture of Greek and Latin names, the Anglo-Saxon coloration of diction and rhythm. In fact, the speaking voice resembles that of an Anglo-Saxon bard. Actually, in 1911 Pound published a modern version of *The Seafarer*, an Old English poem that gives a first-person account of a man alone on the sea, striving to reform his own poetic practice and that of modern English verse at the same time.

II

In his ambitious poetic project, however, Pound was preceded by Alfred Tennyson's *Ulysses* (published 1842), a text characterised by multi-layered intertextuality. For Tennyson draws not only on the *Odyssey* in general (ll. 100–37) as well as in particular (adapting, for instance, *Odyssey* 5. 270–5 in his lines 60sq.), but also, and even more, on the *Divina Commedia*, where Odysseus speaks (26. 90–124)¹⁵ a single, uninterrupted speech, an exception among the souls of the *Inferno*, breaking off with the end of this *Canto*. In Dante, Odysseus' will to live confronts the ineluctable death. Tennyson, however, omits Dante's sequel, i.e. Odysseus' final voyage and the sinking, “but preserves the pathos.”¹⁶

¹³Hammond 2000, 107sq.

¹⁴Kearns 1980, 21.

¹⁵Ricks 1969, 560sq.

¹⁶Robbins 1973, 190.

To begin with, using Odysseus as a hero, both Tennyson and Pound embody themselves in ideal characters, legendary figures. Evoking a frame of mind, Tennyson, for instance, speaks about a life that must be fought out to the end, as he put it in a letter to a friend.¹⁷ Moreover, both his *Ulysses* and Pound's *Cantos* contain passages that can be interpreted as comments on existence issuing directly from the author: "Yet the sentiments have the air of emerging naturally and inevitably from the situations of the imagined speakers, instead of being artificially 'plastered-on'".¹⁸ Finally, neither *Ulysses* nor the *Cantos* are single, unified, or wholly connected discourses.

Both writers share, however, something more, i.e. a riddle: it is still unclear whether or not we are to find their Ulysses altogether noble, or whether they were meant to be noble at all. Thus, both reflect Homer, perhaps without having realised it. Already in Homer there was some discussion of Odysseus as an epic hero: can he be defended against the observation made by Eupheithes (*Odyssey* 24. 426–9), father of Antinous, the first of the suitors to be killed, that something must be done against a man who first took many of our fine men and lost them and who, once returned, killed the very noblest? One must take vengeance on the murderers of our sons and our brothers, Eupheithes continues, for if we do not, this is a disgrace for future men to hear of, and one shall be covered in shame for all time to come.

III

Pound develops the contrast between Odysseus~Pound and Odysseus' companions~hoi polloi throughout the *Cantos*. It is Odysseus who has heard the sirens singing, while his companions were only given ear wax (*Canto* 20. 185). They were not bedding gorgeous women either (20. 181–3): "Nor had they Circe to couch-mate, Circe Titania, / 'Nor had they meats of Kalüpsö / 'Or her silk shirts brushing their thighs.'"

In fact, they have never known the good life. When they are transformed by Circe into pigs, only Odysseus receives the magic herb Moly, given to him by Hermes. In Homer's *Odyssey* it is mentioned in book 10; in Pound's *Cantos*, in no. 47 – where it is handed to Odysseus not only in order to protect him but also to grant him the chance of continuing his frivolous live (47. 41–5): "To the cave art thou called, Odysseus, / By Molü hast thou respite for a little, / By Molü art thou freed from the one bed that thou may'st return to another", etc.

Later on, Pound gets ever more close to the persona whom he has chosen at the outset of his voyage. Citing the Greek word for No-man, i.e. Outis, which

¹⁷ Cited by Ricks l.c.

¹⁸ Mayhead 1958, 232.

Odysseus uses in the Cyclops-episode, Pound declares “Odysseus the name of my family” (*Canto* 74. 23sq.). The citation comes from the first of the so-called *Pisan Cantos*,¹⁹ which Pound began while interned by the American forces in Pisa and which he continued later in Washington, in St. Elizabeth’s Hospital for the Criminally Insane.²⁰ Pound escaped the electric chair because he was considered insane²¹ – reminding us of Odysseus, who tried to escape to Trojan War by simulating madness, “last to volunteer on stiff jobs” as Pound put it laconically.²² Pound evokes this dodging, too (*Canto* 23. 28sq.): “(‘Derivation uncertain.’ The idiot! / Odysseus furrowed the sand.)”

Odysseus pretended to be insane and ploughed his fields with salt. Palamedes guessed what was going on and put Odysseus’ son Telemachus in front of the plough. Odysseus stopped, revealing his sanity. Odysseus never forgave Palamedes; later, he killed him, according to some by means of an intrigue, according to others he stoned him to death, or drowned him. Perhaps the opening of *Canto* 6 also refers to this un-heroic event (6. 1sq.): “What you have done, Odysseus, We know what you have done...”

In 1938, in his *Guide to Kulchur*, in a context different from the *Cantos*, Pound exclaimed emphatically about Odysseus (146): “A chap with a mind like THAT! The fellow is one of us. One of US.” And if Pound simulated madness as did Odysseus, somewhat inspired so to say, they were of the same ilk, indeed. To many a Homeric reader this sounds familiar. In the *Odyssey*’s first line we hear of Odysseus as *polytropos*, ‘a man of much resource’ (as Hammond translates), and later of Odysseus *polymetis* (21. 274), ‘resourceful Odysseus’ (Hammond again) – a man being able to encompass within his mind many another intelligence, a mind that can assume the shape of all things.²³ This they have in common indeed – Odysseus, Homer’s (metaphorical) son, as well as the (literal) son of Homer Pound, Ezra, both telling beautiful stories. Their beautiful lies, however, were not to everybody’s taste. Both Odysseus and Pound were much despised for them.

George Orwell, for instance, set the tone, declaring boastfully but erroneously Pound to be “entirely spurious,”²⁴ a crank forever discredited. And Odysseus’ treatment of Palamedes was regarded as despicable by all three

¹⁹ Flory 1980, 184sq.

²⁰ Hesse 1964, 208sq.

²¹ Carpenter 1988, 742–53.

²² Paige 1951, 362, from 1935.

²³ The meaning of *polytropos*, however, was disputed in antiquity. The word is ambiguous, either ‘much travelled, much wandering’, or ‘of many wiles, versatile, turning many ways, of many devices, ingenious’. The adjective recurs only once in Homer (*Odyssey* 10. 330), where either sense is suitable. Odysseus’ travels, however, resulted from accident, “and a reference to something genuinely characteristic of him is more appropriate”, as Stephanie West writes (1988, 69). Furthermore, ‘ingenious’ is a synonym for the epithets more commonly applied to Odysseus (such as, e.g., *polymetis*), corresponding to Odysseus’ self-characterization (*Odyssey* 9. 19sq.).

²⁴ 1968, iv 552, from 1949.

of the great tragedians who dramatized Palamedes’ story. Though we do not know how Sophocles handled the story in his *Palamedes* (F 478sq.) or in his *The Madness of Odysseus* (F 462), the fact that in his *Philoctetes* he presents Odysseus as an evil liar makes it likely that his view on him was not much better in his *Palamedes*. Euripides in his *Philoctetes* grimly recalled the destruction of Palamedes (F 789d), and in his *Palamedes* a chorus of Greeks voices bitter grief for Palamedes’ death (F 588). Aeschylus in his *Palamedes* ascribed the invention of numbers to Palamedes (F 181a). Thus, he may have brought up not only the motive of Odysseus’ revenge but he may have also suggested that Odysseus was jealous of a man more clever than himself.²⁵

IV

At the time he started, Pound was deeply convinced that classical works matter, both ancient and modern, as he writes in a letter from London in 1917:²⁶ “They are the antiseptics. They are almost the only antiseptics against the contagious imbecility of mankind.” To him there is a kind of great poetry – as the *Odyssey’s* Nekyia, its “speech only pardoned (...) because all the sea-faring men and companions are dead” – that is not made for after-dinner speakers, as Pound put it in a short pamphlet in 1916:²⁷ “Either such statements are made to curry favour with other people sitting at fat sterile tables, or they are made in an ignorance which is charlatanry when it goes out to vend itself as sacred and impeccable knowledge.”

He was even concerned about the deplorable state of classics as he states it in 1917:²⁸

The student is told that all the classics are excellent and that it is a crime to think about what he reads. There is no use pretending that these literatures are read as literature. An apostolic succession of school teachers has become the medium of distribution. The critical faculty is discouraged, the poets are made an exercise, a means of teaching the language.

Pound’s racy style, however, his vivid and sometimes strong language, spiced with a transatlantic flavour made Pound an easy target for any type of polemic.

²⁵ It is not necessary to assume that the tragedians somehow created such an unflattering image of Odysseus. Instead, it might well have been already developed in earlier, oral epic poetry, now lost. Homer would have changed Odysseus’ image, endowing his protagonist with noble qualities, as, for example, his endurance, or at least, emphasizing the importance of such qualities that help him survive, as, for example, his silence. By no means, however, Homer’s Odysseus can be described as a blameless hero, or called a man of undisputed authority. And neither was Pound.

²⁶ Paige 1951, 168.

²⁷ Eliot 1954, 64.

²⁸ Eliot 1954, 239.

It did not help much that he fell for Fascism, fleeing ‘American decadence’. Perhaps he was in fact insane, and not assuming a Hamletish posture of his soul. At least he was excitable, eccentric, and politically unacceptable. What he has to say about classical literature, however, comes from a sound mind. Despising bad translations of Homer, considering prose-renderings to be the ‘nadir’ of all, in the 30s, Pound prodded a British classicist to produce an accessible translation of the *Odyssey*.²⁹ Most regrettably, nothing came of it.

V

At about the same time, in 1932, T. E. Lawrence, known to the world as Lawrence of Arabia, the man who had inspired and led the Arabs in a guerrilla war against the Turks, deploying tactics also used by Odysseus in the *Iliad*’s tenth book, published his new version of the *Odyssey*. At his insistence though, it appeared without any mention of the translator’s name; not until his tragic death in 1935 were the publishers permitted to reveal that Lawrence of Arabia was responsible for a translation later to be distributed gratuitously to the Allied armed forces. His translation, however, would hardly have satisfied Pound, for Lawrence translated Homer as he wrote the book that made him famous, an autobiographical account of his participation in the Arab Revolt:³⁰ “The result was what we should expect from *Seven Pillars of Wisdom*: energetic and swift sentences and paragraphs, with a vocabulary affected and often ... ludicrously false.”

Lawrence’s translation differs from Pound’s, whose poetic project is out of Lawrence’s reach. No multi-layered intertextuality is aimed at, no rhythmic pattern achieved. And “prose ... has its limitations.”³¹ Lawrence’s translation reads: “Then from out of Erebus they flocked to me, the dead spirits of those who had died. Brides came and lads; old men and men of sad experience; tender girls aching from their first agony; and many fighting men showing the stabbed wounds of brazen spears – war-victims, in their blooded arms. All thronged to the trench and ranged restlessly this side of it and that with an eerie wailing. Pale fear gripped me. Hastily I called the others and bade them flay and burn with fire the sheep’s bodies which lay there, slaughtered by my pitiless sword. They obeyed, conjuring without cease the Gods.”

²⁹ Flack 2015, 128.

³⁰ Hight 1949, 488. The style of Lawrence’s much lesser known *The Mint*, however, in which he details his life as an ordinary soldier in the Air Force, is terse though; his variegated letters show again other stylistic features.

³¹ Knox 1991, 23.

EPILOGUE

Both Pound and Lawrence were men who were gifted with great ability and misused it. Like Pound, Lawrence the Brit also was highly excitable, not less eccentric than Pound the Yank, and to quite many people politically unacceptable. Moreover, his life cannot be called otherwise than an odyssey, as was that of Pound. In the end, it is the spirit of the age one might think, or a congenial spirit of both Lawrence and Pound, that somewhat united them and guided their Ulyssean lives, forced them to become men of many moves.

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THE SON OF HOMER – EZRA POUND’S ODYSSEY

Summary

Ezra Pound began his *Cantos* by translating a Latin version of Homer's Underworld-book into an English-sounding metre. He didn't expect anyone to recognize the rather obscure source

very quickly. Alfred Tennyson, however, preceded Pound; in his *Ulysses* he, too, did overlay and conceal what he got from Homer by something which he took from Dante. This seems fitting in the case of Ulysses, who himself not only told Cretan stories, i.e. a patch-work of half-truths and semi-lies, but also had to hide his driving forces. Again just like Ulysses, Pound was a man of many turns, as was his contemporary Lawrence of Arabia, a man who led a Ulyssean life if there is any. Both were much interested in classics. While Pound tried to get a new translation of the *Odyssey* on its way, though in vain, at the same time Lawrence of Arabia published his, anonymously, hiding his identity, as Ulysses had to. Like Ulysses both Lawrence as well as Pound are seen by many as archdeceivers, archturncoats, and archliars.