

The Body of Odysseus, No-Body's Body

Véra Savvaki, Ph.D.

Numerous figurations in contemporary art bear witness to the fact that today the body has become a site of conflicts and anxieties to the limits of representation. Clinical practice also confronts us to complex, enigmatic and violent corporeal experiences. Besides somatic symptom disorders, different corporeal events and experiences (such as disease, disability, pregnancy, puberty, ageing) and voluntary body-modifications increasingly question our psychoanalytic listening. From a theoretic-clinical point of view, psychoanalysis disposes of interesting models to think the body: hysterical conversion, models referring to psychosomatic pathologies, as well as the recent theorizations of A. Lemma. However, when working with subjects whose corporeal problematics are at the fore, the body of Odysseus has time and again worked for us as a metaphor to illustrate the manner in which identity seeking is expressed through the subject's relation to its own body.

If war in the *Iliad* took place in the outer world, war in the *Odyssey* develops within the internal reality of the hero. We thus discover with surprise that Odysseus could have returned quite swiftly to Ithaca, but that his opportunistic, manipulative and cunning mentality lead him elsewhere. Odysseus is acting in – almost – everything that happens to him. His monologues and ulterior motives are full of calculations, stratagems, pride and distrust. It appears that the greatest test – condensing the entire ambivalence of the hero – is not simply the return to Ithaca, but the revelation of his identity. Besides, Athena, Odysseus' divine equivalent, accompanies the hero's quest with cunning transformations of his body, disguising it here as a poor beggar, there as a strong and beautiful man.

Odysseus' adventures before the arrival in Ithaca do not follow a linear present tense and direct action development, but are accounted by Odysseus himself in the middle of the work. Known as 'embedded narrative', the structure of the *Odyssey* puts the identity dimension of the journey to the fore. With this technique, Odysseus sometimes lives, sometimes narrates the *Odyssey*, as if – in his quest of himself – he were being self-constructed as protagonist and narrator. Thus, the poet, the narrator and the agent seem to produce the work in a movement of triple identification – or of triple splitting. What is more, Odysseus always presents himself as an-other who had sometimes heard speak of himself or who is looking for information on the famous hero, as if his story were at first somebody else's story. He is oral rumors that travel faster than him; he is other people's memories; he can take all forms; he is 'no-body'. In these fictions, what remains of him? Would *one* identity and *one* body be enough for him? If Odysseus is the lost object, then could he be created/found again?

These re-encounters with himself take place at the Phaeacians', when, shipwrecked and naked, Odysseus is welcome by Nausicaa, dressed in her clothes and brought to the palace of Alcinous. The welcome and encounter with the benevolent king produces a subject-effect: almost re-born, Odysseus unfolds, like an *aidos*, his own *Odyssey* in all its splendor and is honored as a war hero and the king of Ithaca. As the survivor organizes his story, he is reconstructed by it, as if the encapsulated narrative functioned like a psychic revetment layer in an effort to deal with trauma. If on every monster and adventure are projected his own regressed and 'monstruous', because non-integrated, psychological parts, then Odysseus takes shape thanks to the power of a deferred narrative bringing together the pieces of his history and in front of a king who recognizes him.

However, it is in Ithaca that Odysseus' body becomes a true protagonist and permits the ultimate

recognition of the hero. First, the wet-nurse Eurycleia recognizes her master through a scar of a wild boar's bite that the young Odysseus had suffered when he went hunting with his grandfather. Later, Argos, his loyal dog, recognizes his master intuitively just before dying in a particularly emotional scene. Thirdly, Odysseus is recognized by Penelope—his just-as-smart feminine counterpart—through a test of intimate complicity. In these three scenes, we can trace the enduring inscription into the body of some organizing instances of psychic life: on the one hand, adolescence as corporeal injury tied to the first confrontation with masculinity, transmission and death. On the other hand, the evolution of 'savage' drives towards the tender mastery of one-self and the resolved oedipal succession. Finally, the erotic encounter with the *alter-corpus* and the secret of the bed-tree in the bridal chamber present themselves as the ultimate 'sign' of truth and the anchoring sole of the subject.

In this work of recognition, the stakes of identity are progressively displaced from speech towards the body and the other. If, across the *Odyssey*, the body of Odysseus does not stop changing states—it is injured, taken care of, disguised, transformed into a scorned or embellished body—the closer the hero comes to Ithaca, the more his body is captured by its intimate reality. Would the return to Ithaca thus be synonymous with the grieving of the immense potentialities of an all-powerful and all-desiring Ego? Would the corporeal marks become occasions for the body to become cathected and spoken of again?

Surprisingly, Odysseus—this pre-classical hero—is profoundly modern: his personality is far from being smooth or consensual, his journey is ambivalent, both erratic and determined, and his body, before its final recognition, is the body of 'no-body', immersed in a play of appearances and metamorphoses. At the same time, the work of recognition described in the *Odyssey* illustrates in an exemplary way the manner in which aspects of corporeal cartography can serve as primary matter for a subject to engage the fundamental questions of its own construction, such as that of origins, vulnerability, belonging and otherness. However, towards the end of the work, Odysseus puzzles us when he announces to Penelope a prophecy concerning his next journey and his future adventures. Situating the body—unsettling until the end!—would thus be a paradoxical effort because it invites us to imagine what other forms will take that which remains psychologically un-related, discontinuous and non-appropriable.