Odysseus's Eternal Return: Classical Reception in the Post-Hermeneutical Framework of the Materialities of Literature

O eterno retorno de Ulisses: recepção clássica no quadro pós-hermenêutico das materialidades da literatura

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Abstract: This article discusses *classical reception* in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature, taking as case study Theodoros Angelopoulos's reappreciation of Odysseus's *nostos* in *Voyage to Cythera* (1984). Inspired by Oscar Wilde's concept of *art-criticism*, this idea of *classical reception* assumes that a good way to protect the classics from acts of hermeneutical violence is to read them as aesthetic mediations for the *making* of entirely *new artworks* —particularly artworks whose materialities allow for more than just a revision of meaning.

Keywords: Homer; *Odyssey*; Theodoros Angelopoulos; *Nostos*; Post-Hermeneutics; Art Criticism.

Classical reception as a hermeneutical practice

In 1989, a scholar named Richard Jenkyns published an article in *The Journal of Roman Studies* that opens with the following remark about what should be the appropriate way of reading Virgil's *Eclogues*:

> *There is an obstacle to our natural appreciation of Virgil's Eclogues which looms as large in their case as in that of any poetry whatever. The Eclogues form probably the most influential group of short poems ever written: though they themselves take Theocritus as a model, they were to become the fountainhead from which the vast and diverse tradition of pastoral in many European literatures was to spring. To use them as a model was in itself to distort their character: it is one of the greatest ironies of literary history that these elusive, various, eccentric poems should have become the pattern for hundreds of later writers. Moreover, the growth of the later pastoral tradition meant that many things were attributed to Virgil which are not in Virgil. Sometimes they were derived from interpretations which were put upon Virgil in late antiquity but which we now believe to be mistaken; sometimes they are misinterpretations of a much later date; sometimes they originated from new developments in pastoral literature which their inventors had not meant to seem Virgilian, but which in the course of time got foisted back on to Virgil nevertheless. It is hard, therefore, to approach the Eclogues openly and without preconceptions about what they contain,*

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> *and even scholars who have devoted much time and learning to them have sometimes continued to hold views about them for which there are upon a dispassionate observation no good grounds at all. No poems perhaps have become so encrusted by the barnacles of later tradition and interpretation as these, and we need to scrape these away if we are to see them in their true shape. My aim here is to do some of this scraping by examining the use of Arcadians and the name of Arcadia in Virgil's work. (Jenkyns (1989) 26; my emphases)*

Jenkyns's proposition is so problematic, I feel like emphasising the whole paragraph; in a few words, what he is suggesting is the possibility of reading Virgil *as it was in its original social context*, as if the texts' earliest propositional contents could be found intact if we brushed away all the layers of criticism written about them throughout their history. His argument belongs to an empiricist logic of literary studies according to which a classicist's task is to rectify the deformations of meaning that different works produced upon a classical artwork —particularly in a textual medium— throughout history, so that we can appreciate this work as it *really* was, as it was *originally* read, perceived and assimilated by its native public (Wood (2012)163-64).

As a reaction to the abuses committed against the classics by readers of many different traditions that valued interpretation precisely as the ascription of some kind of meaning, this empiricist method does not seem at all a bad alternative.

Take, for example, Sigmund Freud's reading of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex* (5BC).

It is true, as Freud's studies advance and the hypothesis of the Oedipus Complex becomes more intricate, the whole theory detaches itself from the original literature —that is, from Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, as well as from the Oedipus myth itself. However, in *The Interpretation of Dreams* (1899), where he first formally suggests the idea of an Oedipus Complex, Freud does affirm that Oedipus *suffered* from a certain complex that was bound to be natural to all of us: *"It is the fate of all of us, perhaps, to direct our first sexual impulse towards our mother and our first hatred and our first murderous wish against our father."* (Freud (2010) 280) For an ordinary reading, it seems a very common sense that Oedipus's tragic end results from the fact that he *suffered* from this sexual impulse, but both the myth and the tragedy hardly assume this: if Oedipus *suffered* from this impulse, as Freud contends, he would have directed it to

King Polybus and Queen Merope, whom he believed were his real parents and whom were for him effectively the parental authorities. Oedipus's emancipation from King Polybus and Queen Merope, followed by his flee from Corinth, in fact suggests, from a psychoanalytical perspective, that he somewhat managed to control or overcome such sexual impulse —an impulse, we should always have in mind, proposed by a scientific research conducted in a capitalist, bourgeois, Jewish-Christian environment.

In contrast with interpretations like Freud's, Jenkyns's suggestion indeed looks like a truthful philological practice, which, relying on the text and the text only, is able to decipher it in the essence of its configuration, removed from the defacements of readings or criticisms that followed it. What is important to notice about the criticisms written through the prism of this logic, however, is that, by trying to rectify the original meaning of the text, they are eventually substituting one act of hermeneutical violence for another: it is true that many misreadings and many misinterpretations throughout the history of an artwork are likely to have ascribed to it meanings that, consciously or not, sought to fulfil teleological interests of a reader, an audience, a critic or an institution, but it is also true that "original readings" like those that Jenkyns suggests are themselves misinterpretations that ascribe meaning to these texts following an interest that is also teleological, only more discreet —namely, that of assuming the possibility of recovering the true, pristine meaning of a text as it was originally read and thereby writing a criticism that believes to be really doing it. Frequently this criticism glides into a hubristic, positivistic form of historical inquiry (MARTINDALE (2006) 2-5), and therefore into another, perhaps more complex, but also more subtle, form of hermeneutical violence; it is a criticism that brings itself forth as a means to rectify an artwork and protect it from having some kind of meaning ascribed to it by the interpretation of other criticisms, but in practice it is itself a mode of interpretation that tries to teleologically redetermine not only an artwork's natural structure, but also aspects of the factual past that produced this structure in the first place. In other words, any attempt to reconstitute the *original* meaning of an ancient text —and virtually of any text, for that matter— is already a process of meaning ascription whose interest is teleologically pre-established by the infinite interpretations that

first motivated this attempt. Of course, it is perfectly possible and legitimate to examine how, by whom and to what end a given classical work was read in a certain social context, but precisely because this is not an attempt to rediscover in a text an innate and unspoilt meaning that was corrupted by subsequent interpretations. Rather, this is a historiography, a history of reading, a history of understanding, it is an attempt to figure out what social factors —from chaotic political scenarios to the everyday use of the pencil— in fact led a given culture, social group or even a poet to read a text differently from other cultures, other social groups and other poets. Accordingly, this historiographical practice also seeks to understand how specific readings of a given text permitted new ways of thinking and thereby influenced the production of other works of many different natures; it seeks to understand how a given text travelled through different social contexts, impacting them as much as being impacted by them.

Jenkyns's paragraph is in fact quoted in one of the opening chapters of *Redeeming the Text: Latin Poetry and the Hermeneutics of Reception* (1993), by Charles Martindale, a book that is still today one of the main references for what we can understand as the basics of *classical reception*: standing up against Jenkyns's hypothesis that it is possible to retrieve the original meaning of a classical text, Martindale suggests that, from a hermeneutical perspective, the safest way to read the classics today —that is, without committing an act of hermeneutical violence against them by trying to recover their primordial meanings— is to read them in light of the contingencies of our own present, especially through a modern work to which they are somehow connected or with which they somehow dialogue.

A good example is the article *The Streets of Rome: the Classical Dylan* (2012), by Richard Thomas, one of the most vocal supporters of Martindale's idea of *classical reception*.

In this article, Thomas discusses how Bob Dylan reappreciates Virgil's *Aeneid* (c.20BC) in the lyrics of *Lonesome Day Blues* (2001) to animate the political tone of this song's discourse —particularly Dylan's aversion to the North-American imperialism that gave rise to the Vietnam War (1955-75).

Dylan's ability as a musician and lyricist is self-evident, but, in his article, Thomas explores the less conspicuous facet of Dylan as a reader who

is also a literary critic, as a lyricist who seems to notice that one of the best ways to read the classics is by reappreciating them from a contemporary perspective, by trying to benefit from an enjoyment of this literature that does not consist in some kind of *retreat* to its past, but in a *presentification* of some of its most remarkable qualities, so that we can use them to see our everyday worlds in a different way —in their qualities as much as in their flaws.

In a short introduction, Thomas explains that, although he is a Latinist and a huge fan of Dylan, it took him quite some time to realise such blatant influence of Virgil on Dylan —an influence that is probably a consequence of Dylan's two-year stint at Hibbing High Latin Club in his early student years. (Thomas (2012) 134) From the perspective of Martindale and Thomas's idea of *classical reception*, what the classics do for Dylan in *Lonesome Day Blues* is give him voice to thoughts, feelings and anguishes that maybe would not have been so emotively expressed otherwise, that is, if he had not found in the classics the words, images and ironies that eventually allowed him to so beautifully verbalise his views of the war. I use the verb *to find* here in a very deliberate way: considering how the verses of the *Aeneid differ* —in Jacques Derrida's sense— in the verses of *Lonesome Day Blues*, it is very likely that Dylan was only able to verbalise such particular views about the Vietnam War *with* or *after* his reading of the poem; I mean, it is very likely that Dylan was only able to realise some of his most delicate or most ferocious sentiments about the war because he found in the *Aeneid* the words, images, ironies, tragedies and cruelties that finally allowed him to give shape to these sentiments and thereby express them —sentiments that would have probably remained shapeless, maybe only latent, if he had not read the poem. We can say, then, that Dylan identifies in the warmongering discourse and images of Virgil's verses what Ralph Waldo Emerson says about the empathetic vocation of literature: *"In every work of genius we recognize our own rejected thoughts: they come back to us with a certain alienated majesty."* (Emerson (1993) 28)

Dylan's reception of Virgil's *Aeneid*, *via* an Allen Mandelbaum's translation by (1961; 1971), is this:

Aeneid	*tu regere imperio populos, Romane, memento*
6.851-853	*(hae tibi erunt artes) pacique imponere morem*
Virgil	*parcere subiectis et debellare superbos*

Aeneid 6.1134-1137 Mandelbaum	*but yours will be the rulership of nations,* *remember Roman, these will be your arts:* *to teach the ways of peace to those you conquer,* *to spare defeated peoples, tame the proud*
Lonesome Day Blues 37-40 Dylan	*I'm gonna spare the defeated – I'm gonna speak to the crowd* *I'm gonna spare the defeated, boys, I'm going to speak to the crowd* *I am goin' to teach peace to the conquered* *I'm gonna tame the proud*

Thomas's overall opinion about Dylan's reappreciation of Virgil —or Dylan's reappreciation of Virgil through Mandelbaum— is this:

> *What does it mean that Dylan incorporated these lines from a 2000-year-old poem into his 2001 song? That depends on the reader. For me the verse activates the Roman poet's conflict about empire: Aeneas fails to live up to his father's urging that he tame the proud but spare the defeated, when at the end of the Aeneid he kills his wounded and suppliant enemy. Further, the war in "Lonesome Day Blues" becomes —again, for me— not just the war of the Aeneid's mythological frame, set 1000 years before Virgil's time, but also the Roman civil wars, and the wars against Antony and others on which the empire of Augustus would be founded. Before the intertext emerges and as long as the singer of Dylan's song seems to belong in the time of Robert Zimmerman, the war that has brought desolation to the singer is most naturally the Vietnam War, the defining war of ethically failed imperial aspiration of the last century. The two contexts —Rome and America— merge and make the song about no war and every war, as happens so often with time and place generally in Dylan. (Thomas (2012) 136; my emphases)*

We can see from Thomas's analyses that his object of criticism is the triad composed by Dylan's *Lonesome Day Blues*, Mandelbaum's *Aeneid*, and Virgil's *Aeneid*: by confronting Dylan's lyrics with Virgil's epic, he recognises the beauty and the cynicism of one in the other, reciprocally; he is able to see in Dylan's lyrics how the megalomania that motivated the Roman administration in its imperialist expansion around the Mediterranean seems to explain much of the megalomania that motivated the North-American administration in its imperialist expansion in Southeast Asia. The comparative reading of these two texts brings to surface the fact that the hypocritical excuse of peace that the North-American government propagandised as the real motive for an intervention in Vietnam is, literally, as old as Rome —and yet, tragically enough, it does seem to remain an efficient discourse in the country's great capitalist enterprise. Now, an important aspect of Thomas's article is his emphasis on a

personal interpretation —that is, on his own *present-tense reading situation*— that arises from this comparative reading: Thomas encourages us to see, in Virgil's verses of the *Aeneid*, traces of the tragic irony that springs from Aeneas's mercilessness towards his defeated enemies; but he also encourages us to see, in Dylan's *reappreciation* of the *Aeneid*, that the language and the images that in this epic produced one tragic irony, in those lyrics produce another —namely, the refusal of the North-American administration to recognise its own failure. Virgil's and Dylan's poems extol the narrators' desire to take peace and civility to belligerent and rude peoples, but, in the end, the narrators seem to show that their own violent and barbaric natures are what make them think that they are the reference of civilisation; these narrators, they seem so invested in taming the proud that they are unable to see that a cruel pride is what really impels them in their actions.

As we can see, Thomas's criticism basically focuses on his own interpretation of the *linguistic* or *conceptual* impacts that Virgil's *Aeneid* and Dylan's *Lonesome Day Blues* have on each other, reciprocally; this means that, for Thomas, his own pleasure of the texts boils down to understandability, which ultimately boils down to readability, regardless of the fact that other dimensions might also take part in the aesthetic experience of these texts —particularly of Dylan's lyrics.

For instance, how does Thomas *perceive*, not just Dylan's lyrics, but Dylan's lyrics in relation to the song composed from or for these lyrics?

What are his *feelings* about the song that turns these lyrics into music now that he knows how much of the lyrics' aesthetics is based on the bloodshed depicted in Virgil's ironically *heroic* poem?

Dylan's harsh voice, his Minnesotan accent, the folk-blues melody that seems so breezy if compared to the austerity of Virgil's poem —how do these extra-linguistic qualities affect Thomas's overall *impressions* of the song as a whole?

Does politics have any impact on these impressions?

In the next section, I will debate some of the tensions between linguistic and extra-linguistic dimensions such as these, taking as case study *classical reception* not in a contemporary *song*, but in a contemporary *film*: Theodoros Angelopoulos's *Voyage to Cythera* (1984).

More specifically, I will debate, from a post-hermeneutical perspective, how Angelopoulos relies on his proficiency in the *Odyssey* to take it as creative mediation for the making of an entirely new art —a *motion picture* that is beautifully critical of its own present: not the wealthy Ithaca of Odysseus, Penelope and Telemachus, but a Greece ruined by the Emfýlios Pólemos (1946-49), the civil conflict triggered by the sequelae of the Second World War (1939-45).

Classical reception as a post-hermeneutical practice

The Materialities of Literature are a doctoral programme idealised by professors of the University of Coimbra, who, concerned about the efficiency of literary studies in a world where technologies of communication and the material means for artistic expression grow more complex every day, sought to develop strategies to research those mediations that somehow take part in a deterritorialisation of the ideas of literature and literary experience: think, for instance, how different *typographies* might change our enjoyment of a text, how *imagery* might enrich the delight of a narrative or how the *physical structure* of a book might invite us to actively interfere with its plot.

Typography, imagery and ergodism, although non-noematic dimensions, are still likely to take part in a person's aesthetic experience of a given literature; so, unlike our case study in the previous section, in which only the hermeneutic or linguistic dimension of Virgil's *Aeneid* and Bob Dylan's *Lonesome Day Blues* was examined as a factor of aesthetic experience, in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature, dimensions that resist a decipherment of meaning —what we can broadly understand, therefore, as different kinds of materiality— are also examined as objective factors of aesthetic experience.

As consequence, in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature, even the most basic case of *literary criticism* naturally tends to conflate with *art criticism*, and this hybrid form of criticism naturally tends to work according to the mechanics of an *impressionistic criticism*.

But this is not all.

In the first section, I made clear that one of the worst acts of hermeneutical violence that one can commit against the classics is to try to attribute

some sort of meaning to them, that is, is to try to essentialise them so that their meaning may comply with pre-established intentions.

A hybrid mode of impressionistic criticism already works against this kind of violence, but, considering the attention that the Materialities of Literature give to *form*, *plasticity* and *physicality*, *creation* also seems a natural strategy to avoid hermeneutical violence —especially if this creation is a new artwork whose materiality allows for more than just a revision of meaning, that is, if its materiality allows the critic or the artist to reappreciate a given artwork by relying on subjective impressions made possible by the technical characteristics of a new medium.

This notion of a coalescence between *art* and *criticism*, or between *creativity* and *criticism*, is largely based on an idea that Oscar Wilde —himself a Hellenist with a preference for impressionistic criticism— works very thoroughly in an essay titled *The Critic as Artist* (1891).

The best example of Wilde's understanding of *criticism* as a *creative practice* in this essay is the essay itself: inspired by Plato's dialogues, Wilde's essay takes the form of a conversation between two friends —the naïf Ernest and the witty Gilbert, Wilde's alter-ego— who enjoy an evening in Gilbert's living room; Wilde explores the dialectics that spring from the fictional chronotope of the conversation and from the adverse thoughts of the characters to suggest his own views on society, culture, art, and, most importantly, on the very idea of criticism as an artistic practice.

He explains:

> *ERNEST: [The] creative faculty is higher than the critical. There is really no comparison between them.*
>
> *GILBERT: The antithesis between them is entirely arbitrary. Without the critical faculty, there is no artistic creation at all, worthy of the name. [...] All fine imaginative work is self-conscious and deliberate. No poet sings because he must sing. At least, no great poet does. A great poet sings because he chooses to sing. (Wilde (2013) 1462)*
>
> *GILBERT: [...] Beauty has as many meanings as man has moods. Beauty is the symbol of symbols. Beauty reveals everything, because it expresses nothing. When it shows us itself, it shows us the whole fiery-coloured world.*
>
> *ERNEST: But is such work as you have talked about [a creative, impressionistic criticism] really criticism?*

> *GILBERT: It is the highest Criticism, for it criticises not merely the individual work of art, but Beauty itself, and fills with wonder a form which the artist may have left void, or not understood, or understood incompletely.*
>
> *ERNEST: The highest Criticism, then, is more creative than creation, and the primary aim of the critic is to see the object as in itself it really is not; that is your theory, I believe?*
>
> *GILBERT: Yes, that is my theory. To the critic the work of art is simply a suggestion for a new work of his own, that need not necessarily bear any obvious resemblance to the thing it criticises. The one characteristic of a beautiful form is that one can put into it whatever one wishes, and see in it whatever one chooses to see; and the Beauty, that gives to creation its universal and aesthetic element, makes the critic a creator in his turn, and whispers of a thousand different things which were not present in the mind of him who carved the statue or painted the panel or graved the gem. (Wilde (2013) 1473)*

Normally, when we think about criticism, especially literary criticism, we tend to consider this a practice chiefly dedicated to the revision, evaluation and sometimes even judgment of an artwork: we tend to consider that the role of criticism is to retrace the background, structure and content of an artwork in order to explain it in clearer words, so that the tensions between what it basically means and what it can mean are made evident, a dynamic nature that sometimes can even be evaluated in terms of taste, in terms of how much this artwork is worthy of people's attention. Of course, this is not Wilde's idea of *criticism*, or *art-criticism*; for him, the artwork itself, and the occasional revisions, evaluations and judgments it might lead to, must work only as premises to a much larger project —namely, a subjective attempt to explore *beauty* in all its *creative* potential, a personal endeavour into aesthetic experiences as affective bases for the conception of entirely new objects. A regular practice of criticism as a revisionist, evaluative and judgmental exercise tends to interfere with the *artwork itself* in a predominantly tautological way, often resulting in an allegorical exegesis that, however enlightening it might be, ultimately seeks to attenuate many of this artwork's phenomenal dimensions through a clarification of its supposed or potential meanings; now, by interfering with *beauty*, with the *cognitive*, *affective* and *sensuous* impact that an artwork might have on a subject, art-criticism not only goes beyond most attempts to interfere with the artwork itself, in the broadness or narrowness of its meaning, it also requires that the critic invest

herself, in all her subjectivity, as a *creative element* in the conception of a *new object*. In our ordinary understanding, criticism is normally a sober, impersonal perspective about an artwork; in its most ordinary mode, it seeks to provide clarifications as elements of transversally valid truths about the artwork under scrutiny. Against such tautology, Wilde contends that art-criticism should be an inebriated, erotic, insincere and truly personal perspective about an artwork; in this more sophisticated mode of criticism, the critic should explore the open-endedness of an artwork and thereby seek to intensify the ambiguities of what is generally considered true about it.

> *ERNEST: No; I want to discuss the critic and criticism. You have told me that the highest criticism deals with art, not as expressive, but as impressive purely, and is consequently both creative and independent, is in fact an art by itself, occupying the same relation to creative work that creative work does to the visible world of form and colour, or the unseen world of passion and of thought. Well, now, tell me, will not the critic be sometimes a real interpreter?*
>
> *GILBERT: Yes; the critic will be an interpreter, if he chooses. He can pass from his synthetic impression of the work of art as a whole, to an analysis or exposition of the work itself, and in this lower sphere, as I hold it to be, there are many delightful things to be said and done. Yet his object will not always be to explain the work of art. He may seek rather to deepen its mystery, to raise round it, and round its maker, that mist of wonder which is dear to both gods and worshippers alike. (Wilde (2013) 1477)*

We can continue this discussion focusing on our case study now.

Like the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* is a poem about *kleos*, it is the *song* about a hero's *undying glory*; but it is a *kleos* of a very special kind: unlike Achilles, Odysseus does not achieve his *kleos* in battle, but through his *nostos*, through his *safe return home* from the fateful Siege of Ilion and also from the dangers of the sea. So, the *Odyssey* is, above all, a large narrative of self-discovery, animated by the characters' resourcefulness and perseverance in face of the changes that time inevitably brings: it is the story of Odysseus, who survives the atrocities in Ilion and the fantastic caprices of the sea for two decades, always relying on his ingeniousness; it is the story of Penelope, who, in turn, relies on her feminine brilliance to defend her home from a pack of abusive suitors, all while waiting for her husband to come back to her; it is the story of Telemachus, a boy of precocious wisdom who grows up to reclaim his home from his mother's suitors and see his parents reunite —a great reward for his unshakeable loyalty to his family. The *Odyssey* is, therefore, a narrative

of *nostos* as a *reestablishment of order*: Odysseus's safe return to Ithaca brings back to his home and community a harmony that had been lost precisely because of his absence; his presence re-legitimates a memory and an authority that had been gradually crippled by the changes that had followed his journey across the sea; his *nostos* is not just his glory for having conquered Ilion, defeated wicked beasts and overcome Poseidon's treacherous waters, but also his glory in restoring the world that he had carefully built for himself before going to war.

Set in the early 1980's, Theodoros Angelopoulos's *Voyage to Cythera* narrates the story of the partisan Spyro, an elderly man who comes back to Greece after 32 years exiled in modern-day Uzbekistan, then a country member of the Soviet Union. Unlike Odysseus's *nostos*, however, Spyro's return to his family disturbs the very peace they had learned to live with in his absence: his presence brings nothing but grief to Katerina, his elderly wife, who, like Penelope, had patiently waited for his return, but who, much unlike Penelope, mostly did so because she was too busy providing for herself and their two children in an economically ruined country; Voula, his daughter, is the embodiment of a nihilistic resentment, a successful woman who despises any necessity of a father figure —something that, for her, is more like a haunting to remain exorcised, a ghost to remain buried in the tomb of the past; now, for Alexandros, Spyro's loyal Telemachus, having his father back home is to fill with affection a void of helplessness that had been open since his childhood, is to finally give body, face and voice to an ethereal absence and thereby find some closure to lives disgraced by the country's political and social crises that led to such absence in the first place.

Image 01

It is curious to notice, in the first frame, what might be Angelopoulos's reappreciation of a narratological strategy recurrently employed in the *Odyssey*, and, in the fourth frame, what might be his nod, perhaps his homage, to a narrative element typically found in the Oedipus myth.

In the first sequence, the sequence of Spyro's arrival in Greece, we are not introduced to the character himself, but to his blurred reflection on a puddle: in a way, this announces the sad paradox we are about to be confronted with —the return of a man who does not exist anymore to a home that does not exist anymore, either. But, as Spyro is clearly a contemporary reappreciation of Odysseus, the fact that we are not immediately introduced to him seems to re-enact in filmic aesthetics Odysseus's *delayed recognition* by the inhabitants of Ithaca as he arrives from the sea (*Od*. 13.184-315) —a narratological strategy that, in the *Odyssey*, is consistent with Odysseus's sagacity in protecting his own identity and which also ends up improving the very suspense of the story. However, whereas Odysseus's *delayed*

recognition seems to be related to the solidity of his identity —because he *still is* the mighty king of Ithaca—, Spyro's *delayed recognition* seems to be related to the frailty of his identity —it is an aesthetic expression of his *depersonalisation*, of the fact that any authority that he might have once had in his land is now but a sad memory.

Now, in the fourth frame, we can see that Spyro's first words when announcing himself to his children is *"Ego eimi!"*, which can be translated as *"I'm here!"*, *"I exist!"*, or, more precisely in this case, *"It's me!"*. I suggest that this expression can be taken as Angelopoulos's nod or homage to the Oedipus myth, or maybe to Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, because, in this myth, *"Ego eimi!"* is in fact the answer that Oedipus provides to the Sphynx's riddle. In the narratological context of Sophocles's *Oedipus Rex*, this answer can be considered an *anticipatory doublet* (see De Jong (2004) xi) of his own *anagnorisis*, of his recognition of himself as the perpetrator who disgraced his own family and who is indirectly killing his own subjects. (*OR* 1.178-85) If we reconsider Spyro's first words in the light of Oedipus's words of self-recognition to the Sphynx, his destiny, as we will see, becomes all the more tragic: although Spyro arrives as a man who had been banished from his own country and who is now looking for his lost identity, in the end he will find himself as a nobody who has no place and no citizenship in a country that still does not want him —a country that, indeed, does not hesitate to banish him for a second time.

I should make clear that Spyro's story is a narrative inside a narrative: Alexandros, Angelopoulos's alter-ego, is a filmmaker currently working on a film that imagines his father's return home, which, ideally, should be an intimate *nostos*, a process of slowly making amends with the people, the places and the things he had left behind; however, this homecoming story inevitably descends into a tragicomedy in face of the fact that, in spite of the amnesty declared after the Military Dictatorship of 1967-75, the Greek government is just not willing to repatriate rebels like Spyro.

Image 02

And this is where the voyage to Cythera really begins.

One of the most famous references to the Island of Cythera in art are Antoine Watteau's *Voyage to Cythera* (1717) and *Pilgrimage to Cythera* (c.1718), two paintings that depict a *fête galante* of people who seem to be either departing to or arriving in this island —the mythological birthplace of Aphrodite, and, therefore, a place of joy, delight and erotic love. Another famous reference to this island is Charles Baudelaire's *Un Voyage à Cythère* (1857), a poem he wrote inspired by Watteau's paintings and by the fact that, in the myths about this island, every ship that tried to reach it would also tragically sink. (Rafalidis (1997) 43) So, in other words, Cythera is the promise of gratification, but it is also an elusive destiny, it is the auspice of happiness, but it is also the doom of hopes too high for ordinary men; it is, in other words, a *utopia*, a *no-place* that every person tries to reach to find relish, to find shelter from the hardships of the world, but in the quest for which they end up losing their own lives.

Image 03

Image 04

Baudelaire writes in *Un Voyage à Cythère*:

> *Quelle est cette île triste et noire? – C'est Cythère,*
> *Nous dit-on, un pays fameux dans les chansons,*
> *Eldorado banal de tous les vieux garçons,*
> *Regardez, après tout, c'est une pauvre terre.*
>
> (Baudelaire 1982:312)

As I anticipated a while ago, Spyro's return to his family is already problematic, but he soon finds out that his homeland, his real home in the rural hills of Greek Macedonia, is literally crumbling into ruins —so that what should have been a safe return to a real place of order eventually becomes a troublesome trip to a utopia, to the no-land of a past that Spyro effectively *left behind* with his exile.

So, would this be Spyro's own Cythera?

In the *Odyssey*, as Odysseus retraces his way back to the heart of his house, everything seems to come back into place —Eumaeus, Telemachus, Argos, Eurycleia, Penelope— until the anguish of his absence is fully replaced by the comfort of his presence; in *Voyage to Cythera*, however, as Spyro retraces his way back to the heart of his house, everything starts to fall to pieces —not only does he learn that many of his friends are dead, he also learns that other friends have decided to sell their land to a private company, something he completely disagrees with— so that the comfort of his absence is replaced by the anguish of his presence.

Spyro's land of order, colour, love, fertility and friendship does not exist anymore; all there is, is an impoverished land perpetually covered by the mist of hopelessness; no longer a world of seafaring and community, as the *Odyssey* frequently suggests, but a world of cold ice and melancholy in face of a nearing death, both of the body and of the Greek spirit itself.

> *[In Voyage to Cythera], this anti-odyssey, Odysseus does not leave because he wants to: he is driven away. A modern epic is an impossibility in our time. All the heroes have died, and those who survive are unwelcome in the place from which they once drew their strength. Voyage to Cythera is an elegy for Odysseus lost in the ocean, never to reach land again, because land no longer exists. Only Cythera exists, that is the myth of the happiness dreamed of by Watteau at a peak period of the middle class, which, here in Greece, was late in experiencing the fête galante, only because of the "loans" which still continue. Greece continues to be a foreign country to all —for the Right, because they have never managed to acquire a "national conscience" (they have*

> *never even acquired a conscience); because national consciences are not created by Marshall Aid plans. For the Left, because only in the last two years have they begun to shed the feeling of being immigrants with a temporary passport (anyone who wanted to could take it away from them) in their very own country. Greece continues to be a "country for settlement", where at present everything is temporary and uncertain. We must, therefore, conquer Greece so that we Greeks can acquire a fatherland. (Rafalidis 1997:48-9)*

Image 05

Although the story is mostly set in rundown areas of Greece, where smoke and dampness seem natural elements of decay, one of Angelopoulos's most delicate aesthetic strategies is no doubt the misty and cold, greyish and bluish, *Stimmung* that involves the characters from the moment of Spyro's arrival in Greece to the moment of his downfall and fateful end on the sea. In fact, the deeper Spyro digs into his past, trying to retrieve it from the degeneration caused by his absence, the harsher the weather seems to grow around him, isolating him even more into his own misery and, at the same time,

pushing him towards the ocean, the earthly Hades, the no man's land that is the only possible resting place for a no man like him.

Again, this is a huge contrast if we examine Spyro's journey as a *classical reception* of Odysseus's *nostos* to Ithaca:

Image 06

When Odysseus visits Hades's underworld, we learn from Tiresias that not only will the hero return to his home to re-establish the order of his past, he will also eventually find his resting place somewhere in the heart of this land —and this resting place, although distant from the sea, will be determined by the fact that Odysseus will always carry the sea as part of him, by the fact that the sea, the great challenge of his *nostos*, is, at the same time, his most terrible foe and one of his dearest *raisons d'être*.

In Hades's underworld, Tiresias says to Odysseus:

ἔρχεσθαι δὴ ἔπειτα, λαβὼν εὐῆρες ἐρετμόν,	*You must carry on with your journey, taking with you a crafted oar,*
εἰς ὅ κε τοὺς ἀφίκηαι, οἳ οὐκ ἴσασι θάλασσαν	*until you find this place where no-one will know the sea,*
ἀνέρες οὐδέ θ' ἅλεσσι μεμιγμένον εἶδαρ ἔδουσιν·	*where they will not even eat their food with salt taken from the sea,*
οὐδ' ἄρα τοὶ ἴσασι νέας φοινικοπαρήους,	*where they will not know anything about the purple of the ships,*
οὐδ' εὐήρε' ἐρετμά, τά τε πτερὰ νηυσὶ πέλονται.	*or about crafted oars, these wings for the ships.*
σῆμα δέ τοι ἐρέω μάλ' ἀριφραδές, οὐδέ σε λήσει·	*And I will give you this very clear indication, about which you shall never forget:*
ὁππότε κεν δή τοι ξυμβλήμενος ἄλλος ὁδίτης	
φήῃ ἀθηρηλοιγὸν ἔχειν ἀνὰ φαιδίμῳ ὤμῳ,	

καὶ τότε δὴ γαίη πήξας εὐῆρες ἐρετμόν, *ἕρξας ἱερὰ καλὰ Ποσειδάωνι ἄνακτι [...]* *(Od.11.121-30)*	*when a passer-by on your journey meet you* *and say that it is a shovel that you have on your strong shoulder,* *right then you must stick this crafted oar on the ground* *and offer noble sacrifices to Poseidon [...]* *(Od.11.121-30; my free translation)*

Unlike Odysseus, however, Spyro does not travel to Hades's underworld and comes back with new learnings about a peaceful future; his journey is a one-way street into this underworld, into this obscure Cythera where his country, land, home, friends and family do exist, but not for him anymore —and, in fact, the only "place" where Spyro can exist, the only "place" that seems able to accept him, is the sea, the international waters with no jurisdiction from any country whatsoever, and, therefore, the perfect utopia, the perfect *no-place* for a *no-man* like him. Whereas Odysseus finds his roots back in Ithaca, and finds, with a final reconciliation with Poseidon, a resting place in the heart of his warm and luminous land, Spyro only finds back in his Greece memories forever uprooted, and finds that there is no reconciliation with a country or a nation that has legally, culturally and physically turned him into an eternal *Οὔτις*, an eternal *no-one* to be left to die in a *no-place*. Spyro, however, is not left to die completely alone: in a final act of true love, Katerina, Spyro's tired but loyal Penelope, convinces the Greek authorities and her own family to let her stay with her husband on the raft on the middle of the ocean —the raft that can either be the raft to Cythera, to the place where the couple's reciprocal love rests, or the effective no-man's land where they, two elderly remnants of a Greece that does not exist anymore, are fated to perish.

Whatever the case, Angelopoulos's final moral is clear: there is no place in his Greece —and certainly there is no place in Greece today— for a true *kleos* or a true *nostos*, for the safe return home of a hero who epitomises the prosperity of his homeland; the old Greece of seafarers, of victorious battles and lavish abundance, of prosperity and community —this Greece can only

be longed for through the glorious songs of these old heroes, because our world today is simply no place for them.

Image 07

Conclusion

Although the classics are among the most influential literatures upon western thought, the remoteness of their origins also puts them among those works that most diversely suffered some kind of hermeneutical violence throughout their history, what makes them, especially under the shadow of such violence, paradigmatic cases for understanding some of the motivations for post-hermeneutical thinking and thereby some of the options for post-hermeneutical research today. As I have observed, in the realm of criticism, a good strategy to prevent the classics from being subjected to some sort of hermeneutical violence is to examine them in order to determine what impressions they can excite on a contemporary reader, from the present-tense reading situation of her contemporaneity; however, relying on Oscar Wilde's

idea of criticism as a creative and artistic practice itself, I have also observed that an even better strategy is to take the classics as starting points, as ethical, aesthetical and epistemological mediations, for the making of entirely new arts. An elegant example is Bob Dylan's *Lonesome Day Blues*, a song whose lyrics objectively provide a *différance* of Virgil's *Aeneid*, a differentiation process through which Dylan brings forth his own critical perspectives about the Vietnam War; but, now thinking from the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature, I suggested that criticism as creativity or creativity as criticism can be taken to yet another level, where different materialities of communication might take part in the process of creation: in this multimedial scenario, the critic-artist is able to articulate her subjective impressions more radically, as these impressions are finally made possible by the technical characteristics of a whole new medium; in this scenario, the critic-artist's art-criticism is not just an interpretative explanation of the original literature —it is a deliberately creative, and, therefore, deliberately impressionistic work of reappreciation, a work that carefully intervenes in this literature to enlarge it and enrich it in a noble way. Theodoros Angelopoulos's *Voyage to Cythera* seems to be an excellent case of a criticism that criticises an original literary artwork —the Homeric *Odyssey*— by precisely creating something new from it: in fact, I tried to show in this article that it is not difficult for us to notice how even a simple reading of the *Odyssey* thoroughly complexifies this film's sombre aesthetics and tragic misfortunes, and, reciprocally, how these aesthetics and misfortunes allow us to appreciate the *Odyssey* in completely new ways. The main point about this reciprocal enrichment is that we are not at all trying to vivisect this heroic poem in order to find some kind of transcendental or ultimate propositional content, as Richard Jenkyns suggests in his paper; the truth is, we are assuming beforehand that there are no propositional contents of this kind, and, if this means that our understanding of this poem will always be probabilistic, that it will always be circumstantial upon our present reading situation, then perhaps a good and honourable way to read it is precisely to take it as a prism through which we can see our own present entirely anew —just like Angelopoulos does. A fundamental aspect of 'classical reception' in the post-hermeneutical framework of the Materialities of Literature, therefore, is that

it is a critical and creative process that deliberately seeks new means to safeguard the classics from being subjected to some kind of hermeneutical violence —and these means often include materialities of communication that, in their contemporariness, naturally allow the critic-artist to appreciate the classics in constructive ways, ways that, in fact, are also themselves criticisms of her own present.

Images

All film screenshots (Images 01, 02, 05, 06 and 07), used in this article for scientific and educational purposes only, legally comply with the law decree n.º 63/85 issued by the Ministry of Culture of Portugal and published on the Diary of the Republic (n.º 61/1985, Series I of 1985.03.14).

Image 03: *Pèlerinage à l'Île de Cythère* (1717) by Jean-Antoine Watteau. Public domain on Wikimedia Commons.

Image 04: *Embarquement pour Cythère* (1718) by Jean-Antoine Watteau. Public domain on Wikimedia Commons.

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Resumo: Este artigo discute a receção clássica no quadro pós-hermenêutico das Materialidades da Literatura, tomando como caso de estudo a reapreciação de Teodoro Angelopoulos dos *nostos* de Ulisses em *Voyage to Cythera* (1984). Inspirada pelo conceito de Óscar Wilde de *art criticism*, esta ideia de receção clássica pressupõe que uma boa maneira de proteger os clássicos de atos de violência hermenêutica é lê-los como mediações estéticas para a criação de obras de arte inteiramente novas — particularmente obras de arte cujas materialidades permitem mais do que apenas uma revisão de significado.

Palavras-chave: Homero; *Odisseia*; Teodoro Angelopoulos; *nostos*; Pós-hermenêutica; *art criticism*.

Resumen: Este artículo discute la recepción clásica desde un encuadramiento poshermenéutico de las Materialidades de la Literatura, tomando como caso de estudio la reapreciación de Teodoro Angelopoulos del *nostos* de Odiseo en *Viaje a Cythera* (1984). Inspirada por el concepto de *art criticism* de Oscar Wilde, esta idea de la recepción clásica asume que una buena manear de proteger a los clásicos de actos de violencia hermenéutica es leerlos como mediaciones estéticas para la creación de obras de arte completamente nuevas, particularmente obras de arte cuyas materialidades permiten más que una simple revisión del significado.

Palabras clave: Homero; *Odiseia*; Teodoro Angelopoulos; *nostos*; poshermenéutica; *art criticism*.

Résumé : Cet article établit une discussion autour de la réception classique dans le cadre post-herméneutique des Matérialités de la littérature, en s'inspirant de la réappropriation des *nostos* d'Ulysse, dans *Voyage à Cythère* (1984), de Théodoros Angelopoulos. Inspirée par le concept d'*art criticism* d'Oscar Wilde, cette idée de la réception classique présuppose qu'on ne peut protéger les classiques des actes de violence herméneutique que s'ils sont lus comme des médiations esthétiques pour la création d'œuvres d'art complètement nouvelles, en particulier d'œuvres d'art dont les matérialités permettent d'aller au-delà d'une simple révision du sens.

Mots-clés : Homère ; Odyssée ; Theodoro Angelopoulos ; *nostos* ; post-herméneutique ; *art criticism*.