The Detachment of Telemachus

Telemachus' Detachment

When I was a child looking
at my parents' lives, you know
what I thought? I thought
heartbreaking. Now I think
heartbreaking, but also
insane. Also
very funny.

from Louise Glück, *Meadowlands* (1996)

I

My contribution to this series of essays began as a response, given at the panel of the Society of Classical Studies meeting in January 2020 out of which this present volume emerged. The task of a respondent, or rather my task as I understood it, was to walk for a while with the panellists, redescribing their approaches and reflections and integrating them with some of my own such as they were arising out of my colleagues' readings, a task made all the easier by the patience and generous willingness on part of the panellists themselves to read with others and to read others' acts of reading, to step up and ride along, and then to step off again to consider the stretch of road travelled.

At the time, I had just finished reading Stephanie Burt's *Don't Read Poetry: A Book About How to Read Poems* (2019). Burt, a poetry scholar and a poet, argues that not all poems are right for all readers, and that to extrapolate from the encounters with specific poems – positive, negative, or inconclusive – to all poetry would be a category mistake. Making claims about 'poetry' and indeed about the expected or appropriate responses to it as 'poetry' may be too short-sighted and too far-sighted at the same time. For Burt, there is no reading poetry as such; there is only reading poems. Her insistence on the plurality and particularity of poems, which she discusses within the large and open categories of form, characterisation, feeling, complexity, wisdom, and community, leads to an account of describing the reading of poems as more akin to the section of a subway map than to an overarching definition. Multi-stranded, linear and non-linear at the same time, representational and non-representational, such a map is both instrumental and open to deflection: "Think of this book, then, almost as a partial map of an urban subway system, a big one like New York's. It's an attempt to show you, not the whole history of the system nor how all the trains work, but what train to take if you want to get where you are going, how you might find out about other places the system can take you, and, simply, how to ride" (Burt 2019, 8).

Subways, though, are not just places of the mind, and they do not simply or evidently take someone places. In her book-length essay and memoir *Stranger on a Train* (2002), the writer and critic Jenny Diski alternates the narrative of a train journey across and around America – in fact two consecutive but non-matching train journeys, one accidental, one deliberate – with recollections of her teenage self, when she spent days of truancy on London's Circle Line, reading and observing others in a thorny, recurring and self-sufficient fit of putting distance between herself and the world, especially the world of her unreliable and unstable mother. Sitting, persevering on the London Underground with three books a day and without getting

off the train is about defiantly not going anywhere, or at least about knowing that one will at the end of the day return to the starting point without necessarily having made progress:

> There was no need to look up to check which station we had arrived at, it made no difference to me. So I could keep my head buried (as Pam would say contemptuously) in a book. I got through my three books by the following morning unless I had chosen something I found unreadable. That was very rare. The fact that something could be read made it readable to me in those days. Books were where I lived, not because I was bookish, but because everyone has to have a place to go, and between the covers of books was mine (Diski 2002, 5-6).

Seth Lerer, in a programmatic short book on *Tradition: A Feeling for the Literary Past* (2016), picks up on the same image, with a view to readerly affect, in a maybe more upbeat yet also less grittily scrutinizing mode than Diski:

> But what a person truly devoted to reading will do, what a person passionately loving of and living in a book will do, is read in public. […] Look at commuters on the subway. Look at the man waiting for a bus, the woman on a city bench. What does it mean to read in public? It means to perform an act of self-absorption before others. It means to hide inside yourself while outside. It means (sometimes inadvertently, sometimes deliberately) to make yourself the object of another reader: the person who looks at you trying to understand where you are in your book, in your life. What picture arises in your mind? (Lerer 2016, 125).

I would dispute the ostensibly self-evident equation Lerer suggests between loving a book and living in one, as well as his assumption that reading in public is an act of devotion that is equal to loving. Reading, even and especially in public, can be just as defiantly, aggressively isolationist and exclusive as it can be a tableau of loving absorption; besides, those two affects are not mutually exclusive either. It is also arguable whether affect has to equal positive affect and whether positive affect, in turn, has to be keyed to a language of love and longing. It is an equation that is more telling about the expectations of a language of vocation, of interiority, and of individual commitment that have underpinned the modern Humanities and arguably continue to do so. I will return to this point at the end. For now, all three models of 'subway readers' suggested by Burt, Diski, and Lerer, especially when read together, underline the fact that reading, including scholarly reading, just as often occurs in front of others, literal or imagined, directly or indirectly, deliberately or reluctantly.

Lerer's observation sits in his closing chapter entitled 'The Tears of Odysseus': here, he uses the scene of the Odysseus of book 8, shedding yet hiding his tears in front of others at the Phaeacian court when confronted with stories about his own exploits. Lerer takes this scene to reflect on the ostensibly greater permeability of affect between listeners and characters in Homer compared to the 'Vergilian experience' – Aeneas sheds tears, too – of a more explicitly readerly, mediated, 'always-interpreted' way, one that is conscious of the potential for listeners to be learners at the same time (Lerer 2016, 109). I do disagree with Lerer on this count, too, not least because an exclusive pivot towards Odysseus pushes aside just how multiple the models of reading and of interpretation are that can be found in the *Odyssey*. Reading 'in public', i.e. reading, listening, or interpreting in front of others, reading while including others in one's own horizon, and thus making oneself the object of other readers or observers, is essential to this epic poem. In what follows I will swerve from the focus on

Odysseus, and instead describe the figure of Telemachus as such a public or exposed reader, one who interprets in front of others, and who does so in an inconclusive, sceptical, and partial way, much closer to the tangled subway maps than the large-scale trajectory of his father, with its strong teleological pull and his projection of interpretive authority and certainty. My description is closer to a 'redescription' as Rita Felski uses the term, and which I will explore in more detail below in section III. My thinking around Telemachus tries to probe him as an exemplum: I thus respond to his own complex exemplarity highlighted in the ancient poem, as much as to the possibility of reconsidering the relationship of exemplary reading with scholarly reading and its critical certainties.

II

Telemachus as a figure can evoke alternative forms of reading, or at least forms of reading no longer evidently in use today. One such case is exemplarity, the reliance on temporally and spatially removed, narratively abbreviated exempla, mythical or historical figures that seek to prompt rhetorical, ethical, interpretive behaviour, in short, exempla that *make* readers. In their flexibility and particularity, exempla can break through the expectations of historical linearity and historical distance, they can puncture and conflate. Exemplarity calls for situational and hence also provisional responses – an exemplum is not permanent, but it holds for a particular context – and in its appropriateness it also deliberately highlights the impossibility of identity, of a complete fit.[1]

[1] On the complex logic of exemplarity, see most recently Langlands 2018 on Roman exemplarity and situational ethics, including emphasis on the relative openness and the demands put to the reader of exempla to sustain dissimilarity as much as similarity. For explorations of exemplarity as a mode of thinking also about the classical past, see Güthenke 2020a; Goldhill 2017; Postclassicisms Collective 2019, 144-160.

In this respect, Telemachus has a curious and paradoxical status: he is, in many ways, the ur-example of a character faced with exemplarity. Before he – or indeed his father – is even mentioned by name, the poem invokes Aegisthus and then Orestes (*Od*. 1.29-30), who slew him in revenge, thus introducing a template of filial behaviour before the narrative perspective even settles on Telemachus at home. That it is Zeus himself who brings up these examples only adds to the weight of comparison. At the same time, those comparisons reveal dissimilarities, too, or rather they make possible, even if only momentarily, radically alternative outcomes (could Penelope be a Clytemnestra? Is Odysseus dead?).[2] This template is reiterated again and again by the characters Telemachus encounters throughout the first four books, especially Nestor and Menelaus, and it is in book 24 that Agamemnon himself concludes the ring composition by making the explicit comparison between his own and Odysseus' family (*Od*. 24.191-202). In addition, the example of his (absent) father is constantly evoked for Telemachus, not least, eventually, by Odysseus himself.

That said, Telemachus has had a much less 'exemplary' post-Homeric and post-classical identity than one might expect (and certainly much less so than Orestes), which matches quite closely the lack of a future or of alternative future outcomes for Telemachus himself within the narrative of the epic. There are genealogical alternatives, in the (largely lost) Epic Cycle poems, in post-Homeric sources, and especially in Roman sources, that link Telemachus to Homer, or to Rome. The Homeric scholia seem lukewarm about Telemachus, aside from some interest in the goddess Athena's attitude towards him (Wissmann 2009). There is the exemplary reference to Telemachus artfully turning down Menelaus's offer of a gift of horses in book 4 of the Odyssey (*Od*. 4.593-608), as revisited in Horace's *Epistles* I.7.40-43,

[2] For an extended reading of the tension between Orestes and Telemachus, Goldhill 1986, 147-151.

addressed to Maecaenas. Dionysos of Halicarnassus opens his treatise *On Composition* with comparing its dedicatee to Telemachus, receiving a garment from Helen (another reference to book 4). Traditions that made both Odysseus and Telemachus forbears of settlers in Italy, as well as the emphasis on sons reflected in canonical texts of Roman literary culture, especially Vergil, may have a part to play, though it is notable that the few references to Telemachus seem to foreground his relations to characters other than Odysseus (another example is his mention in Catullus 61, as famous son of the best mother, Penelope). But they are indirect links, crafting a rather subterranean genealogy, if they build one at all.

Overall, then, there seems little notable interest in Telemachus in post-classical antiquity, and certainly not much of a story to tell before François Fénelon reimagined him in his immensely successful 1699 novel *Les Aventures de Télémaque*. The *Aventures* were, in their day, the best-selling book of Europe (combining elements of romance, the Greek novel, mirrors of princes, travelogue, and critical philosophies of kingship), and even if the long arm of the book is still much more strongly felt in the French literary world, it is fair to say that Telemachus is not much of a prominent figure these days, at least not in Homeric scholarship.[3] In any case, he certainly has not been so since the beginnings of classical studies as a professional and institutional discipline in the late eighteenth century, a discipline which arguably staked its own foundation story on untangling and revealing the (impossible) constitution, inner structure and coherence, and genealogy, however broken or interrupted, of the Homeric textual corpus[4].

[3] For a reading that integrates attention to Fénelon, and the provocation of his work, into a reading of Homeric ring structure, see Mendelsohn 2020, which follows closely on his scholarly and autobiographical reflections on the Odyssey, Telemachus, and father-son relations in Mendelsohn 2017.

[4] See, for example, Harloe 2013; Güthenke 2021.

As far as models, and model characters, of reading and of learning go, the Odyssey's Telemachus seems to have been a rather lacklustre recipient of scholarly attention and affection, too. The one single monograph in recent years that has taken on Telemachus, with a view to the rites of passages he undergoes, is J.C.B. Petropoulos's tellingly entitled *Kleos in a Minor Key: the Homeric Education of a Little Prince* (2011). Telemachus has led a rather secondary life, and critics have matched what they recognised as the odd formal arrangement of his story – the first four books dedicated solely to his pursuit, and his reintroduction as a more focused, yet still instrumental and mostly subordinate character from book 15 – by treating Telemachus himself as similarly orthogonal or subordinate. Giving him mostly scant attention, they have highlighted that his trajectory always takes a backseat in relation to that of Odysseus. (One old response was to hive off the Telemachy as a separate narrative altogether, sometimes even in conjunction with book 24 and its wrapping up of all the threads of familial and societal relations on Ithaca after the suitors' deaths).[5] In terms of the readings that he has received, some more sympathetic than others, it is either his narrative as a kind of 'warm-up act', or predominantly his own 'lateness' and belatedness that have been emphasised. It is the perspective on him as a successor that has been highlighted, his attempts to 'follow after' and to be called upon to make sense of Odysseus and of himself in relation to Odysseus.[6] To make sense of this relative 'immaturity' or 'naiveté', of his insecurity and

[5] For a summary of the discussion and queries about the status of books 1-4 since antiquity, see Heubeck et al 1990, 51-62. Stephanie West, who comments on books 1-4, sees the Telemachy as Homeric and integrated into the *Odyssey*.

[6] I say predominantly since there are exceptions. Gottesmann 2014 centres Telemachus' 'lateness' in comparison to Odysseus by making that his very advantage: the poem's strategy, as he argues, is that Telemachus needs to be seen to be the rightfully aggrieved party in the struggle with the suitors, so that the revenge against them becomes justified, and in this

rather anti-climactic lack of a big adventure, as well as his integration into Odysseus' revenge in which he tries to make his mark, one readerly strategy has been to cast him in the impressionable role of the 'Homeric reader' (for example, Peradotto 1990, Felson 1994, Doherty 1995, Pucci 1987 – the latter speaking of him as an "intoxicated reader", apropos his remarks on the power of poetry in book 1). Richard Martin made this case maybe most stringently, arguing that Telemachus' perspective is that of a figure internally representative of an audience who themselves try to make sense of a past heroic age in which they no longer really take part (Martin 1993). Telemachus, in short, is more often than not scrutinized for a developmental trajectory of growing up, and of fitting into this secondary role, though a sense of disappointment or worry then lingers that the steps on the way do not sufficiently add up to a heroic or at the least properly transformative arc.[7]

Sheila Murnaghan has maybe been the most sympathetic to Telemachus: exploring him as not just a secondary or "foreshortened" figure in terms of his own adventure, she gives him greater scope as, effectively, himself an active reader of earlier narratives (Murnaghan 2002, 141). She begins from a series of poems by the contemporary poet Linda Pastan, including

argument it has to be Telemachus holding this position since Odysseus is simply no longer known to most of the young actors. Goldhill 1993 emphasises the homecoming narrative as one that is about the reconstitution of the oikos, where generational succession matters most: having the single-son line of Laertes, Odysseus, and Telemachus brought into alignment is the decisive expression of success.

[7] The only critic who has cast Telemachus as an explicitly unchanging character is Douglas Olson. He views Telemachus, who by the beginning of the narrative has *already* recently changed from his former childlikeness, as a consistent and quite shrewd participant in Athena's plan for him, fulfilling the mission to receive information and acquire some form of *kleos* or good reputation in the process (Olson 1995).

the line “Perhaps the Odyssey was meant for Telemachus – a kind of primer, a head start”, and my own choice of Louise Glück’s poem as an epigraph is, with its reverse perspective, on some level also my own appreciative response to Murnaghan’s insightful reading. Murnaghan emphasises Telemachus’ importance insofar as he, in front of the listener, comes to understand his own process and his role in the larger story of Odysseus’ nostos, “a process of positioning himself and being positioned in relation to spoken traditions” (Murnaghan 2002, 142). She builds her argument from the observation that Telemachus functions as a quasi-reader, but she considers this incomplete if we do not also acknowledge that, arguably unlike the Homeric audience, Telemachus is challenged to create actively an identity out of the stories he hears, rather than just passively receive them. This chimes well with the recognition that spectatorship and changing perspectives are significant tropes and narrative techniques constantly employed in the Homeric fabric in general. But I suggest that there might also be a risk that ‘focalisation’ becomes something looking through a telescope, looking from the present over the shoulder of a past narrator or focaliser, through their eyes, at an object or scene, without the need to consider the horizontal relationships of reading that open up in the present, too.

III

The telescoping approach underplays the extent to which lateral relations are no less important than vertical and temporal ones. Reading is an act of making relations, between texts, readers, and the world. The panel that the editors of this issue convened, set out to probe the attention many of the literary humanities have recently given to newly considered forms of reader-oriented criticism, especially ones that deliberately seek to move beyond the certainties of inherited practices of ‘critique’. How might the field of Classics interact with

such prompts to de-emphasize the stable interpretive object, and to question the position of the reader as a suspicious critic as well as the assumption that reading is an act of laying bare a text's hidden meaning yielded up to the probing critic? This should not about a zero-sum calculation of suspicion versus affect: those terms and concepts tend to be contiguous, and they operate on a continuum of criticism and critical approaches. A critique scrutinizing and enacting new forms of attachment can still be called a critique. What seems to be at stake, rather, is how to make space for a pluralism of forms of reading that can accommodate a critical light shone not only on the textual object, but also on the reader and interpreter, acknowledging their situatedness as fully and open-mindedly as possible.

In these debates, I find myself sympathetic to what Rita Felski calls "redescribing" the readerly act and attendant styles of thinking (Felski 2015, 2). Stepping around the interpretive urge for a "rhetoric of *againstness*" (Felski 2015, 17), she is sensitive to how professional and non-professional or non-institutional forms of reading and experiencing texts relate. It is this descriptive approach, one that is conscious of constellations and relations, which I take as a prompt in this essay. 'Description' itself has gained productive traction, helpfully articulated in Heather Love's advocacy for renewed investment in descriptive techniques to counter an imperative to uncover meaning from under a surface (Love 2010). Her exploration of reading that is "close but not deep" is a reminder that descriptive acts can deliver insights that hold off interpretation and suspend close reading, while retaining purchase on ethical and institutional questions. What descriptive techniques offer, in her view, is attention to "surfaces, operations, and interactions", suggesting "an alternate model of reading that does not depend on the ethical exemplarity of the interpreter or messenger" (Love 2010, 375).

Description and redescription link back to the role of the critic and scholar and allow for de-familiarising the certainties and embodiments of critical practice. Felski puts such a programme as follows:

> My goal, then, is to redescribe rather than simply refute the hermeneutics of suspicion, to examine it from various angles, to treat it not just as an error to be rectified but as a style of thought more multiform and mysterious than it first appears. Such an approach strives to be generous as well as censorious, phenomenological as well as historical, seeking to do justice to the allures of a critical sensibility as well as tracing its limits. It conceives of the hermeneutics of suspicion as not just a cognitive exercise but an orientation infused with a mélange of affective and characterological components. In short, suspiciousness constitutes a distinct sensibility or disposition whose parameters exceed the specifics of its intellectual content. It serves as a defining feature of an exemplary persona often invoked in contemporary theory: the critic who strives to avoid or suspend normative commitments in favor of an ethos of restless questioning and self-questioning (Felski 2011, 215-35).

If criticism implies a suspension of one's beliefs and interests for a time, then suspicion and generosity may actually not be so far apart, if doubt is allowed to extend to the process of critique itself. 'Generous thinking' has, in fact, itself become a term in and of critical practice (Fitzpatrick 2019; Fitzpatrick 2020). Still, however generous the critical redescription of the critic here, how much can or should it be assumed that a critic is, in their reading practices, self-same and consistent?

Assumptions about the 'exemplary figure' of the modern critic her- or himself concern not only the quasi-heroic nature, the 'relentless questioning' (and questing?), executed by a solitary figure; also, there is a viewpoint at work of critique and of the critic as a stable, internally consistent, developed entity – as if critique was not constantly formed, deformed and reformed by other critique. Essentially, this is also the inheritance of the modern notion of *Bildung*, or self-formation, a concept at work in the understanding of history, individuals, languages, cultures, and one with a significant genealogy within classical scholarship as a discipline. Irene Peirano, in her contribution to the panel that formed the basis for this special issue, pointed to the well-worn and long-lasting effect of *Bildung* on text criticism and canonicity. The formation of the self, as a guiding concept of modern forms of inquiry, is a concept that brings together, in her words, "models of reading as a self-shaping and text-shaping activity".[8] Put differently, assumptions about the constituting of textual form relate to assumptions about the shaping of the self: both can grow, and both can develop; but does that leave enough conceptual room for deviations, returns, off-shoots, changes of mind, and site-specific, situational adaptation, and its reversal? This, I think, is a key confrontation for disciplinary and readerly certainties about critical practice in Classics, and for the assumptions about the formation of self or text that accompany them. The cultural environment that gave us the complex but still linear *Bildungsroman* also gave us classical philology as a disciplinary practice (in fact, it did so quite literally: Karl Morgenstern, who coined the term in 1819, was a philologist and pupil of F.A. Wolf).[9] Transformation of the

[8] On canonicity, Peirano forthcoming; on the structures of extrapolation from the modern, *gebildet* individual to an understanding of ancient texts and cultures as similarly formed and formative, see Güthenke 2020b.

[9] For a translation and contextualisation of Morgenstern, see Boes 2009, with thanks to Ivo Volt for mentioning Morgenstern to me. The term was brought to greater prominence again by Wilhelm Dilthey, himself classically trained and a key figure for the development of the

self is thus not only an integral expectation, or a "promise" (to quote Peirano again), of our disciplinary habits; but it also normalises an expectation that such transformation be essential and lasting.

IV

Here I return to Telemachus, and the imagination of his trajectory, of his own *Bildung* and its narrative, an expectation that just as likely sets the scholar and reader of Homer up for failure. Can Telemachus be read – redescribed – in any other way, not as a deficient character or as a narrative puzzle, not as a problem in need of solving? In the relatively scant scholarship on Telemachus, one underlying, cumulative assumption seems to be that his figure allows a sequence of viewpoints to emerge, lined up for our seeing through, one behind the other, like the axes through which Odysseus shoots his bow – modern reader, Homeric readers, Telemachus, and all the way back to Odysseus. But what do we lose by this linear focus on seeing acts of reading telescoped, mirrored and repeated? One thing that is lost is how much all of Telemachus growing, traveling, maturing, manoeuvring, adapting, and coming into his own, if that is what it is, actually takes place in relation to and in view of a changing cast of others, well beyond Odysseus, too – adding a horizontal, not just a vertical axis to reading. Seen this way, Telemachus is distinctly not a self-sufficient critic.

In exposing Telemachus as an example for my present reading, considering him a reader and interpreter of sorts himself, it is striking how consistently the *Odyssey* has him confronted with situations, present or narrated, where 'being seen' is no less, and arguably even more important than 'seeing'. If Telemachus' story in books 1-4, and again from book 15, is about

humanities and some of their organising terminology; on Dilthey, see Güthenke 2020b, 142-154.

a tentative crystallization of identity, and about establishing relations with previous narratives, it is also no less so a story that is predicated on relations with other spectators. The question is, is it transformative, a narrative of *Bildung* in miniature, or is it contingent, site-specific, and provisional? There are very few moments when Telemachus is seen caught in conversation purely *à deux*. From his first appearance, his talk with Athena dressed as Mentes occurs just out of earshot but still explicitly in front of the suitors (*Od*. 1.113-324, esp. 114). Telemachus' answering back to Penelope in 1.345-359 (a scene which has exercised commentators particularly strongly) is not only done in front of an audience, but, so I would argue, occurs precisely because there is an audience: it is Penelope's (rare) appearance in front of the suitors that provokes his response, and it is, as we are told explicitly once she has left, because her presence and then absence has excited the waiting suitors to new erotic frenzy. In other words, it is precisely because Penelope was being seen and in return provoked a reaction from the suitors, intensifying the quandary of the current situation, that Telemachus is so keen to remove her from the scene again and send her back to her rooms (*Od.* 1.328-335; 1.360-367).

On his trip of reconnaissance, he first of all picks up a companion. Peisistratus, Nestor's youngest son, appears as an onlooker in Telemachus' conversation with Nestor (*Od*. 3.36ff.) and appears to be a rather tailor-made figure, with no other mention of him elsewhere in the early epic tradition. Giving Telemachus a friend, one who knows how to behave well in front of his own father, too, is thus a deliberate strategy of the poem. Telemachus, once he reaches Pylos on the mainland, travels onwards without his ship's accompanying crew, thus mirroring his father, though again he does not follow the exemplum precisely, since unlike his father he has not actually lost his men. Still, he needs a single companion on his journey, as point of

triangulation and as internal audience alike, in front of whom he receives and digests the narratives he is first offered by Nestor, then subsequently by Menelaus and Helen.[10]

Likewise, on the return from Sparta in book 15, just after he has sent off Peisistratus, he straightaway takes on the fugitive seer Theoclymenos, whose own lineage include family quarrels, namely his father Polypheides' anger at his own father, thus setting up a family history of exile (*Od.* 15.252-54). Significantly – and largely under the radar of commentators – Theoclymenos also reappears at precisely the moment when Telemachus, upon his return to Ithaca, repeats for Penelope verbatim what events Menelaus had foretold him (*Od*. 17.124-149). This, in turn, necessitates Theoclymenos giving his own interpretation of Menelaus's prophecy: he adds that he cannot see clearly – the Greek is ambiguous whether it is Telemachus or Menelaus who is referred to as 'he' – and has no clear understanding (ἦ τοι ὅ γ' οὐ σάφα οἶδεν, ἐμεῖο δὲ σύνθεο μῦθον, *Od*. 17.153, "he certainly does not know clearly, so listen to my account"); therefore it is he, Theoclymenos, who needs to spell out the prophecy, that Odysseus has in fact already arrived. Telemachus initial encounter with Odysseus, likewise, occurs in the presence of Eumaeus, himself a stand-in father, even though the recognition of Odysseus, both at first markedly reluctant and then markedly unquestioned, occurs, ultimately, when they are alone. And so, upon his return to Ithaca, Telemachus is not only seen to be interpreting, but it is still others who continue to shape his interpretations significantly.

[10] When they part company again in book 15, Telemachus not only affirms their relation as *xeinoi*, through their fathers, and through their shared age (*Od*. 15.196-196); but he also predicts that their journey will unite them in *homophrosyneisin*, the term most frequently evoked otherwise for Odysseus and Penelope's bond (*Od*. 15.198).

This constant need for a 'third', triangulated perspective may be most readily visible when it comes to the parallel accounts of events and viewpoints at Troy given by Helen and Menelaus respectively in book 4. Helen tells of Odysseus' reconnaissance in Troy in disguise, and of her own encounter with him hosting him in her halls (*Od*. 4.242-256). She thus offers a story of complicity that is, elsewhere in the poem, always disrupted: namely, the possibility of Odysseus being instantly recognised.[11] This may (or may not) offer an example to Telemachus of what complicity between Odysseus and a female figure could look like (and thus prepare him for events at home and the mutual recognition of his parents).[12] Yet more striking still is Menelaus' supplementary account of Helen's impersonation of the voices of the Achaians' wives, as they sit silent and unresponsive inside the wooden horse. The only reason this scene takes place at all is because of the Trojan Deiphobus. Deiphobus has followed Helen and is standing by, watching (*Od*. 4.274-79), in the role of Paris's brother, Helen's brother-in-law and at this point arguably also as her new husband (thus also raising awareness that remarriage is always a narrative possibility). The episode is certainly an exemplary story, about the power of voice and the challenge of resistance to it, and the complex dialectic of hiding and not hiding, of seeming and being, and one that Telemachus is very much encouraged to 'read', even though his response to the story, rather than increase his knowledge about his father, also increases his pain.[13] Still, it is significant that its setting,

[11] The only other exception of instant recognition is the dog Argus, though he lacks human or even his own voice to act on it (*Od*. 17.289-327). That Helen repeatedly ascribes the qualities of a dog to herself in the *Iliad* may not be a deliberate echo, but it echoes all the same.

[12] It also, in exemplary fashion, reflects Helen's immediate recognition of Telemachus, or at least his identical looks to Odysseus, unlike Menelaus, who only suspects his identity at that point, but admits that 'now I see it, too' (*Od*. 4.138-48).

[13] Bergren 1981; Goldhill 1993, 61-64.

with the strong focus on Helen, is also prompted by the presence of an external viewer, Deiphobus, without whom none of her performance might have taken place.

In many ways Telemachus is an intransigent character, and his ambiguity, his speeches, his ostensible imperfections suggest a relative lack of success, especially in comparison to Odysseus – though it is exactly the detachment from the comparison that I seek to effect here. To give another small example of this only partial learning curve, when leaving Sparta in book 15, he shows new skill and resolve by gently declining Menelaus' invitation for an extra round of travels together (*Od*. 15.86-91). After Telemachus had already declined an offer of horses in book 4 (the scene that is alluded to as exemplary in Horace *Ep*. I.7), here he is taking new control of the situation. All the same, he needed Pisistratos' advice the night before to delay departure until the next morning. His return to Ithaca is of course also fundamentally inconclusive as far as his task at the outset is concerned – he still has no news of Odysseus other than no confirmation of his death.[14] Nor do his father's instructions of how to deal with the suitors seem conditional upon Telemachus' intervening journey.

Notably, there is room for Telemachus as a speaker and viewer who genuinely exposes himself to multiple viewpoints, multiple interpretations ('Odysseus is dead', as much as 'Odysseus is returning'), and multiple, explicit vulnerabilities: he is usually the first to admit his own shortcomings and to persist in a state of not being quite sure what exactly he is asking or indeed learning. The question remains whether Telemachus is simply a less skilled

[14] In fact, the last report of his 'known' whereabouts concern Proteus' story as told to Menelaus, that Odysseus remains on Calypso's island (*Od*. 4.554-560). In short, by the time Telemachus returns home, the best and last information about his father has him quite possibly engaged in a remarriage himself. Again, therefore, I would also stress the potential of exemplary stories that continue to be simultaneously available to him.

reader, less committed, less sure, less authoritative than his father, the master-reader with control of the narrative of his past and its temporal depth – in short, is this one more example of a narrative that is already tilted in favour of Odysseus throughout? If Telemachus is seen rather more dislodged from Odysseus, more isolated in critical perspective from the father-son axis, can he arguably also be seen to be an interpreter of narratives who leaves options and strategies open, a highly flexible and highly susceptible reader, one who can change modes and moods of interpretation and of responding, of suspicion and agreement, of surface and depth, according to the relationships he operates in? Isolating Telemachus, as I do here for a specific moment and a specific exercise, but at the same time emphasising his reliance on being seen, on being in relation, gives him in my reading a pointed, provisional sense of relevance.

Telemachus' susceptibility is reflected in the language used to describe him. The most frequently used epithet – it appears 46 times – of Telemachus is *pepnumenos*. John Heath has probed the etymology and the usage of this epithet, especially in comparison with the *Iliad*, as one that belongs to men and youths less distinguished by strength or wisdom, but by an ability to speak well, speak from experience, and speak in a self-situating, self-aware, self-possessed way (Heath 2001). Telemachus is not alone in Homeric epic to carry this epithet – in the *Odyssey* Nestor and Pisistratos are similarly characterised, as is Laertes (*Od*. 24.375); Penelope both describes Odysseus to others as speaking *pepnumena* words (*Od*. 19.350-352) and reminds Odysseus, apropos the riddle of the marriage-bed, of his past display of being *pepnumenos* (*Od*. 23.209-210). But the clustering around Telemachus is notable and Heath suggests it functions here as a proleptic epithet (the way 'swift-footed' does for Achilles), one its holder only gradually comes to inhabit or re-inhabits. One important conclusion Heath draws from the example of Nestor's son Antilochus in the *Iliad*, of whom it is used in the

negative in the context of the funeral games for Patroclus (*Il*. 23.440), is that being *pepnumenos* is something one can lose as much as gain (he is referred to as '*prosthen* (formerly) *pepnumenos*', *Il*. 23.570), and that, like so many other characteristics, it is importantly bestowed through others. *Pepnumenos* Telemachus is through this epithet also explicitly marked as responsive, his epithet a token of the ability to adapt to his environment.

If this is the case, can Telemachus as a 'belated' reader, on a quest to unearth the truth about his father, be recast, or redescribed, as an interpreter whose knowledge is situated, provisional, partial, and circumstantial, responding and responsive to his interlocutors?[15] In his early interaction with the suitors in book 2, by claiming that "I have suffered greatly" (μάλιστα δέ μ' ἄλγος ἰκάνει, *Od*. 1.40), he repeats Penelope's words to "have suffered the most pain" (ἐπεί με μάλιστα καθίκετο πένθος ἄλαστον, *Od*. 1.342), and he reformulates her own argument by appealing to the fathers of the suitors to recall their sons and leave him (and his mother) to his grief. It is clear, generally, that he is caught up in her own ostensible indecision: the first two books make it clear more than once that it is the delaying of *any* kind of decision on Penelope's part – rather than the choice of a specific suitor – that is the core problem of the extended, suspended moment.[16] On his trip, and throughout the first four books, he wavers between certainty that Odysseus is dead, readiness to withhold judgement, and wishful thinking about a future return – but notably he never does so in direct contradiction to what his conversation partners suggest. Even his actions upon Odysseus'

[15] The term 'situated knowledge' is here also alluding to Donna Haraway's notion of situated knowledge and partial perspective in the context of her critique of the epistemological certainties of fields of science. See, for a discussion relevant to Classics, Güthenke and Holmes 2018, and Postclassicisms Collective 2019.

[16] Antinous makes this very clear to Telemachus (*Od*. 2.100ff): the expectation is that he manage his mother's behaviour.

return, his acting in much stronger concert with his father, dissembling, co-ordinating, speaking *pepnumenos*, and speaking with new "mighty force" (ἱερὴ ἴς) is arguably a form of responsiveness, matching Odysseus' decisiveness with his own, rather than a direct expression of inner growth.[17] Odysseus and Penelope (with the prompting of Athena) make the decisions. Telemachus follows leads, and not always convincingly, or in the right measure.

A small but striking instance comes in book 22, when Telemachus, in the fight with the suitors, pre-empts an attack on Odysseus, and runs Amphinomus through with his spear (*Od*. 22.89-94). Telemachus then makes a conscious decision to leave the spear where it is, for fear of being distracted or opening himself to attack by "one of the Achaeans" (*Od*. 22.95-98). He runs to his father to confirm that he will go in search of more weapons instead (*Od*. 22.99-104). Rather than following an Iliadic template of retrieving his spear from the body (and gloating over it), Telemachus here cuts his losses for fear that he cannot do it, but then seeks an alternative that he considers in line with his father's needs. When he "jumps back" (*ap-orouse*, 95) from the suitor's body, the assonance of the verb with "being at a loss" (*a-porese*) may be coincidental, but resonant. Aporetic Telemachus is not simply finding his place towards and at the end of the poem. It is left open within the narrative what his future place will be or what arrangements of governance will hold on Ithaca. After all, Odysseus will leave again. Not only is there no neat closure, but there is no guarantee that affairs on Ithaca do not, eventually, revert to a stand-off. If Telemachus can be imagined as analogous to a reader, he is a situated reader, and will continue to be so. Book 24, after all, ends on a truce.

[17] For an argument that tracks the changing epithets and introductory speech phrases for Telemachus, with an emphasis on the repeated 'ἱερὴ ἴς' after book 15, see Beck 1998-9.

At the same time, this does not make him an unproblematic readerly character, certainly not within the confines of the *Odyssey*. After the end of the slaughter of the suitors it is Odysseus who orders the reckoning and punishment of some of the female slaves, but it is Telemachus who goes beyond the prompt and determines instead that they should not have a "clean death" (*Od*. 22.462). The deliberately extended violence of all of them hanging, detailed in the narrative, is Telemachus' own exaggerated interpretation of what the situation demands. Buying into Odysseus' authoritative way of reading the world leads Telemachus to his own, alternative, and more indiscriminate excess of judgement, marking the risk and limitations of exemplarity.

V

If Telemachus has, almost by scholarly reflex, been considered a reader and a stand-in for a 'belated' Homeric reader, is there something particular about the Classics scholar taking up this place by extension into the present? The belatedness of philology and of classical scholarship as an interpretive form of 'coming after' itself has a long pedigree (Güthenke 2021). Is there, arguably, then also an element of self-recognition and self-abnegation when Telemachus is relegated to the margins as a secondary, minor character? What possibilities might open up when one considers Telemachus not just as ventriloquising the Homeric reader – and emulating the father – but as leveraging the triangulations to reflect on the professional modern reader as well, and when one emphasises relations where what is key is not only to be seeing, but to be seen seeing, and to do so without recourse to an ostensible stable narrative of the self. For Telemachus as a reader, the past, including one's own genealogy, can be radically put in question. For a modern reader considering Telemachus, it can then put into question the reliance on a stable narrative of a tradition, a past, a disciplinary genealogy, too.

As Telemachus himself insists so pointedly when Athena disguised as Mentes asks his parentage: “no-one knows his own begetting (*gonon*)” (*Od*.1.215-216).

Just as importantly, it is the exchange with others that inflects acts of reading and interpreting. Scholarship does not normally happen in isolation from others, just as figures in an ancient narrative do not act so either. Stepping away from looking at Odysseus and his own narrative through the ‘minor’ eyes of Telemachus, and finding the latter’s detours wanting, what does this suggest about a scholar’s indecisions and the unacknowledged need (unacknowledged at least in academic prose) to be ‘seen’ and recognized as reading and interpreting? Do scholarly readings of Telemachus reflect a reflex to mark the scholar out as ‘minor’, with only limited attention to who a scholarly writer reads in front of at any given time? It may be a modest and habituated gesture to cast oneself as a reader who, at best, can hope to work out their own place in someone else’s story – but then its complementary gesture is to cast oneself as, effectively, the cunning Odyssean hero of reading in full control of one’s own story and past. We are used to both modes in scholarship, and they often occur together, but maybe they are not the only ones. The focus on (theorising) our relation with the text of antiquity as a two-actor relationship stretching between two points, important as it has been for Classics including new critical approaches, also risks underestimating the constant presence of those who make us visible as readers in the first place. There are unspoken third figures present, as much as they are normally hidden from view. Who do we think we read in front of at any given point? Who are the changeable, multiple implied audiences? Peers, students, ourselves, the public?[18]

[18] Telemachus keeps being interrogated, at every station, whether he has come on a mission that is private or official, i.e. he has been sent on behalf of his community, and while he opts for private, for a mission that is only in his own interest, of course the community he left behind does also depend on his decisions, the ones he sets out to be able to make.

I can list at least some of mine: I crafted this paper for the special issue of a journal, by drawing on an earlier, different version for a conference panel. The memory lingers of an event taking place in a somewhat too small, crowded hotel ballroom with no natural light, but probably the last time for many classicists in January 2020 to have been in a crowded room at all. Telemachus had no part in this panel, and was not the substance of my response then, but my reading of Telemachus that emerged connects to my teaching over the last years, in a curriculum at Oxford that is both hyper-canonical and hyper-flexible. Carrying Telemachus outside my classroom was my own choice, but it surely also reflexively owed to my contractual duties to teach the *Odyssey*. I have the freedom to teach my own students the way I want, but I am not beyond generating the voices and potential censorship of others in my head as over the years I tweak and grow into my syllabus – even if I don't teach in front of my colleagues, I still wonder how will they judge my teaching. I started rewriting and reconceptualising the response for the current volume, and in the process noticed that Lerer and Diski somehow ended up in the same pile of books, one ear-marked for reading, the other for re-reading, and so I made time to browse both side by side. A little later I give a talk on Telemachus for an unrelated research seminar, carried out on Zoom, from the privacy of my home where I regret not being physically in the university by the sea where the event would normally have taken place: I distinctly cannot travel, and there is no open space to be seen or a seminar room to orient oneself to in front of a screen. Since my office serves simultaneously as headquarters for the ongoing crisis negotiations that make up pandemic home-schooling, my thinking about a son who cannot be sure what he wants, needs, or ought to learn, nor what he makes of his parents, their wishes, and their crises, takes on new unintended meaning. Heartbreaking, insane, and very funny, indeed. I teach Glück's poetry for a separate module, but her Telemachus poem hangs around.

The point here is not to embrace the spirit of the moment and turn to the confessional mode. It is to externalise the inner workings of how what ends up in print draws from a textured web of associations that may arguably have little bearing on the content, ultimately like training wheels or struts which can be removed from the finished written product without structural damage. And yet, they are themselves as many stops on the subway map of my own professional reading. For all that I appreciate, relish and embrace the detachment which externalising my reading into printed prose offers me, it would be disingenuous not to acknowledge that the writing is made up of highly individual, situated acts of reading whose trajectory is variable and whose choice of examples and exempla is driven by circumstance no less than by any intrinsic quality of the subject matter and texts at hand. A scholarly analysis of Telemachus might, on the page, look no different whether the reader of a journal knows its genesis in my own associative leaps or not. There is certainly no direct translation here either. Part of the appeal of writing and researching is this very triangulation, the indirectness, the invisible three-dimensionality and the lack of fit which gives depth in the first place. And yet, acknowledging it, as a challenge and indulgence alike, might also make me a reader or writer less assuming and less territorial, and render the reading habits of suspicion and generosity mutually more permeable.

Likewise, the point of reflecting back on oneself as a critical reader is not simply to uncover our implicit audiences or ideological assumptions (though trying to do that, with a view to the present and not just regarding past acts of reading, is not a bad start). Nor is the point to be conscious of one's audiences in the interest of 'saving face', of gaining and maintaining positions of authority as readers in front of others, effectively extending assumptions about an ancient honour-shame society that emphasises the censorious view of others – one possible

reading of the Homeric world – into the modern reading situation. The point is to consider the possibilities of an ongoing openness and vulnerability to diverse readerly situations and demands, to sustain that tension, and to exercise what Brooke Holmes and I tried to capture with the call for a "nodal" approach to Classics: a greater willingness to see and to practice the nodal points in a network of (disciplinary) knowledge and forms and styles of interpretation, and to acknowledge an open, plastic, and always partially seen "field", rather than lament the impossible mastery of all material (Güthenke and Holmes 2018).[19] What happens if we consider the activation of different points, by the same scholar or scholars, of different constellations and modes or moods of reading, not as inconsistent, but instead as an ongoing engagement with adapting our abilities as readers to particular texts and particular situations, and to do so persuasively, self-consciously, and responsively. Even if such gathering and exercising of experience and criticism in speaking means doing so unheroically, clumsily, and with limitations, as the epithet *pepnumenos* indicates. If *pepnumenos* is, in fact, precisely about not yet being *pepnumenos*, or not at the moment, then its attendant mode should not be suspicion, but accretion, with an emphasis on experience rather than on transformation. Glück's Telemachus, looking back, thinks "heartbreaking" apropos his parents; he still does so "now", the words aligning exactly on the page, though "insane" and "very funny" are added, "but also," and "also."

[19] Even if this was not at the forefront of our minds at the time, the language of acknowledgement tallies with the use of the term by Stanley Cavell, distinguishing between 'knowing' and 'acknowledging' (Cavell 1976), and reconsidered by, for example, Toril Moi, as an alternative to the imperative to critique.

VI

Pucci discussed the Telemachus of book 1, apropos his spirited defence of the bard and the novelty of bardic song, as an "intoxicated reader" (Pucci 1987, 201). If we think of *Odyssey* book 4, and of the spectacular and affective forms of reading and listening, I suspect that we will continue to be fascinated, even intoxicated, with Helen's enchanting poetic skill, and with the imitated voices of the Achaeans' wives. The reflex is still to go for the fantasy of immediacy, and its intoxicating effects, accompanied by a sense of belatedness. But what if we remembered not only that Pucci contrasts Telemachus' "intoxicated reading" with Penelope's "sober reading", but if we also put a wedge between this Telemachus and an assumption that his status is only ever subordinate; what if we theorised and mobilised others of a similar kind, such as Deiphobus, Pisistratus, or Theoclymenus, not as minor characters, but as instrumental and dynamic figures and actors, as exemplary prompts – conscious of all the imperfection of fit that mark exempla – for recognising and acknowledging how we ourselves emerge as readers only through others, socially, professionally, psychologically?

If this opens up new space, such opening involves distances. In their Introduction to this issue, Joshua Billings and Felix Budelmann discuss the possibilities of 'invested' readings. They suggest a number of 'strong feelings' that they think we ought to take better account of – from love to hate (or, in a minor but resonant key, from titillation to heckling, as Talitha Kearey describes it so well in her paper on Virgilian readers). Such openness and acknowledgment is not synonymous with maximal affective investment, and the aim of this special issue, and the challenge and encouragement to reading classical texts, is precisely to find ways to account for and inhabit the shifting spectrum and mutually overlapping categories of detachment and investment, personal and non-personal, hermeneutic and non-

hermeneutic. Exposing oneself as a critic and reader is not the same as denying distance or detachment. Vice versa, detachment does not self-evidently signify lack of interest or commitment, nor does it have to express a naïve belief in objectivity, which itself is certainly a historically grown concept. Detachment – made up of suspicion and generosity alike – can be a commitment to openness and vulnerability, an active stance of knowing and acknowledging distance, of constant calibration and oscillation. In addition, and importantly, distance from a text is not tantamount to distance from the self. If anything, one clear limit of the 'hermeneutics of suspicion' is the relative neglect of and lack of accounting for the scholar's own, partial perspective in the acts of criticism. Stephanie Burt suggested that a reader, especially a reluctant reader, might get further and persevere longer when acknowledging that there is reading poems, rather than reading poetry. Likewise, new forms of reading remain situated and particular readings of texts. Describing Telemachus' detachment is one, and only one, of them.

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