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Alienation and Fragmentation: The Poetry of War Memory in the Odyssey and E.E. Cummings

Cover Page Footnote

Sincerest thanks to Beth Severy-Hoven for reading many drafts of this paper and to my advisor Brian Lush who first introduced me to the topic of war trauma.

The majority of Homeric war trauma scholarship on the *Odyssey*, though incredibly elegant and thought-provoking, focuses only on the character of Odysseus using psychological models. Nevertheless, war memory has been expressed by many poets throughout the ages in a variety of ways. The poetry of E.E. Cummings, a World War I veteran, provides apt comparisons with previous scholarship of Homeric war trauma, but also introduces a new lens which one can use fruitfully to analyze characters and events in the *Odyssey* that are focused on less by scholars. Before moving on to E.E. Cummings' work and perspective, a survey of existing scholarship on war trauma through the character of Odysseus will prove useful. William H. Race provides a compelling psychological model for viewing Odysseus' time with Phaeacians as therapy. Introducing this perspective provides context and a broad summary of scholarship on war trauma in the *Odyssey*, fleshes out Odysseus' methods of dealing with war memories, and provides valuable comparisons to how Cummings processes similar emotions. Then the paper will turn to E.E. Cummings, whose work exhibits some of the same features of alienation and the distance between the veteran and the civilian. The second section will be dedicated to drawing parallels between the experiences of Odysseus and E.E. Cummings through the concepts of the inability to fully express trauma and a reliance on the past. However, Cummings' poetry also offers perspectives on war memory not often considered in these psychological studies. The third section will develop Cummings' unique perspective which will be applicable to characters and events in the *Odyssey*. In particular, Cummings' war poetry looks at war's aftermath through its social ramifications. After viewing Cummings' reflections and engagement with the Classics, we will return to the *Odyssey* in order to explore Telemachos' journey to the court of Menelaus through the lens of a postwar space where society has been irrevocably changed by war. Combining this new perspective with fruitful psychological methods will tease out many new threads of war trauma in the *Odyssey*.

I. ODYSSEUS' GRIEF AND ALKINOOS' THERAPY

To start, I will give an analysis of Odysseus at the court of the Phaeacians using the psychological methods of other scholars, such as Jonathan Shay and William H. Race. These models are brilliant and informative, but are also indicative of the Odysseus-focused psychological narrative. A poignant representation of Odysseus' grief as a veteran lies in Book 8, when Odysseus is received at the court of the Phaeacians. At several points, Odysseus has a series of emotional breakdowns.¹ The most extreme starts in 8.521, where Odysseus is described with a famous reverse simile. Demodokos' singing has Odysseus mourning at the tale of the Trojan War that he requested, no less. Alkinoos describes his interpretation of Odysseus' internal state:

ἔξ οὗ δ' ὄρπεομέν τε καὶ ὄρορε θεῖος ἀοιδός,
ἔκ τοῦ δ' οὗ πω παύσατ' ὀϊζυροῖο γόοιο

¹ See *Odyssey* 8.83-95, 8.182-185, 8.521-530.

ὁ ξειῖνος: μάλα πού μιν ἄχος φρένας ἀμφιβέβηκεν.

From when we were eating supper and the heavenly singer started,
from then on our guest has not yet stopped his pitiable mourning:
I suppose great distress has surrounded his spirit.²

“ἄχος φρένας ἀμφιβέβηκεν” seems to be the most important phrase describing Odysseus’ internal state, so a look at the semantic range of each word will prove helpful. “ἄχος,” “grief” or “distress,” is used in Homeric epic to refer specifically to “a pain of the mind,” not a physical pain.³ This pain “encompasses” or “surrounds” Odysseus; there is an emphasis on the motion around (ἀμφι), implying there is no part of his φρήν left unaffected: Odysseus is wholly consumed by his grief. A similar use of the idea of circling around the φρήν occurs when Polyphemus is made drunk by Odysseus in Book 9: “περὶ φρένας ἤλυθεν.”⁴ The use of motion around links Odysseus’ all-encompassing grief to the loss of control associated with drunkenness. It is also necessary to note that here the φρήν is both a seat of emotion (even specifically of grief and joy in some cases⁵) and a seat of perceptions and thoughts.⁶ Though it seems this distress originates from emotionally charged memories of the Trojan War, it also has a major effect on his perceptions. Grief inhibits his ability to cope with this reminder of war while in the presence of the Phaeacians. It overtakes not only his emotions, but also his mind.

The other major figure in this conversation is Alkinoos, whom William H. Race frames as a deeply knowledgeable therapist who seeks to console Odysseus through his healing process.⁷ There are two verbs to consider in framing Alkinoos’ perception of the scenario: “ἐπεφρόσατ” and “ἐνόησεν.”⁸ The first seems to be simply noticing the event is occurring, but the second, from νοέω, implies understanding what is happening. Both verbs in some of the alternate meanings have a sense of purpose and intention attached to them: νοέω--“to be minded or disposed, have one’s mind made up”⁹ and ἐπιφράζω--“to think of, have the wit to do, devise.”¹⁰ Thus, Alkinoos is not only noticing and understanding, but also seeks to do something about it.

This is exactly what happens when Alkinoos urges Demodokos to stop playing the lyre and instead allows Odysseus to tell his own story.¹¹ This is a critical moment that illustrates the

² *Odyssey* 8.539-541. This translation by the author. Others translations by Richmond Lattimore, unless otherwise noted: Homer, *Odyssey*, trans. Richmond Lattimore, (New York: HarperCollins, 2007).

³ John Richard Cunliffe, *A Lexicon of the Homeric Dialect* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 2012), 65.

⁴ *Odyssey* 9.362.

⁵ Cunliffe, *Lexicon*, 412.

⁶ Cunliffe, *Lexicon*, 411.

⁷ William H. Race, “Phaeacian Therapy in Homer’s *Odyssey*,” in *Combat Trauma and the Ancient Greeks*, ed. P. Meineck et al. (Palgrave Macmillan US, 2014), 53-54.

⁸ *Odyssey* 8.533.

⁹ Cunliffe, *Lexicon*, 280.

¹⁰ Cunliffe, *Lexicon*, 151.

¹¹ *Odyssey* 8.533-541, 8.572-587.

the role of narrative authority. Jonathan Shay's discussion of final truth versus personal experience in his book *Odysseus in America* will prove useful here. Shay posits that the search for absolute truth of war is "an unachievable, toxic quest" and that the important meaning taken from war for veterans is the personal interpretation.¹² Demodokos sings about the fighting of the Trojan War from a foreign perspective. Even though Odysseus praises Demodokos for the accuracy of his rendition (as if the bard were there himself!¹³), nevertheless there is a grave disconnect between the two stories. Demodokos is telling Odysseus' story for him, and thus taking away Odysseus' agency in the matter of storytelling. Alkinoos' intervention giving Odysseus back narrative authority is a critical step in the healing process; by telling the story of his homecoming to others, Odysseus processes his memories and constructs meaning that he might not have considered outside of this social situation.¹⁴ William H. Race sees this moment as one where Odysseus can "[come] to terms with his war (and postwar) experiences" and "face his gruesome past, and prepare himself for his homecoming."¹⁵ Odysseus provides a vivid chronicle of war and his reflection on it, thus allowing him to move homeward physically and psychologically.

So what is there to generalize about Odysseus' war experience? For one, Odysseus is distressed by his past from both battle and travel. War is specifically a source of grief, shown by an interlude in Book 11, right before Odysseus is to speak about his encounter with deceased heroes of the Trojan War.¹⁶ Race marks this point as critical to the healing process: "by facing the fates of Agamemnon, Achilles, and Ajax, Odysseus closes out his account of war itself."¹⁷ Though his narrative of homecoming is the primary focus of Odysseus' tale, these types of references surface through his reactions to Demodokos and his ghosts from the past. This reflection is highly personal: it is based on events that Odysseus himself has faced in the past and how he understands the pain moving forward. This is a grief that can be communicated, and even overcome to some extent. Odysseus' position as a storyteller allows him to use language and narrative to overcome, or at least cope with, traumatic events. Odysseus' healing process takes place within the confines of society, as he is connected with the community of Phaeacia and eventually his home country. Through Alkinoos' therapeutic prompting, Odysseus is able to express himself in song, and thus obtain agency and exert control over his personal troubles. Race's and Shay's psychological models show us that Odysseus comes into the court of the Phaeacians a battered and troubled outcast, the last survivor of his companions, but leaves with the confidence and health to journey back to Ithaka and deal with the suitors who have invaded in his absence.

¹² Jonathan Shay, *Odysseus in America* (New York: Scribner, 2002), 87.

¹³ *Odyssey* 8.487-492.

¹⁴ Race, "Phaeacian Therapy," 56.

¹⁵ Race, "Phaeacian Therapy," 57.

¹⁶ See *Odyssey* 11.328-332, and then 11.370-384.

¹⁷ Race, "Phaeacian Therapy," 59.

II. “more brave than me:more blond than you”

Millenia after Homer, authors and poets still have struggled with how to express what they have encountered in war and homecoming. E.E. Cummings, an American modernist poet, faced similar obstacles returning home from World War I, especially with readapting to the United States he left. Much of Cummings’ reflection comes directly from his autobiographical novel, *The Enormous Room*. One prominent theme of the novel is alienation from the society he left; during his tenure as an ambulance driver in World War I, Cummings found himself estranged from his fellow Americans, and instead he bonded with the French.¹⁸ This ‘suspicious behavior’ and a refusal to hate Germans led to Cummings being imprisoned under accusations of treason.¹⁹ Cummings’ time away from civilian society allowed him to see problems within the United States and its social institutions that he hadn’t considered before he left. E.E. Cummings’ feelings of isolation and alienation correspond with the same distance Odysseus is facing at Phaeacia. Cummings’ unique fragmentary style, his sense of distance from society, and his engagement with the Classical tradition as a means of nostalgia resonate with Odysseus’ journey to tell the story of his homecoming.

Much of E.E. Cummings’ poetry addresses topics in a revolutionary style characterized by the breakdown of syntax and line structure. Cummings’ use of enjambment, sometimes in the middle of individual words, and unconventional capitalization create a jarring aesthetic. The form itself reflects grappling with the limitations of written language. One of the most startling examples lies in his poem entitled “r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r”:

r-p-o-p-h-e-s-s-a-g-r

who

a)s w(e loo)k
upnowgath

PPEGORHRASS

eringint(o-

aThe):l

eA

!p:

S

a

(r

rIvInG

.gRrEaPsPhOs)

to

rea(be)rran(com)gi(e)ngly
,grasshopper;²⁰

¹⁸ E.E. Cummings, *The Enormous Room* (New York: The Modern Library, 1934), 3.

¹⁹ Cummings, *Enormous Room*, 9-20.

²⁰ E.E. Cummings, *Complete Poems, 1904-1962*, ed. George J. Firmage (New York: Liveright, 1991), 396.

This poem can be read in a near infinite number of ways. Nevertheless, there are a few things that are clear from the style and form of the poem. Disjointed spacing, nested parentheses, and sporadic capitalization cause the reader to slow down and attempt to decipher individual words. The poem invites the reader to create meaning from a fractured selection of syllables; it must be decoded and translated from the lines on the page to meaning in the mind. From this process, personal meaning is derived, but inevitably some meaning is lost or obfuscated. Cummings' style draws attention to the limitations of conventional language to articulate complex subjects, which is a common theme throughout Modernism as a whole.

The breakdown that Cummings faces can also be seen in the example of Odysseus at the court of the Phaeacians. As discussed in section I, Odysseus' storytelling is critical in his recovery. His emotional outbursts of tears are representative of his struggle to put his grief into words. It is not until Alkinoos prompts Odysseus that he can reveal his identity and share his story. Odysseus' tale also emphasizes the same theme of the breaking down of concrete meaning. In Book 9, Odysseus describes a violent storm that sets his ship off course; this is the last mark of clear geography before he reaches a land of mythic creatures and people.²¹ No longer does Odysseus give landmarks, but merely "the land of the Lotus-Eaters."²² Though these locations may have some basis in reality, Odysseus' story obfuscates geography in order to create a land of adventure and peril outside of the civilized world. His mythologization of his travels, though his audience may consider it true, points to the idea that the ordinary world cannot accurately contain his homecoming journey.

Another theme members of Cummings' generation (himself included) reveal is a desire to distance themselves from conventions, both of society and language, as neither can fully comprehend or articulate war trauma. E.E. Cummings conveys alienation from modern society in many of his poems, some of which are quite focused on war. As Alison Rosenblitt argues:

The changes in Cummings' relationship to the Classics have more to do with a growing sense of regret and nostalgia, though that is also tinged at times with ambivalence. His presentation of the classical world becomes more liminal and blurred. These blurrings of boundaries connect his poetry to one of the central aspects of First World War literature—the issue of social and linguistic breakdown and a loss of confidence in the ability of language to articulate the war experience.²³

These "blurrings of boundaries" are linked to the Classics in the sense that E.E. Cummings' understanding of the Classics and war radically changed from his time at Harvard to the postwar years.²⁴ For instance, at Harvard he wrote several poems including "HELEN" and

²¹ *Odyssey* 9.67-81.

²² *Odyssey* 9.84.

²³ Alison Rosenblitt, "'A Twilight Smelling of Vergil': E. E. Cummings, Classics, and the Great War," *Greece & Rome* 61.2 (2014): 253.

²⁴ For more information on Cummings' engagement with the Classics at Harvard, see L.R. Lind, "The Hellenism of Cummings, EE," *Classical and Modern Literature-A Quarterly* 2, no. 3 (1982): 139-146. For more examples of his

“Epithalamion.”²⁵ Rosenblitt remarks that the latter “is a well-drawn poetic image. But it is also aestheticized, literary, and far removed from war’s realities.”²⁶ Cummings’ poems about war before he encountered it firsthand were idealized, glorified, and used Classical reference to enforce this notion. After directly experiencing battle for himself, his works reflect disillusionment with society and culture: “the poetry written during and after [Cummings’] experience of the First World War expresses a growing sense of distance from the naive patriotism of those who remained at home.”²⁷ A biting example of Cummings’ postwar perspective lies within the poem “i sing of Olaf glad and big,” which tells the story of Olaf, a defiant man who refuses to go to war.²⁸ The opening line harkens to the openings of the *Odyssey* and other epic poetry where the narrator invokes the muses and describes the protagonist of the story. Olaf is framed as a hero because of his defiance--“I will not kiss your fucking flag”--and his bravery for suffering because of his beliefs. Here Cummings is undermining the concept of a hero in the vein of Achilles, but not of heroism in general. This points not so much to the idea that Classical heroes are pathetic, but rather that modern society is appropriating and emphasizing the wrong elements. His changing relationship with the Classics due to his engagement in World War I points to a greater disillusionment with society, especially with the American institution of patriotism represented by the glorification of war and the flag in “Olaf.” Here E.E. Cummings presents a troubling world where true heroes no longer receive the recognition they deserve.

Odysseus faces distance from society as well, though his troubles lie along different themes. One of the most egregious offenses that Odysseus encounters is the breakdown of the guest-host relationship when in the land of the Cyclopes. The land itself is uncivilized and ripe for potential; in a long description Odysseus remarks that the Cyclopes lack the technology to fully utilize the land.²⁹ When Odysseus asks for a guest gift and hospitality from Polyphemus, he is instead met with the death of his companions.³⁰ Odysseus comes into land expecting that this relationship will be upheld, but instead Polyphemus openly defies the tradition:

ὥς ἐφάμην, ὁ δὲ μ’ ἀντίκ’ ἀμείβετο νηλεί θυμῶ:
 ‘Οὔτιν ἐγὼ πύματον ἔδομαι μετὰ οἷς ἐτάροισιν,
 τοὺς δ’ ἄλλους πρόσθεν: τὸ δέ τοι ξεινήιον ἔσται.

‘So I spoke, and he answered me in pitiless spirit:

poetry that engages with Classic material heavily see “HELEN”, “the phonograph may(if it likes)be prophe” for his use of Sapphic form, and “in heavenly realms of hellas dwelt”, among many others.

²⁵ Although “Epithalamion” is the first poem in *Tulips & Chimneys*, it was originally written in 1916. See Rosenblitt, “A Twilight Smelling of Vergil,” 245.

²⁶ Rosenblitt, “A Twilight Smelling of Vergil,” 245.

²⁷ Rosenblitt, “A Twilight Smelling of Vergil,” 243.

²⁸ Cummings, *Complete Poems*, 340.

²⁹ *Odyssey* 9.116-141.

³⁰ *Odyssey* 9.266-271.

“Then I will eat Nobody after his friends, and the others
I will eat first, and that shall be my guest present to you.”³¹

This act links Polyphemus with the suitors at Ithaca who are overstaying their welcome, consuming all of the possessions of an absent man.³² This breakdown of tradition is observed by Odysseus and is a source of his ire, much like Cummings’ disdain for blind patriotism.

Despite the alienation he faces, Cummings finds solace in the Classics as a means to look at the past, even though his relationship with them has changed after war. The Classics are a point of reflection throughout his entire life, as shown in his poem “When i am in Boston, i do not speak.”:

When i am in Boston, i do not speak.
and i sit in the click of ivory balls....

noting flies, which jerk upon the weak
colour of table-cloths, the electric When
In Doubt Buy Of (but a roof hugs
whom)
as the august evening mauls
Kneeland, and a waiter cleverly lugs
indigestible honeycake to men
....one perfectly smooth coffee
tasting of hellas, i drink, or sometimes two
remarking cries of paklavah meeah.
(Very occasionally three.)
and i gaze on the cindercoloured little ΜΕΓΑ
ΕΛΛΗΝΙΚΟΝ ΞΕΝΟΔΟΧΕΙΟΝ ΥΠΗΘΥ³³

This poem refers to a favorite Greek restaurant in Boston that E.E. Cummings frequented in college.³⁴ Here he links memories of the restaurant’s atmosphere and food to “hellas.” The poem invokes both new and old; Cummings’ style is juxtaposed with the form of a sonnet which he identifies in the first poem of the set.³⁵ Cummings is looking back on many different periods: Ancient Greece, his college years, the history of English poetry; all from the same point of reflection closely following the Great War. Though this poem does not engage with war memory explicitly, it illustrates a common feature of Cummings’ poetry: simultaneously looking backwards with Classical engagement and looking forward with his avant-garde stylings.

³¹ *Odyssey* 9.368-370.

³² *Odyssey* 1.159-162.

³³ Cummings, *Complete Poems*, 116.

³⁴ Lind, “Hellenism of Cummings,” 142.

³⁵ Cummings, *Complete Poems*, 115.

Cummings' use of the Classics embodies the same need for Odysseus to tell his story to the Phaeacians. Both use the past to help create meaning about their time at war.

From the psychological perspective, one sees many comparable treatments of war experience between Odysseus and E.E. Cummings. Even if the issues they struggle with are quite different, both face the breakdown of meaning, alienation from society, and a use of the past to reflect on current experience. Where Cummings looks back on his society with disdain, Odysseus often fondly remembers an older society where guest-friendship was still held in high regard. Either way, these common themes focus on the difficulties of veterans returning to a society alien to them. Race's and Shay's attention to the psychological details of war trauma provide many fitting comparisons between the two veterans.

III. "the incomparable couch of death"

A major theme that emerges from Cummings' poetry is his focus on issues that derive from readapting after war. Though some pieces come through in the experiences of the above section, this line of analysis does not fit as well into the psychological model proposed in the first section. The psychological models account for individual veterans readapting to postwar society, but not greater institutions, like society itself. Looking further into Cummings' war poetry, one starts to see different threads that develop around his experiences of alienation. This new perspective, focusing on upheaval and change, provides many other useful ways of understanding the effects of war on Odysseus' society. Cummings' works in particular show a world that can never fully recover from war, where there are clear signs pointing to the devastation that war has brought. Whereas the mind of a veteran can more easily be healed through therapy, greater damages done to society and the natural world are more permanent. One can most clearly see these signs in his poetic forms and his vivid description of the natural environment after war.

One of Cummings' most striking engagements with war lies within a set of five poems entitled "La Guerre"³⁶ from his 1923 collection *Tulips & Chimneys*. The collection contains many of the ideas mentioned before: disillusionment, a criticism of patriotism, alienation, and his connection to the French people.³⁷ The sarcasm-riddled opening of "Humanity i love you" ridicules the blind patriotism of "songs containing the words country home and / mother when sung at the old howard,"³⁸ while "earth like a tipsy" catalogues a narrative "in which a female earth cleanses itself of human civilization."³⁹ However, Cummings develops a new theme in the most critical of these pieces, the closing poem of "La Guerre":

³⁶ "La Guerre" (from French) translates to "The War."

³⁷ Cummings, *Complete Poems*, 53-58.

³⁸ Cummings, *Complete Poems*, 53.

³⁹ Rosenblitt, "A Twilight Smelling of Vergil," 259.

O sweet spontaneous
earth how often have
the
doting

fingers of
prurient philosophers pinched
and

poked
thee
,has the naughty thumb
of science prodded
thy

beauty .how
often have religions taken
thee upon their scraggy knees
squeezing and

buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive
gods
(but
true

to the incomparable
couch of death thy
rhythmic
lover

thou answerest

them only with

spring)⁴⁰

The first, and perhaps most obvious thing to note is the breakdown of clear stanzas in favor of off-set formatting. Sentences are dragged across many lines, stretching the limits of structure, yet still remain coherent when read through. Cummings' style takes on a fragmentary quality, as if something was lost in translation. This style calls to mind the sporadic fragments of Greek Lyric poets, where entire chunks of the text are missing and often replaced with blank space. Though

⁴⁰ Cummings, *Complete Poems*, 58.

these stylistic elements point back to the previous discussion of distancing and alienation, they also stand as a monument of fractured forms, presumably caused by the subject of the poem. Here war trauma alters language itself and dictates personal expression.

“O sweet spontaneous” brings up another critical theme: it speaks to the ability of the natural world to rebound from destruction, as the Earth always responds to winter with spring. With the line “fingers of / prurient philosophers pinched / and poked / thee” as well as science’s similar description, humanity is inflicting harm upon Earth. However, the context to this piece is critical, lying at the culmination of a series of war poems. The Great War’s cataclysm surfaces as the violence of technology at the hand of the philosophers and scientists. Pushpa N. Parekh frames Cummings’ invocation of nature thusly: “reacting against an increasingly technological Western society, marked by its organizational systems, social codes, and rhetoric of war-heroism, Cummings turned to nature as did the Romantics in the nineteenth century.”⁴¹ Whereas some of his contemporaries turned to hopelessness (think T.S. Eliot’s *The Waste Land*), E.E. Cummings still believes in the redemptive power of nature. Though Cummings can find solace in nature, here he admits that even the natural world cannot escape from the trauma of war. Rosenblitt goes so far as to frame Cummings’ depiction of war as sexual violence against the Earth:

Instead of the rhythmic turn of the seasons, spring after winter, we might imagine the rhythm of cannon pounding the battlefield. Standing as the concluding poem of a section which indicts humanity, contemplates the damage done to the natural world, and depicts the frank realities of sex during warfare, we now have ‘death thy / rhythmic / lover’ who has in all senses fucked the earth. As a First World War battlefield poem structured through an imagery of sexual violence, this is as quietly disturbing and as impossible to shake off as the very best of the First World War poetry.⁴²

The Earth may turn from season to season, but that does not mean the Earth forgets. Spring no longer triumphs, but merely turns one season to the next. Cummings’ disturbing depiction of “buffeting thee that thou mightest conceive / gods” draws the reader’s attention to the idea that Earth has been around for a long time, and that this is far from the first war to inflict violence. By mentioning the gods, Cummings is harkening back to a time of polytheism and creation myths.⁴³ Here Cummings connects the Great War with a long tradition of injury to the Earth and the people living on it.

What then does E.E. Cummings add to the discussion of postwar reflection? Cummings points out a critical facet: not only does battle leave indelible marks on individual people, but also on humanity, culture, and the natural world itself. These are events that no matter how hard one tries to forget, they always remain in the collective memory. Though Cummings does not

⁴¹ Pushpa N. Parekh, “Nature in the Poetry of E. E. Cummings,” *Spring* 3 (1994): 63.

⁴² Rosenblitt, “A Twilight Smelling of Vergil,” 260.

⁴³ Rosenblitt, “A Twilight Smelling of Vergil,” 260.

directly engage with Homer's *Odyssey* through "La Guerre," his engagement with the Classics in his other works (and even the 'conception of gods' above) invites us to draw comparisons between the two eras. Going back to Odysseus' world, one can look for these same themes which surface through Homeric society. The two most important takeaways from E.E. Cummings' perspective, as applied to the *Odyssey*, are looking for the marks on society that the Trojan War left on its returning veterans' courts and homes while they were away and the distance between veterans and society after they return.

IV. IN THE COURTS OF THE TWO SONS OF ATREUS

Using Cummings' perspective, one realizes that war affects every living being (from veterans, to civilians, to creatures of the natural world), whether or not they are aware of its presence. Whereas much of combat trauma scholarship on the *Odyssey* focuses on Odysseus, Cummings' perspective draws attention to other veterans such as Menelaus and Agamemnon. Looking at these two veterans' homecomings in particular shows their connection to the society they (once) ruled. Menelaus, Agamemnon, and Odysseus all represent the greater phenomenon of a generation which has suffered both during and after the Trojan War. The homecomings and courts of Menelaus and Agamemnon illustrate larger issues that veterans face when returning to a home that is no longer their own. These issues transcend the personal realm and branch out to society and the natural world. Their positions as the reigning powers highlight that their struggles with the past have consequences for all those they rule. Indelible marks left on postwar society appear vividly through memory and forgetting in the court of Menelaus, and the alienation of veterans surfaces in the betrayal of Agamemnon. Both the psychological model and E.E. Cummings' focus on war's fallout on society will be helpful tools for understanding Odysseus' generation after war.

In the court of Menelaus, one of the first interactions between host and guest (after feasting, naturally) is triggered when the son of Nestor remarks on the wealth and splendour of Menelaus' court.⁴⁴ Menelaus' response is quite telling:

ὥς οὖ τοι χαίρων τοῖσδε κτεάτεσσιν ἀνάσσω.
καὶ πατέρων τάδε μέλλετ' ἀκουέμεν, οἳ τινες ὑμῖν
εἰσὶν, ἐπεὶ μάλα πολλὰ πάθον, καὶ ἀπόλεσα οἶκον
εὖ μάλα ναιετάοντα, κεχανδότα πολλὰ καὶ ἐσθλά.
ὦν ὄφελον τριτάτην περ ἔχων ἐν δώμασι μοῖραν
ναίειν, οἳ δ' ἄνδρες σοοὶ ἔμμεναι, οἳ τότε ὄλοντο
Τροίῃ ἐν εὐρείῃ ἐκάς Ἄργεος ἵποβότοιο.

So it is with no pleasure I am lord over all these possessions.
You will have heard all this from your fathers, whoever your fathers
are, for I have suffered much, and destroyed a household

⁴⁴ *Odyssey* 4.71-75.

that was very strongly settled and held many goods within it.
 I wish I lived in my house with only a third part of all
 these goods, and that the men were alive who died in those days
 in wide Troy land far away from the horse-pasturing Argos.⁴⁵

Two things are evident from his response. The first is society's role of retelling the stories of the great heroes and their suffering from generation to generation. Menelaus expects that Telemachos has heard these stories from his father, which, through dramatic irony, points to the generational loss resulting from the Trojan War. Menelaus' statement highlights that Telemachos had to grow up without the influence of a father. In this passage, Menelaus also emphasizes regret through his recollection, and he forsakes the worldly possessions he gained, instead hoping for the return of his soldiers, and his brother most of all.⁴⁶ The physical distancing of Troy as a "land far away" links the space with the past and a realm remarkably different from one of peacetime. Despite this physical distance, Menelaus cannot escape the realization of the loss of his generation.

Another puzzling element of remembrance in Menelaus' court lies in the ultimate symbol of the Trojan War: Helen of Troy. Helen takes one of the most peculiar roles in the *Odyssey*; she is the first to recognize Telemachos⁴⁷ and acts as a source of forgetfulness through her medicine:

αὐτίκ' ἄρ' εἰς οἶνον βάλε φάρμακον, ἔνθεν ἔπινον,
 νηπενθές τ' ἄχολόν τε, κακῶν ἐπίληθον ἀπάντων.
 ὃς τὸ καταβρόξειεν, ἐπήν κρητῆρι μιγείη,
 οὐ κεν ἐφημέριός γε βάλοι κατὰ δάκρυ παρειῶν,
 οὐδ' εἴ οἱ κατατεθναίῃ μήτηρ τε πατήρ τε,
 οὐδ' εἴ οἱ προπάροιθεν ἀδελφεὸν ἢ φίλον υἷον
 χαλκῷ δηιώεν, ὁ δ' ὀφθαλμοῖσιν ὀρῶτο.

At once she placed a medicine into the wine from which they were drinking,
 a medicine which removed pain and anger, causing them to forget all their ills.
 Whoever should swallow it when it would be mixed in the wine bowl,
 for that day, no tear would fall down his cheeks,
 not even if his mother and father were dying,
 nor if before him, they cut down his brother or dear son
 with bronze, and he were to see it with his own eyes.⁴⁸

Slipping this medicine into the wine for her guests to forget links Helen to Circe, who gives a similar medicine to Odysseus' men so they will forget their homecoming.⁴⁹ Although the

⁴⁵ *Odyssey* 4.93-99.

⁴⁶ *Odyssey* 4.90-92.

⁴⁷ *Odyssey* 4.140-146.

⁴⁸ *Odyssey* 4.220-226. Translation by the author.

⁴⁹ *Odyssey* 10.233-236.

medicine is “ἄχολόν”-- “free of gall” and “νηπενθέζ”--“heartease,” there is something inherently disturbing about being unable to feel emotions should one’s relatives be murdered before one’s very eyes. The first word is made up of an alpha privative and χόλος--“anger” or “wrath,” and this is the only place in Homeric epic where either word occurs.⁵⁰ Both of these words develop the notion of dampening emotions and memory. The phrase “with bronze” invokes a wartime image of bronze spears and the sudden loss of family as a result of the fighting. Helen’s treatment has the effect of blocking recollection, though this is not necessarily a positive effect.

Jonathan Shay argues that this treatment is unwilling on the part of Menelaus: “there’s no hint that Menelaus wants to forget Odysseus, nor that he finds the pain unmanageable, nor that he finds his own tears humiliating.”⁵¹ For Menelaus, remembering is critical because of what Shay calls the “resuscitative effect”; by keeping the dead in their thoughts, veterans honor the fallen, and in the inverse: “in asking the veteran to forget, the family asks him to dishonor himself.”⁵² The forces of memory and forgetting are constantly in contention: the pain of grief and the dishonor of forgetting those who have been lost is something that society must balance. Such discussions are relevant even today, as people discuss the importance of monuments like the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington D.C. At the crux of this issue lie questions of *if* and *how* to remember war. This scene in Menelaus’ court represents the larger conflict that society must face between honoring the dead and moving forward, just like the seasons in Cummings’ “O sweet spontaneous.”

Agamemnon's story is told several times throughout the *Odyssey*, acting as a point of reference and comparison between Orestes and Telemachos as well as the parallel situations in their houses. While Agamemnon is away fighting, two themes emerge: instability and a breakdown of trust. These issues can easily be read in the context of homecoming and the Trojan War. From the very beginning of the poem, Agamemnon’s story is emphasized in the council of the gods,⁵³ but the first retelling of the story in the realm of the mortals occurs when Telemachos visits Nestor, another veteran of the Trojan War.⁵⁴ Nestor’s most relevant remark also contains an important lesson for Telemachos:

ἦ τοι ὁ τὸν κτείνας δαίνυ τάφον Ἀργείοισιν
μητρός τε στυγερῆς καὶ ἀνάλκιδος Αἰγίσθοιο:
αὐτῆμαρ δέ οἱ ἦλθε βοὴν ἀγαθὸς Μενέλαος
πολλὰ κτήματ’ ἄγων, ὅσα οἱ νέες ἄχθος ἄειραν.
καὶ σύ, φίλος, μὴ δηθὰ δόμων ἄπο τῆλ’ ἀλάλησο,
κτῆματά τε προλιπὼν ἄνδρας τ’ ἐν σοῖσι δόμοισιν
οὔτω ὑπερφιάλους, μὴ τοι κατὰ πάντα φάγωσιν
κτῆματα δασσάμενοι, σὺ δὲ τηῦσίην ὁδὸν ἔλθης.

⁵⁰ Cunliffe *Lexicon*, 65, 279, 420.

⁵¹ Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 37.

⁵² Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 80.

⁵³ *Odyssey* 1.29-43.

⁵⁴ *Odyssey* 3.98-101.

When [Orestes] had killed, he ordered among the Argives a grave mound for his mother who was hateful and for unwarlike Aigisthos; and on the same day Menelaos of the great war cry sailed in bringing back many possessions, the burden his ships carried. So, dear friend, do not you stay long and far wandering away from home, leaving your possessions, and in your house men so overbearing, for fear they divide up all your property and eat it away, so all your journey will have no profit.⁵⁵

Here Menelaos (and thus Agamemnon) “of the great war cry” is contrasted with “unwarlike” or “ἀνάλκιδος” Aigisthos. With this adjective, Aigisthos is linked with the suitors that seek to infiltrate Odysseus’ home.⁵⁶ The two represent a common theme: both houses are in disarray because of the lack of a central authority. Nestor warns Telemachos not to wander too far away from home, lest the suitors consume all his property. While Agamemnon is away, there is a power vacuum back at home which can easily be stolen by “unwarlike” fiends like Aigisthos. War took Agamemnon away from his home and family, and in his absence his court fell apart. A similar pressing issue is revealed in Ithaka, where the suitors are overrunning Odysseus’ possessions and dynasty. War is presented as a force that tears apart families and allows imbalances in power to form in veterans’ absences.

The next time we hear about Agamemnon, he himself gives a grave warning to Odysseus from the underworld:

‘τῷ νῦν μή ποτε καὶ σὺ γυναικί περ ἦπιος εἶναι:
μή οἱ μῦθον ἅπαντα πιφασκέμεν, ὄν κ’ ἐν εἰδῆς,
ἀλλὰ τὸ μὲν φάσθαι, τὸ δὲ καὶ κεκρυμμένον εἶναι.

...
κρύβδην, μηδ’ ἀναφανδά, φίλην ἐς πατρίδα γαῖαν
νῆα κατισχέμεναι: ἐπεὶ οὐκέτι πιστὰ γυναιξίν.

So by this, do not be too easy even with your wife,
nor give her an entire account of all you are sure of.
Tell her part of it, but let the rest be hidden in silence.

...
When you bring your ship in to your own dear country, do it
secretly, not in the open. There is no trusting in women.⁵⁷

⁵⁵ *Odyssey* 3.309-316.

⁵⁶ See *Odyssey* 4.334 and 17.125.

⁵⁷ *Odyssey* 11.441-43, 11.455-456.

Clearly this stems from a deep distrust of the wife that betrayed him on his homecoming day, but there are other forces lurking here. Jonathan Shay's concept of social trust proves useful to explaining Agamemnon's behavior:

Social trust is the expectation that power will be used in accordance with "what's right." When social trust is destroyed, it is not replaced by a vacuum, but rather by a perpetual mobilization to fend off attack, humiliation, or exploitation, and to figure out people's trickery.⁵⁸

Because his wife misused her power for deceit while Agamemnon was away, this shook the core of Agamemnon's ability to trust. Here, he is projecting his fears onto the whole of women, not just his own wife. In warning Odysseus, Agamemnon reveals the deep seated mistrust that many veterans have returning to society. Agamemnon feels the need to use deceit--silence and secrecy--in order to discover the "trickery" he expects from women. This phenomenon affects everyone inasmuch as it creates a fundamental divide between veterans and civilian society. The conflict between the two groups, or even just the lack of understanding, creates disconnect and animosity.

Menelaus even expresses the breakdown of the natural world throughout his homecoming when he must find and catch Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea, who will tell him which of the gods is angry with him. Menelaus expresses to Telemachos the anger of the gods during his homecoming, as Menelaus and his companions are beset by days of harsh weather that impede their travel.⁵⁹ The gods (through the medium of nature) are waylaying Menelaus and other veterans because of their actions in the Trojan War, especially because of their improper behavior in respect to revering the gods and conducting sacrifices.⁶⁰ This behavior is the cause of an improper transition between military and civilian life. Proteus himself takes it one step further in his role and description. He is associated with the depths of the sea and is described as an ancient being who inhabits the waters of Egypt.⁶¹ Proteus is connected with the natural world, lying far away from civilization at the depths of the ocean. The natural world is shown in tumult even further when Menelaus attempts to capture him:

ἡμεῖς δὲ ἰάχοντες ἐπεσσύμεθ', ἀμφὶ δὲ χεῖρας
βάλλομεν: οὐδ' ὁ γέρον δολίης ἐπελήθετο τέχνης,
ἀλλ' ἦ τοι πρῶτιστα λέων γένετ' ἠυγένειος,
αὐτὰρ ἔπειτα δράκων καὶ πάρδαλις ἠδὲ μέγας σῦς:
γίγνετο δ' ὕγρον ὕδωρ καὶ δένδρεον ὑψηπέτηλον:
ἡμεῖς δ' ἄστεμφέως ἔχομεν τετληότι θυμῷ.

⁵⁸ Shay, *Odysseus in America*, 151.

⁵⁹ *Odyssey* 4.360-364.

⁶⁰ See *Odyssey* 4.351-353 and 5.105-111

⁶¹ *Odyssey* 4.385-386, 4.395.

We with a cry sprang up and rushed upon him, locking him
in our arms, but the Old Man did not forget the subtlety
of his arts. First he turned into a great bearded lion,
and then to a serpent, then to a leopard, then to a great boar,
and he turned into fluid water, to a tree with towering branches,
but we held stiffly on to him with enduring spirit.⁶²

Here Proteus shapeshifts into different manifestations of the natural world, from animal, to water, to plant. He is not located in any one clear category and cannot maintain a constant identity. This shows the mythologization of Menelaus' journey, similar to the fantastical lands of Odysseus' homecoming. Menelaus describes much of what Cummings does with the breakdown of clear boundaries of the natural world as the result of war. Though Menelaus may frame this as the gods' doing, clearly the natural world is still in uproar after the events of the Trojan War.

These themes of distance and alienation, memory and forgetting resound with both Cummings' poetry and Odysseus' struggle to return to a home he cannot forget, no matter how hard he tries. As members of the same generation, Menelaus, Agamemnon, and Odysseus all face trouble adapting to a changed society. In Odysseus' case, he must deal with the physical threat of the suitors overtaking his home and destabilizing his legacy over Ithaca. The breakdown of trust exhibited by Agamemnon also surfaces in Odysseus when he disguises himself as a beggar in order to not reveal his true identity to his family. Overall, these themes help to prepare the audience for the inevitable showdown between Odysseus and the suitors, but also point to the effects that war have on Menelaus' and Agamemnon's courts, and thus the whole of society in the *Odyssey*.

V. CONCLUSION

Many signs of reflecting on and understanding war experience surface on a personal level through Odysseus and other characters of his generation. Odysseus himself struggles with authority and agency about recollections of the Trojan War and homecoming--E.E. Cummings faces similar issues coming home from World War I. Comparing each soldier's reflections on battle allow for a fuller picture of the *Odyssey* as a narrative of war memory and coping with the past. Many similarities lie between E.E. Cummings and the heroes of the *Odyssey*, but Cummings also brings a new focus on the larger mechanisms that shift as a result of battle. This new lens helps to explore individual characters' struggle with their past in the *Odyssey* and how society and the natural world have changed in their absence. Menelaus' court reflects new tensions of memory and forgetfulness as a greater problem that society must grapple with. Agamemnon's homecoming and death provide a stark warning that society has become unstable and untrustworthy after veterans left. These perspectives point to both a personal and cultural emphasis on war memory, which is a timeless theme still reflected upon by poets to this day.

⁶² *Odyssey* 4.454-459.

They also prepare Homer's audience for the realities of a changed society that will surface as a major theme in the rest of the narrative.

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