

Odysseus: A Reflection on Life in the New Home

Ye Wenzhe
Medicine, New Asia College

1. It Is a New Home

“Greetings, strangers. You are welcome here. Please have dinner with us if you don’t mind. And you can tell us what you need after that.”

Oh, it couldn’t be Telemachus, the mature king grasping my hand.

It was twenty years more of a strong aspiration to return home than miserable struggles. However, was this familiar but also strange place still my home in mind? I should really have a careful inspection first.

“What a great feast! Stranger, it seems that you are not from a country whose king is as brilliant as ours, or you wouldn’t have to lead a vagrant life here,” said the young guest sitting next to me.

“I’m afraid so. However, I heard that the hero, Odysseus, ruled this kingdom before the Trojan War. Why his subjects became the adherent of another king instead of waiting for Odysseus?”

“Odysseus? Oh, sorry that I can’t remember clearly. I’ve heard from my father that, he was a resourceful and valiant king and was the proud of Ithaca. Nevertheless, he left the kingdom when I was a child.”

“Oh, I see that. Then is it offensive for me to ask about his wife, Penelope? Is she still waiting for her husband?”

“I think you mean the queen of Zacynthus. It was years ago that she married the king of Zacynthus, one of the suitors. Her bed was also removed to welcome our new queen.”

Shocked to numb, I was not able to hold the goblet when the guests stand up and chorus: “Let’s toast to our great king, Telemachus!”

After the dinner, I tested Telemachus in an attempt to receive a second answer, whereas the young guest told the truth. It was not the home in my thoughts all along. After a careful examination from Eurycleia of my old scare, my baby Telemachus, a prudent king now, finally realized that his father returned home after twenty years of exile.

“Oh, I can’t believe it!” said my son, hugging me tightly, “Dear father, thank god you are home now.” He tried to assist me into a chair although there was obviously no need. “Oh, dear father, don’t worry anymore. You will be taken good care of from now on.” Telemachus said, “please have a sweet sleep tonight and I will tell you everything about these twenty years tomorrow.”

I walked after a new servant into the room without Penelope, and knew that it wouldn’t be a good night for sleep.

2. New Home Comes with New Perspectives of Life

Moonlight gently fondled the Ionian Sea, which shined fathomlessly and peacefully.

“It was twenty years! How come everything has changed! Penelope betrayed me, and my little boy considers me no more than an old father. Oh, the valiant and heroic Odysseus has gone! Athena, why did you help me struggle back home but punish me through the deprivation of all those

things that help me gain a foothold at home! How I wish that everything had remained unchanged!”

Walking slowly in his dark monk robe, Thich Nhat Hanh said: “My dear friend, I feel so sorry for your unforeseen trouble, however, I think you may appreciate the change of the world instead. Without impermanence, you would have never had the chance to become a reputable king of your regality or the husband of your beloved wife.”

“Whatever you say, my friend, whatever I had, was lost, which will never ever come back to me again.”

“Well, if you have heard about the Heart Sutra, you will understand that no one is isolated. Can you think of one thing that is brought out from nothingness? No, probably you can’t (一行禪師 13). So nothing can vanish for the same reason. Actually, you gain the gene of great power from your parents and so does Telemachus, whose birth is the extension of your life. You two share some parts of each other. It seems that you are no longer the king, but in reality, you just passed it to other parts of yourself, Telemachus.”

“Maybe you are right. Telemachus is my son and the successor of my kingdom. I should feel proud of him, as it must be a great challenge to learn to rule a country without help from his father. And I don’t think anyone else’s son can do better than Telemachus. Oh, poor father, poor son. Their mothers both left them during the suffering, though one is sorrowful while the other is infuriating.”

“Listen, my friend, I want you to keep calm and rational. Then answer me: did you love Penelope?” wise Socrates once again saw through what I was thinking. “Yes, I think I did, anyway.” I answered with a deep breath.

“Ok, that’s good. So what do you think love means to you?”

“Dear Socrates, I think love is loyalty, just as the bed in our bedroom suggests. I loved Penelope because she was loyal to me, therefore I am angry and no longer in love with her now.”

“So in your opinion, it is loyalty that induces love. Am I right?”

“Yes, exactly.”

“Some of your servants are also loyal to you right?”

“Yes.”

“Do you love them?”

“Certainly not, my friend.”

“So, do you agree that some kinds of loyalty can induce love while some kinds cannot?”

“Yes.”

“That’s good. So do you think Penelope loved you before the betrayal?”

“I think I’m sure that she loved me.”

“And do you agree that she loved you because of the same reason: your loyalty?”

“Yes.”

“You have been loyal to her, am I right?”

“I think so.”

“But why your loyalty now doesn’t induce her love?”

“I guess it indicates that even the love-inducing kinds of loyalty don’t always do their job.”

“Right. My friend, a few more questions. Do you think that you were still in love with Penelope before you knew about the betrayal?”

“Yes, woefully.”

“It was when you were still in love with Penelope that she chose to betray you, am I right?”

“Yes. And you are trying to prove that love cannot always induce loyalty if I’m right.”

“Almost perfect, Odysseus! You are much more sagacious than Agathon, one of my friends.”

“Thank you, wise Socrates. But I don’t think I totally grasp your points.”

“You see, my intelligent friend, there is no certain relationship between love and loyalty. To be specific, instead of inducing loyalty from your lover, love actually induces your own loyalty towards the objects you love. It is because you love them that you are willing to do certain things to the objects only. However, this kind of loyalty is not love at all.”

“Then please tell me more about what love is.”

“Be patient, my friend, try your best to follow. The beginning of love is the pursuit of physical beauty, which is easy to understand. One focuses more on the individual first, and gradually realizes the beauty in all bodies, becoming a lover of all physical beauty. Then, the next stage is the love of mental beauty, the qualities of mind. Afterwards, he then should appreciate the beauty of customs and institutions, regarding physical beauty as trivial. While his accessing of knowledge through institutions, he may come to the beauty of different types of knowledge. The process for one to move from stage to stage is like climbing a ladder, and the first five stages have been introduced, along which one’s love is dominated more and more by the beauty in general instead of individuals and one also develops many inspiring thoughts and arguments. If one continues to pay all his attention to philosophy, he will come to the final goal along the ladder, which is divine and eternal and also the origin of other kinds of beauty. It is the beauty itself. One can finally get access to immortality and even gods.

Now it is obvious that, love is a kind of pursuit to process immortal beauty (210a–211c; 206a). To sum up, instead of loyalty, love is desire.”

“That’s marvelous, Socrates! I’ve never heard about this approach of immortality. I tried to obtain immortality by governing a country and defeating the enemy, in expectation that my deeds would be eulogized through decades.”

“Exactly, clever Odysseus. Trying to achieve immortality is part of human nature, which accounts for why people tend to reproduce.”

“Sorry to interrupt your brilliant speech, Socrates,” said Thich Nhat Hanh, “but I have to say that I don’t think ‘immortality’ makes sense.”

“Please continue.”

“It is mentioned that, pursuing immortality is human nature. However, I would rather regard it as people’s horror of death. However, horror cannot save us, only a deeper understanding of the world can (一行禪師 23). Dear Odysseus, your mother didn’t leave you, as there is no such thing as death. Your sorrow of death indicates that you are still constrained by the life world you are living in.”

I was confused, thus asked: “Why is that? Death is objective and I don’t think I believe in afterlife of your religion.”

“I am also talking about the reality, my friend, you just need a deeper observation of the world. For example, waves of the sea are not immortal. They are faced with dying. However, with a closer observation, we will realize that the wave is water in nature. They are born and then disappeared, while water remains invariable. If the wave can only see the isolated self, it will sure to be worried about its death. Whereas if it can see the water nature and understand the unity of water and itself, it then will be freed from life and death, which cannot constrain it anymore (17). I would like to call this

worldview as ‘inter-being’ (6). To understand there is only transformation but no life or death, you have to see your unity with the world.”

“Very interesting idea, Thich Nhat Hanh. To follow your logic: no death then no fear of death, and thus no pursuit of immortality. Am I right?”

“Thank you, Socrates. People always seek immortality because they haven’t been aware that everything is immortal already.”

“I am sorry, but I think it is because of different definitions of ‘immortality’. I don’t think the wave still exists when I see a pool of quiet water, while you think so. Your perspective of understanding cannot change what happened, which is more of a self-smoothing. Poor Odysseus cannot kiss or talk with his mother anymore. This is the reality.”

“However, dear Socrates. How people respond to what happens is more important and controllable than what really happens. I think it is a better way for dear Odysseus to radically get rid of his distress.”

“It is so nice of you two, my dear friends. Although I didn’t grasp all your ideas, I feel a lot better now. Whatever, life continues. Now I wonder what I should do as an abdicated king.”

The long enjoyable talk continued until we saw the smile of the goddess of dawn.

3. The Loss Can Be a Gift of Life

After that night, we three go for a walk every few days. I understand that there are two kinds of reproduction: physical and mental, of which the latter is more lasting (208–209e). Although I have achieved the mental reproduction as a resourceful and brilliant king, Socrates told me to keep climbing up the ladder of love. So now I am writing a book talking about the morality and human nature in ruling a country and the war, trying to

reach the divine beauty through philosophy. Also, I am reading more books including the Sutras. Though Socrates doesn't agree, I also regard them as a kind of philosophy. At every end of the walk, Thich Nhat Hanh always reminds us of our responsibility to help the sufferers. So every time my dear Telemachus comes to me for consultations, I will emphasize on the benevolent policy.

I cannot wait to have dinner with the guests tonight. By the way, the young citizen in the beginning of the essay becomes a loyal audience of my Troy-war stories. I guess maybe I am already satisfied with my felicitous life even without immortality.

Thank you for reading and wish you all a happy life.

Works Cited

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Teacher's comment:

The story is thoughtfully conceived and well written. Socrates and Thich Nhat Hanh are engaged in a lively dialogue about love and fear of death. While loyalty is an important theme in the *Odyssey*, it hardly plays any role in the *Symposium*. Linking love with loyalty, Wenzhe elaborated Plato's theory of love and adapted it to the story of Odysseus. Regarding the fear of death, Thich Nhat Hanh's metaphor of wave is aptly suited to illustrate the concept of emptiness. The fear of death that underlies the pursuit of immortality is alleviated by the insight into the emptiness of one's own self and the inter-being of all. As a whole, Wenzhe demonstrates her good understanding of Thich Nhat Hanh and Plato, as well as her ability to apply their thoughts in the discussion of the two all-too-human traits of human nature. (Ho Wai Ming)