

Chapter 5

The Misadventure of Staying Home

Thwarted *Nostos* in De Chirico and Rebecca West

SHEILA MURNAGHAN

From the *Odyssey* onwards, the long *nostos* tradition has at times called attention to a paradoxical insight: the challenges and rewards of homecoming can be experienced by those who never leave home. If being at home means more than being physically located in a certain place, then the dynamics of presence and absence, loss and recovery, that make up *nostos* can be played out within a single setting. Something new can be gained that makes the non-traveler somehow more “at home” than before. Or the obstacles to a successful experience of outward journey and smooth reintegration may not be intrusions from the outside, but internal, home-grown impediments.

My discussion draws on two twentieth-century works, a painting and a novella, to consider the question of in-house obstacles to *nostos*, but I start from the *Odyssey*'s own presentation of *nostos* without departure, which is summed up in the celebrated simile that marks the reunion of Odysseus and Penelope. This simile is a frequent touchstone for thinking about Odyssean *nostos* in terms that are especially compelling to modern readers and writers. Already in Homer's heroic epic, homecoming is redefined as an experience that transcends gender, that maps onto the daily rounds of ordinary life, and that is psychological rather than physical.

And as he wept, he clung to his beloved wife.

*Land is a welcome sight to men swimming
For their lives, after Poseidon has smashed their ship
In heavy seas. Only a few of them escape
And make it to shore. They come out
Of the grey water crusted with brine, glad
To be alive and set foot on dry land.*

So welcome a sight was her husband to her. (*Od.* 23.232–39, trans. Lombardo; emphasis in original)

Even on repeated rereadings, the simile is startling for the way it seems at first to be entirely about Odysseus, constructing a mini-narrative that recalls Odysseus' adventures, only to be revealed at the end as the story of Penelope, an account of experiences that happened within the narrow compass of her house and were mostly internal. The return of Odysseus is a return for Penelope as well because it reconfigures the house that she has never left, turning it back into a place where she can be at home. The assimilation of Penelope's homebound existence to risky seafaring enforces a reevaluation of the relationship between women's and men's lives, between domestic experience and the outside world of glorious achievement. The *Odyssey* here acknowledges its heroine's importance to the success of its story and makes Penelope a lasting emblem for the value of women's traditional concerns and forms of expression.

At the same time, the simile assumes, and requires for its impact, a distinction between home and abroad. Penelope and Odysseus have occupied different spaces and they have had, and will continue to have, different roles in the maintenance of their joint good fortune. Furthermore, the simile celebrates a meeting of minds between husband and wife that privileges his journey and return as definitive experiences for both. If the traveler's return spells homecoming for the one who has never left, then the home itself harbors no obstacles that cannot be overcome by the absent owner's presence and repossession of what he left behind.

In accord with the pervasive ironizing of *nostos* in modern works, both of my twentieth-century examples have titles formulated as "The Return of . . .," yet present a doubtful vision of *nostos*, unsettled by blurred distinctions between male and female, and especially between home and

abroad. In both, the character of home as a straightforward point of return is compromised by histories and memories that prevent it from serving as a straightforward point of departure.

My first example is a painting by the Greco-Italian painter Giorgio de Chirico (fig. 5.1). This is a very late painting in De Chirico's career, dating from 1968. Entitled "The Return of Ulysses," it provides an unexpected account of that legendary event.¹ A youthful, boyish, even somewhat girlish Ulysses conducts his voyage in an indoor setting. He is entirely alone; this return of Ulysses includes no Penelope and no suitors.

Throughout his career, De Chirico was obsessed with the concept of the enigma, and critics have not been slow to find this painting enigmatic, often responding to it with questions, as in this comment from Wieland Schmied's *Giorgio de Chirico: The Endless Journey*:

Ulysses is depicted rowing a small boat through restless waves. But these are not the waves of the sea; they are ripples on a pond that has somehow found its way into a living room. Has he returned home from an ocean voyage, to relive in memory the dangers he has faced and mastered? Or were his adventures nothing but a dream, and he has never left the home of his yearnings? We do not know.²

Among the painting's many elusive features are its mood or tone. It has an air of sweetness and charm, evoking a pleasant afternoon on the water and a welcome freedom from danger, but there are also suggestions of claustrophobia and frustration. One possible approach involves focusing on Ulysses' solitude and boyishness: he seems unmarked by experience, as if he has never been anywhere. In this respect, he is very different from an earlier version of Ulysses painted by De Chirico in 1922, an older, more experienced figure stranded on a seashore, evoking Odysseus as we first meet him in the *Odyssey*, trapped on Calypso's island and bent on getting

1. De Chirico painted another, closely related version of "The Return of Ulysses" in 1973, now in a private collection. An older Ulysses, who somewhat resembles a classical statue, leans out of the front of canoe-like vessel, with an arm reaching forward in a gesture of uncertain significance; there too Ulysses' back is turned on both his room and the outer world glimpsed through an open window.

2. Schmied 2002, 111. Cf. Holzhey (2005, 88): "The traveler, one might conclude, has survived the adventures of his journey. Or were they actually no more than the dreams of stay-at-home? Has the home-comer ever been away?" For a discussion of this painting in relation to twentieth-century Italian treatments of Odysseus' homecoming as unsatisfying, see Schironi (forthcoming). For broader treatments of De Chirico's life and cultural context in relation to the concept of the enigma, see Crossland (1999); Jewell (2004).



FIGURE 5.1 Giorgio de Chirico, "The Return of Ulysses," Fondazione Giorgio e Isa de Chirico, © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome

back to Ithaca. What De Chirico's later, younger Ulysses does share with his earlier, older version is the condition of being trapped, though without the evident appearance of anguish. With his assiduous rowing, he appears to be trying unsuccessfully to leave through the open door as much as settling happily into his cozy domestic environment with its chairs, paintings, and chest. His posture as a rower means that he is simultaneously moving towards (or trying to move towards) and turning his back on all the elements in his setting.

Whatever else this enigmatic painting may be hinting at, it gives strong visual expression to the difficulty of clearly distinguishing home and away, of differentiating the confined and constructed domestic world from the realm of nature. The sea looks like a carpet; the open door, with its brown oblong shadow, rectangular panels, and ornate handle, resembles the closed cabinet; the natural landscape framed by the window mirrors the painting on the opposite wall. If the traveler cannot achieve a meaningful *nostos*, his difficulty may be caused by what his home itself contains, rather than by what he might have experienced outside it or by alien elements that have recently invaded.

As Schmied's comment indicates with its references to "memory" and "dream," this interior scene is suggestive of psychological interiority, through the solitude and dreamy expression of Ulysses, and through various visual signs of unseen worlds, including the half-open door, the large secretive closed cabinet, the open window that reveals only part of an enclosed building, the painting on the wall. Schmied connects those memories and dreams to an implied Odyssean voyage: possibly dangers relived in memory, possibly adventures yearningly dreamt of. But various elements of this scene, especially the window and the painting, suggest that the rower's dreams and memories could also be seen as impediments to such a voyage, rather than reflections of it—private visions that are both idealized and rooted in the past, which interfere with the kind of outward journey and successful return we associate with Odysseus.

In terms of De Chirico's biography, both the landscape and the painting evoke a personal past. The painting on the wall is a quotation of De Chirico's own earlier work, particularly paintings from the nineteen-teens, his influential metaphysical period, in which buildings, spaces, and objects are charged with meaning that is evident but cryptic. Fig. 5.2, painted in 1913, is a characteristically mysterious and melancholy example, in which the same tower occurs, also with an arcade, and with one of the statues of Ariadne that appear in many works of this period.

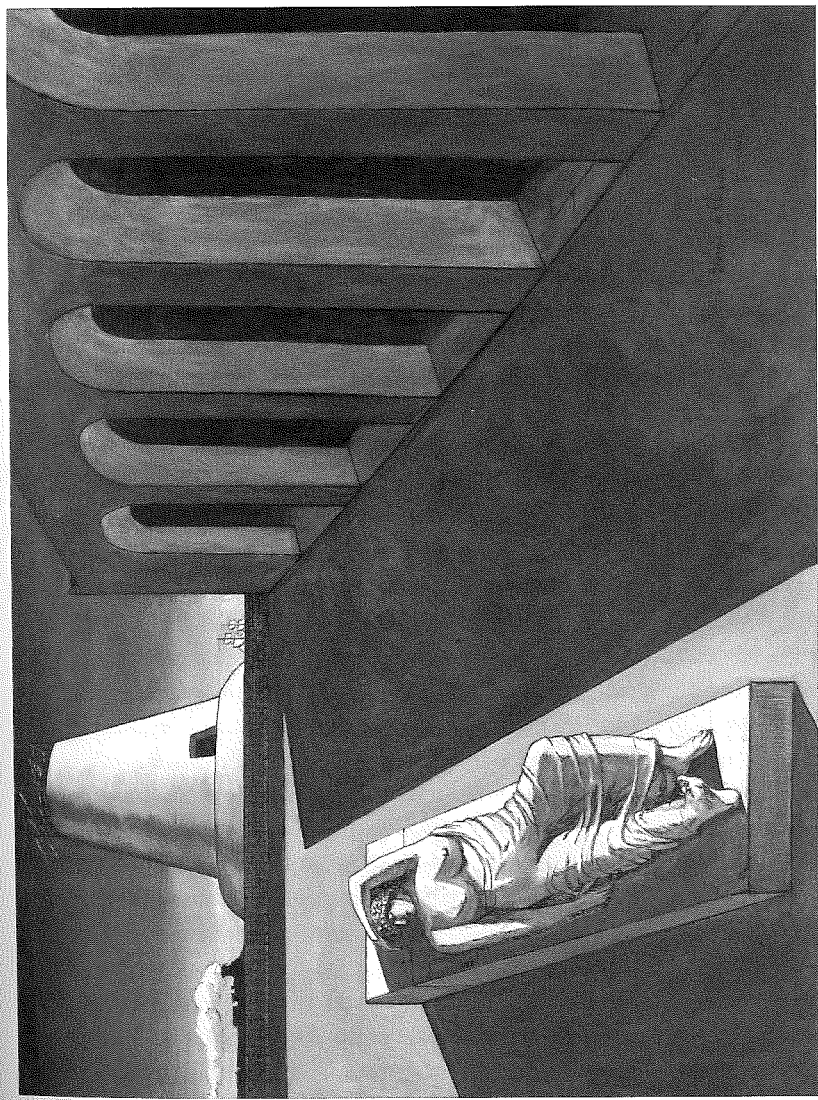


FIGURE 5.2 Giorgio de Chirico, "Ariadne," The Metropolitan Museum of Art, © 2013 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York/SIAE, Rome

The classical elements in these paintings refer in part to De Chirico's earliest years, which were spent in Greece, first in Volos (the legendary starting point of the Argonauts, whose journey, along with Odysseus', De Chirico took as a model for his own life's journey) and then in Athens. Painted scenes of classical buildings and classical statues recreate the terrain of his childhood, as does the ostensibly real landscape glimpsed through the open window in the "Return of Ulysses," with its half-seen Greek temple. Positioning his rower between interior and exterior images of his own early history, De Chirico may be signaling the inescapable pull of formative private memories and registering the effect of such memories in this Ulysses' solitude, inexperience, and lack of progress.

As an antitype of the Homeric Odysseus, De Chirico's Ulysses reminds us that *nostos* as delineated in the *Odyssey* is not a return to ultimate origins, to the hero's childhood or even his youth, nor does it depend on the reanimation of memories that are his alone. It is defined, in the moment marked by that simile in Book 23, as a reunion between two people and the reclamation of a relationship and of a physical space that have both been constructed (or reconstructed) in adulthood. In the context of Odysseus' homecoming, the salient feature of his house is not its association with his childhood but the presence of his marriage bed, which he built as an expression of his adult identity and his definitive role as Penelope's husband. De Chirico's Ulysses inhabits a bedroom, yet he is alone there, and the room contains a wardrobe but no bed.

The *Odyssey* does include significant reminiscences of Odysseus' life before his marriage to Penelope, but they are milestones in his assumption of a public identity that he reasserts on his return: his naming by his grandfather Autolycus (*Od.* 19.399–12), the boar fight at which he proves his manhood and receives his scar (*Od.* 19.413–66), the scene in which his father, Laertes, names the trees that Odysseus inherits (*Od.* 24.336–44). Furthermore, these reminiscences are cordoned off from the central action of Odysseus' recognition by Penelope. The story of his naming and acquisition of the scar is told in a highly controlled flashback. Euryclia is prevented from revealing her recognition so that the scar and the memories it carries are kept from Penelope and do not become public knowledge. Odysseus' recollection of acquiring the trees in his father's orchard occurs outside the house and in a kind of coda, after the expulsion of the suitors and the reunion with Penelope.³

3. As Alex Purves points out in her essay in this volume, the *Odyssey's* segregation of home and farm is subtly qualified, not least by the presence of a tree at the center of the house.

Furthermore, Penelope, on whom the success of their joint *nostos* so much depends, has no existence in the poem outside her marriage to Odysseus. The only hint of her former life comes in Athena's impersonation of her sister in order to appear to Penelope as a dream in Book 4, where Penelope herself notes that her sister never comes to Ithaca because she lives far away (*Od.* 4.810–11).⁴ The Greek mythological tradition is not devoid of stories about Penelope's earlier life, although the evidence for them is scanty and comes from late sources. We cannot be sure that any of them would have been known to Homer and so cannot claim that he has suppressed them (though scholars have plausibly argued that he deliberately avoids accounts of Penelope's life after her marriage, also known from later sources, in which she is unfaithful). But it is instructive to see what one of Homer's modern retellers accomplishes by bringing in what Homer does not.

Margaret Atwood's 2005 *Penelopiad* draws on several versions of the Odysseus story other than the *Odyssey*, taken in particular from the continuous narrative constructed by Robert Graves out of widely scattered ancient sources in his quirky but influential compendium, *The Greek Myths*.⁵ Graves weaves into his account of the Odysseus myth a brief summary of traditions preserved by commentators interested in Penelope's name and its possible meaning:

Odysseus married Penelope, daughter of Icarius and the naiad Periboea . . . Penelope, formerly named Arneia, or Arnacia, had been flung into the sea by Nauplius at her father's order; but a flock of purple-striped ducks buoyed her up, fed her, and towed her ashore. Impressed by this prodigy, Icarius and Periboea relented, and Arneia won the new name of Penelope, which means 'duck.' (1955, vol. 2, 279)

Atwood reconceives these bits of antiquarian lore as traumatic experiences that shape Penelope's personality, playfully closing the conceptual gap between classical mythology and contemporary psychology. Penelope claims not to remember the episode of being thrown in the sea, which she has been told about by servants, but still considers it formative: "It is to this episode—or rather to my knowledge of it—that I attribute my reserve,

4. In fact, Athena has appropriated this figure in order to guide Penelope's thoughts in ways that prepare for her unwitting cooperation with Odysseus (Murnaghan 1995, 68–69).

5. "Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* (Penguin) was crucial. The information about Penelope's ancestry, her family relations—Helen of Troy was her cousin—and much else, including the stories about her infidelity are to be found there" (Atwood 2005, 197). On Graves's view of all ancient sources, from whatever period, as equally valid "information," see Murnaghan (2009, 84).

as well as my mistrust of other people's intentions" (Atwood 2005, 9). The experience leaves her with a nickname that her nasty cousin Helen uses to demean her: "I think Odysseus would make a very suitable husband for our little duckie,' she said. 'she likes the quiet life, and she'll certainly have that if he takes her to Ithaca . . .'" (33). Atwood also develops the tradition that Penelope's mother was a sea nymph into a portrait of an uncaring, irresponsible parent: "My mother, like all Naiads, was beautiful, but chilly at heart. . . . She was elusive. When I was little I often tried to throw my arms around her, but she had a habit of sliding away" (10–11). Penelope sums up the legacy of her childhood this way:

You can see by what I've told you that I was a child who learned early the virtues—if such they are—of self-sufficiency. I could see that I would have to look out for myself in the world. I could hardly count on family support. (11)

Turning snippets of ancient myth into consequential childhood traumas, Atwood grounds the sardonic, detached perspective of Penelope's narrative (delivered from the underworld) in Penelope's earliest experiences. She constructs a version of the heroine who comes to her marriage with qualities of wariness and independence that keep her aloof and unillusioned despite her responsiveness to Odysseus' charms. As Penelope recalls her long-awaited reunion with Odysseus, Atwood replaces the *Odyssey's* portrait of a wholehearted meeting of the minds with an account of mutual deception and reserve.

The two of us were—by our own admission—proficient and shameless liars of long standing. It's a wonder either one of us believed a word the other said.

But we did.

Or so we told each other. (173)

If *nostos* is to be equated with a reclaimed marriage, the earlier memories of the participants may be as threatening to it as subsequent developments involving separation and incommensurate experience. This point is succinctly expressed by Louise Glück in her poem cycle *Meadowlands*, a late twentieth-century reworking of the *Odyssey* that develops Homer's portrait of Penelope as agent, poet, and independent thinker. Glück uses the *Odyssey* as a foil to a modern marriage that is falling apart for many

reasons, among them the aloofness of the wife, a poet who finally cares more about realizing her poetic vocation than preserving her marriage and who views her husband with a clear-eyed detachment like that of Atwood's Penelope. The poem in the cycle that is entitled "Nostos" ends not with the reunion of husband and wife but with the speaker's private return to childhood, the only site of authentic experience. "We look at the world once, in childhood. / The rest is memory" (Murnaghan and Roberts 2002, 3).

Glück's observation offers one way of understanding De Chirico's pointedly modern Ulysses, a solitary figure enclosed in a private world characterized by childhood memories and a personal artistic vision, for whom no one seems to be waiting, and who seems not to be going anywhere. In this respect, Joyce's version of Ulysses' return in *Ulysses* (discussed in this volume by Leah Culligan Flack) is much closer than De Chirico's to Homer's own. Identifying the *nostos* of his homebound couple with Molly Bloom's return in memory to the moment when she decided to marry Leopold, Joyce affirms the *Odyssey's* conception of homecoming as the recovery of an identity that begins with marriage.

My second example is an early twentieth-century narrative that also locates the obstacles to homecoming at home rather than abroad, Rebecca West's novella *The Return of the Soldier*. West's narrative is grounded in the details of a particular English scenario and she engages—obliquely, but far more explicitly than De Chirico—with the pressures of twentieth-century history, including war and the aftereffects of battle trauma. But there too troubled *nostos* is summed up in a static image of repeated, ineffectual, youthful rowing.

Before I started, I went to the pond on the hill's edge . . . a place where autumn lives half the year, for . . . the pond is fringed with yellow bracken and tinged bramble, and the water flows amber over last year's leaves. Through this brown gloom, Chris was taking the skiff, standing in the stern and using his oar like a gondolier. He had come down here after breakfast, driven from the house by the strangeness of all but the outer walls, and discontented with the ground because everywhere but this wet intractable spot bore the marks of Kitty's genius. After lunch there had been another attempt to settle down, but, with a grim glare at a knot of late Christmas roses bright in a copse that fifteen years ago had been dark, he went back to the russet-caved boat-house and this play with the skiff. It was a boy's sport, and it was dreadful to see him turn a middle-aged face as he brought the boat inshore. (R. West [1918] 1998, 43)

The Return of the Soldier, first published in 1918, is one of the earliest literary responses to the First World War; it was written during 1916 and 1917 and its events take place during 1916, before the war is over or its outcome can be foreseen. Nonetheless, like De Chirico's painting (and like Virginia Woolf's 1922 novella *Jacob's Room*, discussed in this volume by Leah Culigan Flack), *The Return of the Soldier* has a domestic focus and draws on the symbolic potential of domestic spaces, especially bedrooms, and their changing or unchanging arrangements. The story is told from the point of view of a woman waiting at home; the narrator introduces herself with the observation that "like most Englishwomen of my time I was wishing for the return of a soldier" (R. West [1918] 1998, 5). None of the action takes place at the front; events there figure in the narrative only to the extent that they have been seen by the narrator in newsreels and have invaded her dreams.

West does not allude explicitly to the *Odyssey*, but her novella takes key elements of the *Odyssey's nostos*-story—the returning soldier, the waiting wife, the great house, and the seductive alternative of timeless love in an island setting—and rearranges them in the context of a war that is still ongoing. The soldier at the center of this story, Chris Baldry, has returned from the front, not as a triumphant victor, but as an invalid. His wounds are not physical, but in a way that gained new attention in the context of the First World War, psychological. He suffers from shell-shock and, as a consequence, amnesia.

Chris Baldry has forgotten everything that has happened to him for the last fifteen years, since 1901, including his marriage to Kitty and their joint improvements to his house, Baldry Court, those "marks of Kitty's genius" that bewilder him and that make his house strange in "all but the outer walls." Unable to pick up the threads of the life he left behind for the front, he reverts to aimless rowing in the one corner of his estate that seems familiar. For the narrator, his passionately devoted cousin Jenny, who lives with Kitty at Baldry Court, this produces the disturbing incongruity between his boyish pursuit and his middle-aged face.

At this point in the story, Jenny is setting out on an errand to bring another woman to Baldry Court, Margaret Gray, the woman with whom Chris was in love in 1901, the time to which he has in his own mind returned. Margaret was then living with her father, the keeper of an inn on Monkey Island, an island in the river Thames. As a very young man, Chris was a frequent visitor to Monkey Island, and in that idyllic setting he and Margaret fell in love, but then parted because of a trivial quarrel. While Chris has prospered in the meantime, Margaret has fallen into a dingy,

straightened existence, with a feckless working-class husband. Jenny and Kitty honor Chris's request to have Margaret brought to Baldry Court, but assume that he will be horrified when he sees her as the cheaply dressed, diffident, work-worn, middle-aged woman she has become. But they are wrong; Chris finds comfort in Margaret's loving company, and she starts coming to spend every afternoon with him. Kitty meanwhile is busily consulting doctors with the hope of curing Chris's amnesia, turning finally to an unconventional psychiatrist, Dr. Anderson.

Dr. Anderson's diagnosis is that Chris's "unconscious self is refusing to let him resume his relations with his normal life," and he confronts Kitty with the unwelcome news that Chris "has forgotten his life here because he is discontented with it." Kitty finds this hard to fathom, and when Dr. Anderson wonders what suppressed wish has caused Chris's amnesia, she shoots back, "he wished for nothing. He was fond of us, and he had a lot of money" (R. West [1918] 1998, 79–80). It is Margaret who discovers and ultimately delivers the remedy. She realizes that Chris can be dislodged from the past only by a really powerful intervening memory, the memory of his and Kitty's son, who has died at the age of two. The book ends with Chris's return to present reality, marked, in its final words, by Kitty's expression of relief. "I heard her suck her breath with satisfaction. 'He's cured!' she whispered slowly. 'He's cured!'" (90).

Here, as in the *Odyssey*, the soldier's return to his house and wife is impeded by a kind of detention—in this case cognitive rather than physical—in an alternative setting that involves a lovely woman and an idyllic island. As in De Chirico's painting, that compelling alternative is linked to memories of an idealized earlier stage of life associated with the classical past. The inn on Monkey's Island where Chris meets Margaret started out as a Duke's folly, possessing "a grace and silliness that belonged to the eighteenth century," and includes a small Greek temple. Chris has avoided coming to the temple with Margaret because of its sordid associations as the scene of the Duke's assignments, but those associations fall away on the crucial evening when he discovers and declares his timeless love for Margaret (in a reminiscence to Jenny, which she recapitulates).

But tonight there was nothing anywhere but beauty. He lifted her in his arms and carried her within the columns and made her stand in a niche above the altar. A strong stream of moonlight rushed upon her there: by its light he could not tell if her hair was white as silver or yellow as gold, and again he was filled with exultation because he knew that it would not have mattered if it had been white. His love was changeless. Lift-

ing her down from the niche he told her so. And as he spoke her warm body melted to nothingness in his arms. The columns that had stood so hard and black against the quivering tide of moonlight and starlight tottered and dissolved. He was lying in a hateful world where barbed-wire entanglements showed impish knots against a livid sky full of booming noise and splashes of fire and wails for water, and the stretcher bearers were hurting his back unbearably. (R. West [1918] 1998, 41–42)⁶

The end of this passage is the only account we get of Chris's experiences at the front, and marks this moment of desire ennobled by classical associations as the last experience that Chris can bear to remember, the only part of his past to which he can bear to return.

The home of Chris's adulthood, to which he is returned by his disability, represents another kind of ideal. It has been furnished by Kitty with perfect taste at great expense, expense justified in Jenny's mind because the house is intended as a refuge for Chris. "I was sure that we were spared from the reproach of luxury because we had made a fine place for Chris," she comments at the beginning of her story: "Here we had made happiness inevitable for him" (R. West [1918] 1998, 6). Jenny is mistaken about that, as she herself comes to see, and as the psychiatrist Dr. Anderson uncomfortably points out.

Baldry Court does not provide the spiritual alternative to the battlefield that would make it a fitting goal of *nostos*. That alternative is provided by Margaret, both as Chris remembers her on Monkey Island, and in the present time of the narrative. Jenny sees this when Chris first reencounters Margaret and, contrary to Jenny's expectations, is not repelled by her vulgarity. "How her near presence had been known by Chris I do not understand, but there he was, running across the lawn as night after night I had seen him in my dreams running across No Man's Land" (R. West [1918] 1998, 59).

Nor is Baldry Court, as it turns out, entirely cut off from the risky foreign adventures of the wider world. We learn this when Jenny figures out that the silly quarrel that drove Chris and Margaret apart occurred at a time when Chris was, in any case, obliged to go away. His financier father had found his fortune threatened and had summoned Chris to his aid. "That night he talked till late with his father and in the morning he had started for Mexico, to keep the mines going through the revolution, to keep the firm's head above water and Baldry Court sleek and hospitable,

6. On the affinity between Chris's nostalgic vision, especially its combination of classical and pastoral elements, and the aesthetics of Georgian poets such as Rupert Brooke, see Cohen (2002, 76–79).

to keep everything bright and splendid save only his youth . . ." (R. West [1918] 1998, 53). Chris's embarkation for Mexico coincides with his separation from Margaret and his entrance into an adult male identity defined by financial and familial obligation. Jenny observes that "at his father's death, he had been obliged to take over a business that was weighted by the needs of a mob of female relatives who were all useless either in the old way with antimacassars or in the new way with golf clubs" (8).⁷ While *nostos* is compromised in the *Odyssey* by an obligatory future journey, here an earlier, but equally unwelcome journey impedes Chris's return, the journey to Mexico that has led to his marriage to Kitty and the renovation of Baldry Court.

Kitty's stylish interior decorating involves some classicizing touches, but they have a different valence from the temple on Monkey Island, as can be seen in Jenny's description of "the latest acquisition of Kitty's decorative genius, a figurine of a white naked nymph." This has none of the "grace and silliness" of the classical temple on Monkey Island, but is a "coolly conceived" emblem of luxury and passionless femininity, which Jenny imagines to reflect "Chris' conception of women" (R. West [1918] 1998, 56–57). But Jenny is forced to revise her understanding of "Chris' conception of women" as she observes his happiness with Margaret. We see this in the scene in which, as in the first passage quoted above, she goes out of the house, this time to summon Chris and Margaret to meet with the psychiatrist, and she finds Chris sleeping on the ground with Margaret sitting beside him.

They had taken the mackintosh rug out of the dinghy and spread it on this little space of clear grass. . . . She had run her dreadful hands over the rug so that it lay quite smooth and comfortable under him when at last he felt drowsy and turned on his side to sleep. He lay there in the confiding relaxation of a sleeping child, his hands unclenched and his head thrown back so that the bare throat showed defenselessly. . . . What [women] desire is greatness such as this which had given sleep to the beloved. I had known that he was having bad nights in Baldry Court, in that new room with the jade-green painted walls and the lapis lazuli fireplace, which he had found with surprise to be his instead of the remembered little room with the fishing rods. (69)

Jenny's comparison of Chris to a sleeping child points to the strange duality of his relationship to Margaret, who is in his eyes the unaltered

7. On West's exposure of the role of women in constructing and enforcing a deadly, constricting ideal of masculinity, see Norton (2000, 8–13).

beloved of his youth but has become, due to the passage of time and his own regression and dependency, more like his mother. Chris's return to his time with Margaret is also a return to childhood, the stage of life that was then just ending. Jenny repeatedly identifies Margaret as a maternal figure, even at one point associating her with the Virgin Mary (R. West [1918] 1998, 83).⁸ She has an obvious stake in doing so, given her own unrequited passion for Chris, since it allows her to write the erotic element out of Chris's attachment to Margaret. Memories of Chris's childhood are gratifying to Jenny because they return her to the time when she and Chris were companions and she had not yet been displaced by Kitty (and before that, as she now realizes, by Margaret).

Readers of Alex Purves's paper in this volume will recognize the Odyssean resonance of Chris's ability to sleep on the ground near his house but not in his bedroom—a clear signal of alienation from what is supposed to be his home. In this failed *nostos*, the returning warrior cannot find a longed-for haven in his bedroom. The alterations that have been made there since his youth are ostentatious expressions of a shallow marriage, very different from the renovations carried out by Odysseus in his own house as he constructs an everlasting bed for himself and Penelope (and, of course, the success of the *Odyssey's* plot hinges on the fact that Penelope has herself made no alterations).⁹ The fashionable improvements to Baldry Court disturb Chris's peace, preventing him from achieving the restorative, protected sleep in his own bed that is one sign of Odysseus' *nostos*.¹⁰

For all its surface beauty and serenity, Baldry Court is, in the end, no safer than the battlefield. Secured by the exploitation of Mexican mines and the skillful management of a threatened revolution, Chris's home is also contaminated by violence and inhumanity. West's plot is constructed in such a way as to point up the equivalence of home and away, since Chris's return to his forgotten identity as master of Baldry Court also entails his return, once cured of amnesia, to the front. As a result, the title *The Return of the Soldier* takes on a second, more sinister meaning.

8. On Jenny's emotional investment in Margaret as a maternal figure, see Stetz (1987); Cohen (2002, 80).

9. By contrast, in Charlotte Yonge's *The Dove in the Eagle's Nest*, discussed in this volume by Clemence Schultze, the Odysseus figure welcomes the civilizing improvements to his home made by the Penelope figure during his absence.

10. Chris's ability to sleep is transferred to Jenny as well, as during this period she finally sleeps soundly herself, undisturbed by dreams of the front (R. West [1918] 1998, 71). Jenny's sleep, coinciding with Chris's happy reunion with Margaret, marks a brief experience of *nostos* for her; in her needy attachment to Chris and Baldry Court, she is aptly described as "homesick for somewhere she has never physically left but where she is never securely at home" (Cohen 2002, 71).

This consequence of Chris's psychological return is emphasized at the novella's conclusion. Jenny stands at a window, watching for Chris, to whom Margaret has taken the tokens of his dead child that will bring him back to the present. Margaret has decided to do this only with difficulty. She is moved by respect for the truth and for the reality of Chris's marriage to Kitty, who suffers terribly from his condition, but she is also aware that it means depriving Chris of the happiness that he has with her. It is as if Calypso were forced to make the decision that Odysseus makes at the beginning of his story in the *Odyssey*—that she and all that she offers must be left behind.

The terms of Odysseus' choice are echoed in Jenny's thoughts, which closely parallel Margaret's deliberations: "Why did [Kitty's] tears reveal to me what I had learned long ago, but had forgotten in my frenzied love, that there is a draught we must drink or not be fully human?" (R. West [1918] 1998, 87).¹¹ There is even a hint of another mythical goddess with a mortal lover—Eos with Tithonus¹²—in Jenny's recognition of what would happen if Chris were allowed to remain in his protective amnesiac state: ". . . if we left him in his magic circle there would come a time when his delusion turned to senile idiocy; when his joy at the sight of Margaret disgusted the flesh, because his smiling mouth was slack with age" (88). However, while Chris is brought back to the present out of the same respect for the mortal condition that causes Odysseus to leave Calypso, his destination is not a home in which he can live out the rest of his life with a like-minded wife, but the front with its grinding hardships and likely death.

From her window, Jenny watches Chris turning his back on Margaret and walking across the lawn:

He was looking up under his brows at the overarching house as though it were a hated place to which, against all his hopes, business had forced him to return . . . he walked, not loose-limbed like a boy, as he had done that very afternoon, but with the soldier's hard tread upon the heel. It occurred to me that, bad as we were, we were not yet the worst circumstances of his

11. Jenny's thoughts about what it would mean for Chris to remain as he is evoke the annihilation and virtual death that Odysseus would experience if he stayed with Calypso: "There was a finality about his happiness which usually belongs only to loss and calamity; he was to be as happy as a ring cast into the sea is lost, as a man whose coffin has lain for centuries beneath the sod is dead" (R. West [1918] 1998, 86–87). Chris's repeated journeys by ferry to Monkey Island to see Margaret also recall the classical passage to the underworld in Charon's boat.

12. Calypso compares herself to Eos, but as the lover of Orion rather than Tithonus at *Od.* 5.121–22. For an account of Eos and Tithonus in a similar context, see *Homeric Hymn to Aphrodite* 218–38.

return. When we had lifted the yoke of our embraces from his shoulders he would go back to that flooded trench in Flanders. . . . (R. West [1918] 1998, 90)

As Jenny watches Chris approaching, Kitty asks her how he looks, and Jenny replies “Every inch a soldier.” This inspires Kitty’s gratified response, “he’s cured.”

By organizing her plot around amnesia, West brings contemporary reality into her fiction, reflecting the new awareness of battle trauma that arose during the First World War—manifested most famously in the work of the pioneering psychologist W. H. R. Rivers at Craiglockart Military Hospital in Scotland (an early predecessor of Jonathan Shay and others working in this area now, whose patients included Siegfried Sassoon, Robert Graves, and Wilfred Owen). But she also uses the newly emergent psychoanalytic concept of repression to replace the battlefield as the source of trauma with earlier experiences. In his quest for those experiences, Dr. Anderson wants to go back to Chris’s childhood, interpreting his consuming need for Margaret as compensation for the deficiencies of an old and competitive father and a subtly rejecting mother—employing an approach that was revolutionary then but is now so familiar that Margaret Atwood can use it playfully to reconstruct the childhood roots of Penelope’s reserve.¹³ The plot of *The Return of the Soldier* privileges two other prewar traumas, Chris’s separation from Margaret and the death of his son (and with it the loss of a meaningful future at Baldry Court).¹⁴

Drawing on an understanding of battle trauma as a catalyst for earlier disturbances, West uses amnesia as a narrative device with which to

13. The relationship between *The Return of the Soldier* and psychoanalysis is complicated by West’s later declaration that the book has nothing to do with psychoanalysis (R. West 1982). But Dr. Anderson’s search for Chris’s suppressed wish and proposal of a talking cure (“I’ll do it by talking to him. Getting him to tell his dreams” [West (1918) 1998, 80]) are clearly indebted to Freud. Several critics have noted that the alternative cure intuited by Margaret corresponds to more recent theories of trauma and its effective treatment. See Pinkerton (2008); Pividori (2010). Concern over shell shock, with its battlefield onset, promoted the acceptance of Freud’s views in England, lessening resistance to a theory that traced neurosis to sexual conflicts. Psychoanalysis was less threatening as a treatment for battle trauma than as a theory that “the question of libido infiltrates almost every aspect of our social and political existence”—a point that is insisted upon equally by Freud and by West (Varney 2000, 263–67). On the “psychoanalytic logic” of the novel’s refusal of “a theory of trauma that remains enclosed within the context of war neurosis,” see Kavka (1988, 158–60) and, especially in relation to Freud’s theory of the death drive, Bonikowski (2005).

14. In the opening scene, set in the boy’s bedroom, Kitty makes it clear that there will be no more children, although Chris has not faced this: “I wish Chris wouldn’t have it kept as a nursery when there’s no chance.” (R. West [1918] 1998, 4). There’s an obvious contrast here with the *Odyssey*, where Odysseus’ *nostos* involves the affirmation of Telemachus as Odysseus’ worthy heir.

construct a fable of her times, pinpointing a moment that is significant in her hero's biography, but also in her nation's history, as the turning point after which all else is better forgotten. Chris's amnesia allows her to bypass the immediate horrors of the battlefield as the subject of her narrative. Instead, she tells the story of the war as she herself knew it, substituting the experiences of those at home for the soldier's blanked-out experiences of the war. By denying the battlefield as the ultimate source and objective of the soldier's amnesia, she highlights the underlying pathologies of the society that was fighting this drawn-out, voracious, seemingly endless war. Her plot throws into relief the deterioration of English society since 1901, the date of Chris's separation from Margaret, but also the end of the Victorian era, with the death of Queen Victoria, and the beginning of the new century—a deterioration characterized by new wealth, conspicuous consumption, and heightened social stratification, embodied in the contrast between Chris's two women, opulent, decorative Kitty and careworn, shabby Margaret.

Chris's life with Kitty is not the solid marriage of two minds that Odysseus and Penelope recreate, but a soulless, superficial existence in a house that gives a false impression of tradition, stability, and self-sufficiency.¹⁵ Kitty, for all her sincere attachment to Chris, is more like the lethal wife Clytemnestra of Agamemnon's failed *nostos* than like Penelope; invested in her identity as Chris's acknowledged wife, she requires the "cure" that sends him back to war. Margaret has in the meantime also journeyed away from Monkey Island, into a taxing working-class existence that accentuates the class difference that was temporarily elided in her youthful romance with Chris. But both the parasitical wife and the self-sacrificing maternal figure are, in their different ways, complicit in the war to which they conspire to make Chris return (Cohen 2002, 81).

The plot device of amnesia allows West to segment Chris's life history in a way that lumps together the rough, deadly foreign terrain of the battlefield and his comfortable peacetime adult life in England. The traumatized soldier's compulsion to forget the horrors of war is refigured as a compulsion to forget the horrors of home. Chris is unable to escape his home, even when going off to war, although he has tried to do so. A complicating detail of the plot reveals that he had wanted to forget his home even before he left for the front. The news of his disabled condition is slow to reach Baldry Court because he had failed to register his home address with the

15. On Baldry Court as a site of "suspect continuity," implicated in the forces of modernity by which it appears to have been invaded from the outside, see Cohen (2002, 62, 75).

War Office, a fact that Dr. Anderson seizes on to support his diagnosis that “Chris has forgotten his life here because he is discontented with it” (R. West [1918] 1998, 80).

In the end, Jenny decides that Chris’s condition has the effect of clarifying rather than obscuring the truth:

it became plain that if madness means liability to wild error about the world, Chris was not mad. It was our peculiar shame that he had rejected us when he had attained to something saner than sanity. His very loss of memory was a triumph over the limitations of language which prevent the mass of men from making explicit statements about their spiritual relationships. (R. West [1918] 1998, 65)

Chris’s amnesia is a sort of double for Louise Glück’s designation of life after childhood as mere memory (“the rest is memory”). Both condemn as unreliable or inauthentic the stage of life and set of activities—entrance into adult responsibilities and the formation of a household centered on marriage—that in the *Odyssey* is both the indispensable precondition and the cherished goal of the hero’s successful *nostos*.

As the essays in this volume repeatedly demonstrate, the modern world’s tales of uncertain *nostos* take us back to the *Odyssey* and to the difficulties and qualifications that its happy ending has to play down, such as the future journey prophesied for Odysseus. Rebecca West’s use of amnesia to initiate the plot of her novella, and to critique her society for glossing over the true costs of its gracious self-image, prompts a closer look at Homer’s use of amnesia to close down the plot of the *Odyssey*.

Odysseus’ successful return from the Trojan War entails an extraordinary amount of collateral damage, even if the poem tries to present this as unavoidable and justified, beginning with its opening lines, in which the narrator nervously exonerates Odysseus for the loss of his companions, and its introductory divine council, in which Penelope’s suitors are equated with the villainous Aegisthus. Odysseus returns to Ithaca without any of the men who followed him to Troy, and recovers his home by eliminating their stay-at-home counterparts, Penelope’s suitors, an entire generation of young men from Ithaca and its surroundings. In the highly competitive Homeric world, achievement and success are measured in preeminence over others, expressed in part by exclusive possession of a large and magnificent house. To recover his home, Odysseus must eliminate rivals who are not the distant, foreign enemies of Troy, but his own people.

After Odysseus’ return is seemingly complete and news of the suitors’ defeat becomes known, the surviving Ithacans gather. Eupheithes, the father

of one of the leading suitors, spells out the extent of Odysseus' assault on his fellow-citizens:

My friends, it is truly monstrous—What this man has done to our city.
 First, he sailed off with many of our finest men
 And lost the ships and every man aboard.
 Now he has come back and killed many others,
 By far the best of the Cephalenians.
 We must act now, before he runs off to Pylos
 Or takes refuge with the Epean lords of Elis.
 We will be disgraced forever if we don't avenge
 Our sons' and brothers' deaths. . . . (*Od.* 24.426–35, trans. Lombardo)

As Eupheithes' words show, the violent nature of Odysseus' homecoming makes it inherently untenable. The disgruntled Ithacans are acting to forestall what they assume is his inevitable next step, flight to the mainland to escape their vengeance. Other ancient versions of the Odysseus myth include this element of exile as a consequence of the suitors' slaughter, which makes Odysseus' homecoming effectively self-cancelling, ruled out by the means through which he achieves it.¹⁶ In the *Odyssey*, however, divine backing allows Odysseus to stay where he is, and amnesia is the mechanism by which this is brought about.

In an interchange with Athena about whether the battle between Odysseus and the Ithacans should end in ongoing strife or in amity, Zeus declares that Odysseus will be able to keep his place as king of Ithaca.

Now that Odysseus has paid the suitors back,
 Let all parties swear a solemn oath,
 That he will be king of Ithaca all of his days.
 We, for our part, will have them forget (*eklêsin theômen*)
 The killing of their sons and brothers. (*Od.* 24.482–85, trans. Lombardo)

This amnesia on the part of the suitors' relatives makes possible an amnesty imposed by Athena, as Odysseus and his supporters move aggressively against them. Describing that aggression, the poet makes clear what is at stake.

16. Cf. Apollodorus, *Epitome* 7.40 and Plutarch, *Quaestiones graecae* 14, in which Odysseus' exile is the outcome of arbitration to resolve his conflict with the suitors' relatives. For fuller discussion of the many alternative versions of Odysseus' homecoming in antiquity, see Jonathan Burgess's essay in this volume.

They would have killed
 Every last man—not one would have gone home—(*kai ethêkan anostous*)
 Had not Athena, daughter of the Storm Cloud,
 Given voice to a cry that stopped them all cold. . . . (*Od.* 24.528–30,
 trans. Lombardo)

As a necessary consequence of his homecoming, Odysseus must foreclose the homecoming of his opponents, making them *a-nostos*, “without *nostos*.”

Like *The Return of the Soldier*, the *Odyssey* ends with the warrior who has come home going out again to war, resuming the violent struggle on which the maintenance of a conspicuously elegant house, with its extensive estate and desirable mistress, depends. But convenient, divinely imposed forgetfulness on the part of others allows Odysseus to change course and settle back into a secure, timeless, and satisfying peacetime life at home. He achieves the happy ending that Chris Baldry can only long for as he fends off through amnesia the knowledge of what he has instead. In the end, successful *nostos* depends on selective memory that maintains a sharp distinction between the comforts of home and the brutal hazards of the wider world.¹⁷

17. My thanks to Jane Gordon for helpful comments on an earlier draft of this essay.