

November 8, 2009

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

## Back From War, but Not Really Home

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WASHED onto the shores of his island home, after 10 years' absence in a foreign war and 10 years of hard travel in foreign lands, Odysseus, literature's most famous veteran, stares around him: "But now brilliant Odysseus awoke from sleep in his own fatherland, and he did not know it,/having been long away." Additionally, the goddess Athena has cast an obscuring mist over all the familiar landmarks, making "everything look otherwise/than it was." "Ah me," groans Odysseus, "what are the people whose land I have come to this time?"

That sense of dislocation has been shared by veterans returning from the field of war since Homer conjured Odysseus' inauspicious return some 2,800 years ago. Its vexing power was underscored on Thursday, when a military psychiatrist who had been treating the mental scars of soldiers returning from Iraq and Afghanistan went on a shooting rampage at an Army base in Texas.

Who is the veteran, and how does he stand in relation to his native land and people? This question remains relevant to those marching in parades this week for Veterans Day in the United States and Armistice Day in Europe, as well as to the ever-diminishing number of spectators who applaud them. In theory, Veterans Day celebrates an event as starkly unambiguous as victory — survival. In practice, Nov. 11 is clouded with ambiguous symbolism, and has become our most awkward holiday.

The great theme of "The Odyssey" — the return of the war veteran to his home — is the only surviving, and undoubtedly the greatest, epic example of what was evidently a popular theme in ancient times. Another poem, now lost, "Nostoi," or "Returns," was an epic of uncertain authorship that was said to have encompassed five books and traced the homecomings of veterans of the Trojan War like the Greek commander in chief, Agamemnon; his brother, Menelaus; the aged counselor Nestor, the priest Calchas, the hero Diomedes and even Achilles' son, Neoptolemos.

The Greek word nostos, meaning "return home," is the root of our English "nostalgia" (along with algos — "pain" or "sorrow"). The content and character of "Nostoi" is now impossible to gauge; all we know of it comes from a late, possibly fifth-century A.D. summary and stray fragments. Some of the most famous of these traditional veterans' stories, however, have survived in later, non-epic works.

Aeschylus' towering tragedy "Agamemnon," staged in 458 B.C., centers on the king's return from Troy to his palace in Argos, where he is murdered in his bath by his wife, Clytemnestra. Virgil's "Aeneid" famously relates the travails of the heroic Trojan veteran Aeneas, who, following the destruction of his city by the Greek victors, must make a new home in some other, foreign land.

But it is “The Odyssey” that most directly probes the theme of the war veteran’s return. Threaded through this fairytale saga, amid its historic touchstones, are remarkable scenes addressing aspects of the war veteran’s experience that are disconcertingly familiar to our own age. Odysseus returns home to a place he does not recognize, and then finds his homestead overrun with young men who have no experience of war. Throughout his long voyage back, he has reacted to each stranger with elaborate caginess, concocting stories about who he is and what he has seen and done — the real war he keeps to himself.

Midway through the epic, Odysseus relates to a spellbound audience how, in order to obtain guidance for the voyage ahead, it was necessary to descend to Hades. There, among the thronging souls of men and women dead and past, he confronted his comrades of the war — Agamemnon, Achilles, Patroclus, Antilochus and Ajax — robust heroes of epic tales now reduced to unhappy shades who haunt his story.

Similarly, while Odysseus is lost at sea, his son, Telemachus, embarks on a voyage of discovery, also seeking out his father’s former comrades, but those who lived to return. First of these is old Nestor, a veteran of many campaigns, now at home in sandy Pylos. No mortal man could “tell the whole of it,” says Nestor of the years at Troy, where “all who were our best were killed.” In Sparta, Menelaus, whose wife, Helen, was the cause of the war, is haunted by the losses: “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.”

Odysseus’ own memories are more potent. Amongst the kindly Phaiakians, who give him hospitality toward the end of his hard voyage, he listens to the court poet sing of the Trojan War’s “famous actions/of men on that venture.” Odysseus, taking his mantle in his hands, “drew it over his head and veiled his fine features/shamed for the tears running down his face.”

And most significantly, epic tradition hints at the dilemmas of military commemoration. In “The Iliad,” Achilles must choose between *kleos* or *nostos* — glory or a safe return home. By dying at Troy, Achilles was assured of undying fame as the greatest of all heroes. His choice reflects an uneasy awareness that it is far easier to honor the dead soldier than the soldier who returns. Time-tested and time-honored, the commemoration rites we observe each Memorial Day — the parades and speeches and graveside prayers and offerings — represent a satisfying formula of remembrance by the living for the dead that was already referred to as “ancient custom” by Thucydides in the fifth century B.C.

The commemoration of the veteran — the survivor who did not fall on the field of war — is less starkly defined. The returned soldier, it is hoped, will grow old and die among us, like Nestor, in whose time “two generations of mortal men had perished.” In our own times, the generation born in the optimistic aftermath of World War II has already encountered veterans of both world wars, the Korean War, the Vietnam War, the Persian Gulf war and our wars in Afghanistan and Iraq — and still has several decades of martial possibilities in reserve. As the earlier of those wars recede into the past, their old soldiers fade away; and thus, commemorative rites for the veteran — by definition, the survivor — also tend to end, perversely, at graves.

How to commemorate the living veteran? Again, some guidance can be found in epic, the crucible of heroic mores. Old Nestor, the iconographic veteran, is a teller of many tales of the many battles he once waged. “In my time I have dealt with better men than/you are, and never once did they disregard me,” he tells the

entire Greek army in “The Iliad.” “I fought single-handed, yet against such men no one/could do battle.” Although he is a somewhat comic figure, his speeches are deadly earnest; Old Nestor knows that his is the only voice to keep memory of such past campaigns alive.

One suspects such lengthy recitations are rare today. Rarer still is the respectful audience enjoyed by Nestor; impatience with such reminiscences began well before our age. “Menelaus bold/waxed garrulous, and sacked a hundred Troys/”Twixt noon and supper,” wrote Rupert Brooke, cynically, during the years leading up to a later Great War.

Today, veterans’ tales are more likely to be safeguarded in books and replicated in movies than self-narrated to a respectful throng. Detailed knowledge of the experience in which a veteran’s memories were forged is thus made common. To learn these stories is both civilian duty and commemoration. Death on the field and the voyage home — both are epic.

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