

Poetry Porch: Prose

“Odd Issues from Ithaca” by Julia Griffin

Featuring two poems:

“Anagnorisis”

“Odysseus’ Cat”

And one by Michael Collier: “Argos”

Poets find inexhaustible inspiration in *The Odyssey*, or memories of it – even remote ones. In Derek Walcott’s great Caribbean epic, *Omeros*, the poet himself meets Homer and offends him by admitting that he never read the poem “all the way through”; nevertheless, he says, “I was the freshest of your readers”. The line calls up the special pleasure of thinking about the poem, which, for poets, grows into writing both about it and with it. The poem is its own clear-edged world, with its brisk pace, its emphasis on the public and declarative; this gives it a special appeal to introspective lyric poets, who find in it so many little corners to colonize and privatize. Circe and Calypso, the Sirens and Penelope have long been popular subjects for lyrics; recently, even the hanged servant girls have found their laureate (Margaret Atwood, of course). And,

going one step further down from women in the Homeric hierarchy, poets have pulled out the figure of Argos, Odysseus' dog.

On my sonnet "Anagnorisis," my inspiration for this poem was the dog's instant recognition. Odysseus is recognized by two figures, a goddess and a dog – neither dependent on the process of discursive reasoning that distinguishes all the humans.

Anagnorisis

The Goddess knew, of course. She rolled her eyes
As he began a quick, impromptu chat
About himself. "Come on now, save the lies,
My little alter ego." That was that.
The humans needed more. The cautious Prince
Was coaxed into belief; the Queen was led
To share the lead, articulating hints
About the central fixture of their bed.
The aged Nurse said nothing, only knelt
Before the tub and searched his ragged hide
With her wise fingers: through the wound she felt
The child beneath. And all the while, outside,
Close to the gates, lay Argus – who alone
(Besides the deathless gods) had simply known.

Michael Collier's poem "Argos" takes the dog as a symbol for the experience of mature reading. The reader who races past the Argos passage, en route to Odysseus' revenge, misreads Odysseus himself and loses the richness of the poem, which allows the hero his moment of private grief. Collier imagines his reader re-reading the poem and grieving both for Argos and for the losses incurred over a lifetime.

Argos

By Michael Collier

If you think Odysseus too strong and brave to cry,
that the god-loved, god-protected hero
when he returned to Ithaka disguised,
intent to check up on his wife

and candidly apprise the condition of his kingdom
so that he steeled himself resolutely against surprise
and came into his land cold-hearted, clear-eyed,
ready for revenge, then you read Homer as I first did,

too fast, knowing you'd be tested for plot
and major happenings, skimming forward to the massacre,
the shambles engineered with Telémakhos
by turning beggar and taking up the challenge of the bow.

Reading this way you probably missed the tear
shed by Odysseus for his decrepit dog, Argos,
who's nothing but a bag of bones asleep atop
a refuse pile outside the palace gates. The dog is not

a god in earthly clothes but in its own disguise
of death and destitution is more like Ithaka itself.
And if you returned home after twenty years
you might weep for the hunting dog

you long ago abandoned, rising up from the garbage
of its bed, its instinct of recognition still intact,
enough will to wag its tail, lift its head, but little more.
Years ago you had the chance to read that page more closely

but instead you raced ahead, like Odysseus, cocksure
with your plan. Now the past is what you study,
where guile and speed give over to grief so you might stop
and desiring to weep, weep more deeply.

The Ledge, Houghton Mifflin Co., 2000

Thinking about the faithful Argos in a rather lighter spirit, I would say that
Odysseus is not really the kind of man I would associate with a dog. He seems to me

the quintessential cat man: independent, resourceful, secretive. How would a cat have reacted to this intense little scene? I did my best in another sonnet: “Odysseus’ Cat”

Odysseus’ Cat

For Maria

Dozing across the sun-baked pigsty roof,
She watched the beggar from one rheumy eye,
Feeling no need for movement, or for proof.
So he was back. And dirty. By and by,
When the thatch cooled and she had had her nap
And done some hunting (silently, alone),
She might appear – though this was not a lap
She’d care to settle on: all dirt and bone.
She stretched her claws. No doubt there’d be a price,
With compensations: exile from the bed,
Rules and routines, less spillage, fewer mice,
No easy suitors, peace again instead.
Still warm enough, she yawned and licked a limb,
Giving the man no sign. A match for him.