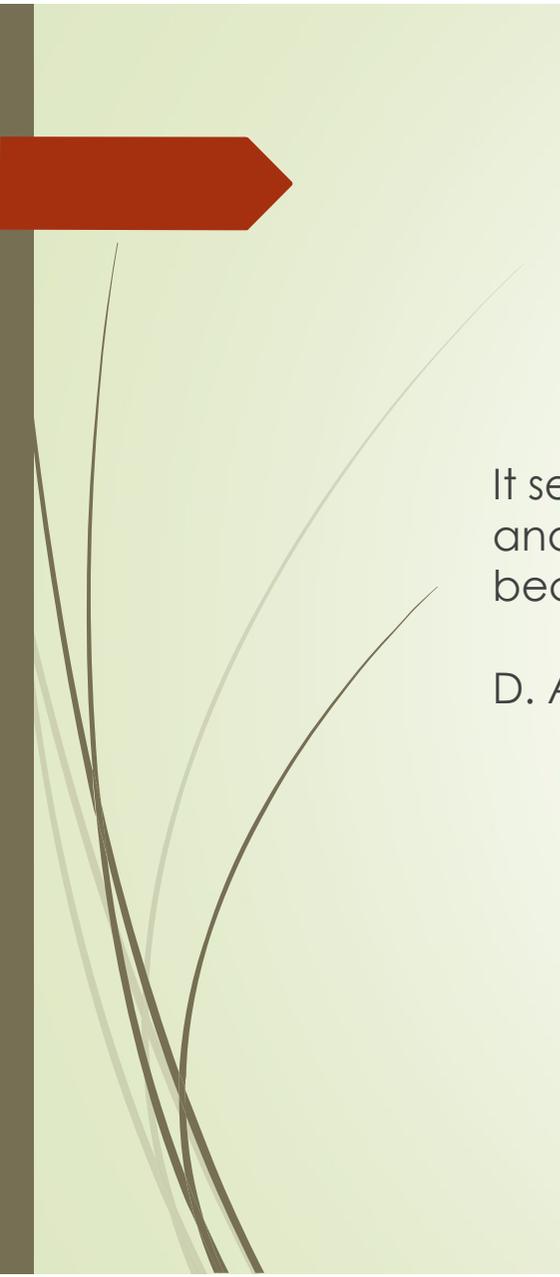




# Mythical motifs in literature

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It seems to me that an indignant insistence at every turn on what is separate and different about us, at the expense of what we have in common, is becoming the scourge of our times.'

D. Aaronovitch, The Times, Comment, Thursday 30 March



## Joachim du Bellay, *Les Regrets*, 1558

Heureux qui, comme Ulysse, a fait un beau voyage  
Ou comme cestuy là qui conquit la toison,  
Et puis est retourné, plein d'usage et raison,  
Vivre entre ses parents e reste de son age!

Quand revoiray-je, hélas, de mon petit village  
Fumer la cheminée: et en quelle saison  
Revoiray-je le clos de ma pauvre maison,  
Qui m'est une province, et beaucoup d'avantage?

Plus me plaist le sejour qu'on basty mes ayeux,  
Que des palais Romains le front audacieux:  
Plus que le marbre dur me plaist l'ardoise fine,

Plus mon Loyre Gaulois, que Tybre Latin,  
Plus mon petit Lyré, que le mont Palatin,  
Plus que l'air marin la douceur Angevine.



## George Seferis, 'Upon a foreign verse' (1931)

Happy is he who has made the journey of Odysseus.  
Happy if at the setting out he has felt sturdy a love's rigging  
spread through his body like the veins in which the blood hums.

Of a love with an indissoluble rhythm, unconquerable as music and eternal  
Because it was born when we were born, and as for whether it dies when we die, we do  
not know, and nor does anyone else. [...]

And there appears before me again and again the apparition of Odysseus, eyes red with  
the wave's salt  
And the maturing desire to see once more the smoke emerging from the warmth of his  
house and his dog that has grown old waiting at the door.

He stands tall, whispering through his white beard words of our tongue as it was spoken  
three thousand years ago.  
He extends a palm knotted by rope and tiller, with a skin worked by dry north wind, burning  
heat and snow.



## George Seferis (continued)

He is the great Odysseus, he who ordered the Wooden Horse to be built, and so the Achaeans won Troy.

I imagine that he is on his way to instruct me how to make a Wooden Horse so that I can win my own Troy.

For he speaks with humility and calmly, effortlessly, as if he knew me as a father, [...]

He tells me of the difficulty and pain of feeling the sails of your ship swollen with memory and your soul's becoming the tiller.

And of your being alone, dark in the night and ungoverned like chaff on the threshing-floor. [...]

He speaks – I still see his hands, that knew how to test the mermaid was fitted to the prow,

Granting me the waveless blue sea in the heart of winter.

tr. David Ricks



## Ezra Pound, *Hugh Selwyn Mauberley* (1920)

Died some, pro patria, non dulce et non  
decor  
walked eye deep in hell  
believing in old men's lies, then unbelieving  
came home to a lie, [...]

There died a myriad,  
And the best, among them,  
For an old bitch gone in the teeth,  
For a botched civilization,

Charm, smiling at the good mouth,  
Quick eyes gone under earth's lid,

For two dross of broken statues,  
For a few thousand battered books.

Then on an oar  
Read this:

"I was  
And I no more exist;  
"Here drifted  
"An hedonist."



## George Seferis, 'Argonauts', from *Mythistorema* (1935)

[...]

They were good, the companions, they didn't complain  
about the work or the thirst or the frost,  
they had the bearing of trees and waves  
that accept the wind and the rain  
accept the night and the sun  
without changing in the midst of change.  
They were fine, whole days  
they sweated with lowered eyes  
Breathing in rhythm  
And their blood reddened a submissive skin. [...]

The companions died one by one,  
With lowered eyes. Their oars  
Mark the place where they sleep on the shore.

No one remembers them. Justice.



## Archibald MacLeish, *Elpenor* 1933

It is I, Odysseus – Elpenor –  
Oarsman: death is between us.

Three days I have waited you,  
Coming my own way,  
Not your way,

(The oar-handle hard to the nipple):  
Not being come in the ship, [...]

And the place I believe to be Hell from the  
Many dead and the pelts of

Great captains, emperors,  
Princes, leaders of men



## MacLeish (continued)

For myself – if you ask me –  
There's no way back over sea water,

Nor by earth's oaks, nor beyond them:  
There is only the way on.

You had best, trusting neither to  
Charts nor to prophets but seamanship,  
Take to open sea,

Till you come to a clean place  
With the smell of the pine in your faces

[...]

## Takis Sinopoulos, 'Elpenor', from *Watershed* (1951)

[...]

It was one of our company who came upon him,  
and not the eldest among us: Look, that must be Elpenor.  
Quickly we turned our eyes. How strange that we remembered,  
for our memory had dried up like a river in summer.

It was Elpenor truly by the black cypress trees,  
blinded by sun and too much thinking,  
digging the sand with the stubs of his fingers.

And then I cried out to him with a joyful voice: Elpenor,  
Elpenor, how have you suddenly found your way to this land,  
for your end had come this past winter with a black iron  
thrust through your ribs, and we saw the thick blood on your lips  
as your heart dried up by the side of the oarlocks;

And we planted you with a broken oar by the shore's edge  
That you might hear the wind's murmur and the sea's roar  
How can you be so alive now? How did you find your way to this land,  
blind with bitterness and too much thinking?

[...]

tr. Kimon Friar



Katerina Angelaki-Rooke, 'Penelope says',  
from *The Scattered Papers of Penelope* (1977)

I wasn't weaving, I wasn't knitting  
I was writing something  
erasing and being erased  
under the weight of the word  
because perfect expression is blocked  
when the inside is pressured by pain.  
And while absence is the theme of my life  
– absence from life –  
tears and the natural suffering of the  
deprived body  
appear on the page. [...]

You will never be here  
to water the flowers  
the old ceiling dripping  
under the weight of the rain  
with my personality  
dissolving into yours  
quietly, autumn like...

Your choice heart  
– choice because I have chosen it –  
will always be elsewhere  
and I will cut  
with words  
the threads that bind me  
to the particular man  
I long for  
until Odysseus becomes the symbol of Nostalgia  
Sailing the seas of every mind.  
[...]

tr. Karen Van Dyck



## Yannis Ritsos, 'Penelope's despair', from *Repetitions*

It wasn't that she didn't recognize him in the light of the hearth: it wasn't the beggar's rags, the disguise – no. The signs were clear: the scar on his knee, the pluck, the cunning in his eye. Frightened, her back against the wall, she searched for an excuse, a little time, so she wouldn't have to answer, give herself away. Was it for him, then, that she'd used up twenty years, twenty years of waiting and dreaming, for this miserable blood soaked, white-bearded man? She collapsed voiceless into a chair, slowly studied the slaughtered suitors on the floor as though seeing her own desires dead there. And she said 'Welcome', hearing her voice sound foreign, distant. In the corner, her loom covered the ceiling with a trellis of shadows; and all the birds she'd woven with bright red thread in green foliage, now on this night of the return, suddenly turned ashen and black, flying low on the flat sky of her final enduring.

Leros, 21 September 1968

tr. Edmund Keeley



## Goethe, *Conversations with Eckermann* (about *Weltliteratur*)

Not that the nations shall think alike, but that they shall learn how to understand each other, and, if they do not care to love one another, at least they will learn to tolerate one another.