

Article

Odysseus and the Siren Song of Knowledge

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Abstract

This article rereads Odysseus's encounter with the Sirens in the *Odyssey* through the lens of sound, arguing that the episode stages a foundational tension between knowledge and alterity in Western thought. Drawing on Emmanuel Levinas's notion of the "temptation of temptation," the essay shows how Odysseus's famous stratagem—hearing the Sirens while bound to the mast—models a form of mediated proximity that allows sound to be collected without ethical exposure. Close readings of Homeric Greek, especially the Sirens' claim to knowledge of ὅσσα γένηται, reveal that their song gestures not merely toward retrospective epic knowledge but toward natality and coming-into-being, a dimension Homer pointedly withholds. By placing the Sirens alongside early colonial soundscapes and modern reflections on cartography, the article argues that Western listening practices privilege mastery over vulnerability. Against this tradition, the Sirens' unheard song marks a suppressed alternative: listening as openness, risk, and ethical relation.

Keywords: *Odyssey*; Sirens; listening; sound and knowledge; alterity; Emmanuel Levinas

1. Introduction

Halfway through Homer's *Odyssey*, the Achaean queen Circe warns Odysseus of the dangers he and his men will face upon leaving her island. Taking him by the hand, she first tells him of the Sirens, a pair of birdwomen who sing beautifully from the shore and lure passing sailors to their death. She then describes the six-headed Scylla and the whirlpool Charybdis, the two monsters who guard the Strait of Messina. The third and final warning is to stay away from the island of Thrinacia, where Circe's father, the sun god Helios, allows his fat cattle to graze.

Odysseus inevitably looks for strategies to survive the dangers described by Circe while also drawing some benefit from each encounter. In the case of the Sirens, however, Circe offers him a strategy of her own:

Whoever in ignorance (ἄιδρις) draws near to them and hears the Sirens' voice, his wife and little children never stand beside him and rejoice at his homecoming; instead, the Sirens beguile him with their clear-toned song, as they sit in a meadow, and about them is a great heap of bones of moldering men, and round the bones the skin is shriveling. But row past them, and anoint the ears of your comrades with sweet wax, which you have kneaded, for fear any of the rest may hear. But if you yourself have a will to listen (ἀτὰρ αὐτὸς ἀκούμεν αἶ κ' ἐθέλησθα), let them bind you in the swift ship hand and foot upright in the step of the mast, and let the ropes be made fast at the ends to the mast itself, that with delight (τερπόμενος) you may listen to the voice of the two Sirens. And if you shall explore and command your comrades to free you, then let them bind you with yet more bonds. (Homer 1995, pp. 450–51)



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Circe tells Odysseus how to pass the Sirens safely, but she also provides him with a scheme to hear their song without risking his life. Strapped to the mast of his ship and his men's ears packed with wax, Odysseus can get close to the Sirens while remaining far from any real danger. It is a famous example of heroic perspicacity that Odysseus takes Circe's advice; nonetheless, the broader implications of his brush with disaster—and the full scope of the Sirens' power—are also commonly overlooked.

The scene itself is a crossroads. Homer predetermines Odysseus's choice, of course, but a close reading of the encounter nonetheless indicates two forking paths. The first of these leads to knowledge and power, while the second leads to something much deeper and mysterious.

2. Odysseus Rex

It is worth beginning with the observation that Odysseus's feat of eavesdropping has become something of an archetype for modern Western philosophical inquiry. In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, for example, Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno read the episode as an allegory for modern bourgeois society. Framing Odysseus as the rational "Master who has others work for him," they argue that he can aestheticize pleasure to some degree but cannot fully experience it; as for the sailors, these stand in for workers structurally excluded from all pleasure and transcendence (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972, pp. 59–60). Emmanuel Levinas has gone as far as to frame Odysseus's encounter with the Sirens as an early (even formative) example of "the temptation of temptation" (Levinas 1994). As he presents it (with Odysseus squarely in mind), Western knowledge rests on peculiar footing—a kind of distance in proximity.

Levinas introduced the idea of "the temptation of temptation" in a 1964 talk given at the annual colloquium series at the École Normale Israélite Orientale in Paris, where he served as director. He opens his exposition by examining a Biblical passage that had long perplexed Jewish scholars. In Exodus 24:7, the children of Israel claim that they will "do and hear" all that Yahweh has asked. In Hebrew, the phrase reads *נעשה ונשמע* (*na'aseh v'nishmah*), and more than one commentator has argued that the conjunction between the two verbs implies seriality—that is, that the Israelites will first do what Yahweh has asked and later hear or come to understand it. It is, according to these commentators, a statement of the deep faith and commitment that the Jews eventually come to demonstrate during their time in the desert. They do not yet know or understand what God wants of them, but they have already resolved to do it. They will leap, as it were, before they look.

For Levinas, who takes the seriality of the phrase seriously, the stance adopted by the Jews in Exodus 24:7 drives a wedge between them and what would become the West. As he sees it, Western thought—even with the compelling drama of personal salvation that Christianity offers—remains distant from the world, even as it seeks obsessively to experience and understand it. It requires experience mediated by prophylaxis. To be clear, it is not a conscious attitude of ironic distance or cynicism; rather, it is a model of knowledge and experience itself:

Westerners, opposed to a limited and overly well-defined existence, want to taste everything themselves, want to travel the universe. But there is no universe without the circles of Hell! In the whole as a totality, evil is added to good. To traverse the whole, to touch the depth of being, is to awaken the ambiguity coiled inside it. But temptation makes nothing irreparable. The evil which completes the whole threatens to destroy everything, but the tempted ego is still outside. It can listen to the song of the sirens without compromising the return to its island. It can brush past evil, know it without succumbing to it, experience it without experiencing it, try it without living it, take risks in security. (Levinas 1994, p. 33)

To “take risks in security” is to explore and come to know without commitment, to contemplate something closely while maintaining one’s distance. As Levinas sees it, Westerners tend to gather information, assess, and then (and only then) decide what to do—and the decision is often enough to gather more information and engage in further assessment. There is obvious prudence in this approach, but it also comes with a price: we study the world while remaining aloof from it. Odysseus is an early champion of this—a man compelled to hear the Sirens but unwilling to risk having their song pull him overboard. As Circe makes clear, he has the option to place wax in his ears and sail past the Sirens along with his crew. This would ensure his safe passage while leaving intact the mystery (and danger) of their song. Why does Odysseus not choose to do this? Why does he not join his crew? The answer, it turns out, is straightforward: he must survive and return to Ithaka, but he also must know. These twin compulsions constitute the dark heart of Odysseus’s heroism. Homer introduces him, after all, as “shifty” (πολύτροπον) in the first line of the *Odyssey* and then as a “man of many devices” (πολυμήχανός) not long afterward (Homer 1995, pp. 12–13, 26–27). How else to explain his undercover return to Ithaka, disguised as a beggar to gather intelligence before revealing himself even to his father? Or his interrogation of the hapless Dolon followed by the murder of the sleeping Thracians in book ten of the *Iliad*? Odysseus is an eminently Western hero, according to Levinas, and a model for many heroes to come. But is this how a person should act? More to the (philosophical) point: what sort of world emerges from Odysseus’s example?

The world built on Odysseus’s heroism is an unquestionably powerful one, an empire of knowledge. We study, we theorize, we test our hypotheses, we build frameworks for further understanding. We scheme, we argue, we sell. We travel to the moon and back. Nothing remains outside of our power to conceptualize, not even the origins of the universe itself. Dolphins are mammals, polio is a virus, and Eswatini is an absolute monarchy. You are human, your cat is not. This is a mighty world, and one quite sure of itself. Held securely to the mast of our ship, we hear and see everything. We also find mystery in this world, but we remain distant from it—nor can it be any other way. The temptation of temptation is a game that precludes alterity and closeness, and it accomplishes this by always already having assimilated experience, distilling it into something potable and nourishing. As Levinas argues in *Totality and Infinity* (published only three years prior to his 1964 ENIO talk): “To know amounts to grasping being out of nothing or reducing it to nothing, removing from it its alterity” (Levinas 1979, p. 44). If the Other (in Odysseus’s case, the Sirens) calls into question the “spontaneity” of the self and places it in danger by its very presence, the temptation of temptation (which Levinas equates with Western forms of knowledge) provides an ex post facto remedy: it rescues the self from its relation of proximity to the Other by quickly theorizing away the Other’s alterity. In spatio-physical terms, the self may remain in its original place; however, it is now close to the Other only in the way that a person consulting a nautical map can be said to be near the sea (Levinas 1979, p. 43). The temptation of temptation protects the self by removing the alterity with which the Other threatens it by its very presence. In Book 12 of the *Odyssey*, Homer poetically reduces the Sirens to monsters of temptation before producing a stratagem by which their monstrosity—their capacity to threaten Odysseus’s spontaneity and even his very life—can be checked and mapped. What Levinas wishes to argue is that there is no alterity in this map-world, and thus there can be no proximity. It is worth wondering what exactly Odysseus hears as he sails by the Sirens, at least beyond their call to listen.

3. A Quiet Place

There is a historical scene that closely resembles Odysseus’s encounter with the Sirens. In late April 1500, a large maritime expedition from Portugal to India veered off course far

enough that it struck land at what is now Porto Seguro, Brazil. The captain of the expedition, Pedro Álvares Cabral, decided to take advantage of the accident and go ashore with a landing party to investigate what they had found. A member of the crew named Pêro Vaz de Caminha would accompany him and subsequently write a letter to Portuguese king Manuel I to describe what he had seen. Vaz de Caminha's letter is the earliest European account of Brazil, and it is popularly referred to as Brazil's "birth certificate." What does Vaz de Caminha see at Porto Seguro? More importantly, what does he hear? At first, practically nothing:

Men came to the beach two or three at a time so that when our boat reached the mouth of the river, there were 18 or 20 of them, all dark-skinned and naked—with nothing whatsoever to cover their privates. They carried bows and arrows. They approached our boat with their weapons at the ready, and Nicolão Coelho signaled them to put down their bows, which they did. We were unable to speak with them or come to any useful understanding due to the sound of the sea breaking on the coast.

[Acodirã pela praya homee[n]s quando dous quando tres de maneira que quando o batel chegou aa boca do rrio heram aly xbii ou xx homee[n]s pardos todos nuus sem nhuu[m]a cousa que lhes cobrisse suas vergonhas. Traziam arcos nas mãos e suas seetas. Vijnham todos rrijos pera o batel e nicolao coelho lhes fez sinal que posesem os arcos. E eles os poseram. Aly nom pode deles auer fala ne[m] ente[n] dimento que aproueitasse polo mar quebrar na costa.] ([Vaz de Caminha 1500](#), f. 1^v)

What Vaz de Caminha sees at Porto Seguro are roughly two dozen Tupinambá men with bows and arrows. He also sees that they are naked (he will spend even more time lingering over the nudity of Tupinambá women), a distinction that for sixteenth-century Portuguese readers would point at once to savagery and prelapsarian innocence. What he hears, however, is only the sound of waves hitting the shore, a kind of natural white noise that precludes communication.

Later in his letter to Manuel I, Vaz de Caminha recounts a scene of dancing and music on the far shore of the Buranhém River:

Beyond the river there were many of them, and some were dancing and playing in front of the others without holding hands and doing it well. Diogo Dias, a tax official from Sacavém and a fun-loving man, went across the river and brought one of our pipers with him along with his instrument. He then joined them dancing and took them by the hand, and they danced and laughed and followed him very well to the sound of the pipe. After dancing, Dias showed them several quick turns on the ground and a somersault, which surprised them and made them laugh. With all this, he held their attention and pleased them; however, they soon took fright (as mountain creatures do) and went away inland.

[Alem do rrio amdauã mujtos deles dançando e folgando huu[n]s ante outros sem se tomarem pelas mãos e faziãno bem. Pasouse emtam aalem do rrio diego dijs alxe que foy de sacauem que he home[m] gracioso e de prazer e levou consigo huu[m] gayteiro noso cõ sua gaita e meteose cõ eles a dançar tomandoos pelas mãos e eles folgauam e rriam e amdauam cõ ele muy bem ao soõ da gaita. Depois de dançarem fezlhe aly amdando no chaão mujtas voltas ligeiras e salto rreal deque se eles espantauam e rriam e folgauã mujto. E com quanto os cõ aquilo muito segurou e afaagou. Tomauam logo huu[m]a esqujueza coma monteses e foranse pera cjma.] ([Vaz de Caminha 1500](#), f. 7^v)

Here again, there is no sound—at least from the Tupinambá. They dance, but Vaz de Caminha does not mention their music or singing, as if the whole performance were a silent pantomime. The only music here—the only sound, really—comes from a Portuguese piper. Dias takes the Tupinambá by the hand and leads them in a dance, but it bears asking to what extent there is any real contact between them. What hands does Dias touch and hold? Are they the hands of an Other capable of interrupting or even placing in doubt his enjoyment of the scene? Of course they are, but the temptation of temptation quickly intervenes to mitigate the risk of contact and contagion. For Dias, these are native hands, strange hands, naked hands—and they remain distant to him by means of the conceptual map he constructs of them.¹ There is no Other, and so there is only the simulacrum of proximity, a map.

In the end, the Portuguese would keep their distance just well enough to carve out a Brazil-sized piece of South America and claim dominion over it. They secured the Tupinambá and other Indigenous groups to the land (as extensions of nature itself), brought in millions of enslaved African laborers to extract resources, and eventually built a vast commercial empire out of sugar and gold. Through generations of miscegenation and coexistence, the Portuguese would adopt closeness as their imperial brand; but it is important to study the limits of that closeness, the risks the Portuguese—like Odysseus—would not take. In the end, the Portuguese Empire is an empire of maps, not earth and sea.

What is the effect that maps have on our world? At what point does our need for conceptualization—and more broadly, to understand—preclude any possibility of closeness or ethics? Franco Farinelli speaks at (book) length of the order that emerges from our reduction of the earth—a labyrinth of interconnected peoples, stories, fantasies, nature, and much else—to flat, conceptualized space. Building on ideas articulated by early nineteenth-century geographer Carl Ritter, Farinelli criticizes the “cartographic dictatorship” that emerges from classical Greece, a conceptual order that reduces the three-dimensional, rhizomatic chaos (and alterity) of the world to a neat grid of measured-out lines (Farinelli 2018, p. 27). For Farinelli, Christopher Columbus does not demonstrate that the world is a sphere so much as he reduces that sphere to a flat, plottable map:

Neither space nor time exists, things endure, in the world of Columbus, dominated instead by the spatio-temporal abstraction. [...] Things are exactly the opposite of what is often still believed today: the impact of Columbus was not by any means that of making the image of the Earth spherical when it was previously believed to be flat, but of transforming the whole Earth, from the sphere that it had been believed to be, into a gigantic table. (Farinelli 2018, pp. 20–21)

An expert in dead reckoning (and perhaps little else), Columbus is for Farinelli an heir to Odysseus. He sails along, past, and through the Atlantic world, reducing what he sees and hears to points on a grid—a map. As when Odysseus and his men defeat Polyphemus through subtle trickery (telling the one-eyed giant that Odysseus is “nobody” so that others will not come to his aid), Columbus attempts to take power over the world he has encountered by mapping it. For Farinelli, our maps do not represent the earth so much as the earth has come to take the form of our maps.

Jorge Luis Borges, improvising a bit on a conceit first rolled out by Lewis Carroll, examines the order of maps in his well-known micronarrative “Del rigor en la ciencia,” (On exactitude in science). In the story, the scientists of a fictional empire construct a life-sized map of their territory. Their zeal for mapmaking wanes over time, and they eventually discard the enormous map, leaving bits and fragments to blow around the dry, Western periphery. Once the very bleeding edge of science, the life-sized map becomes reduced to loose shreds that serve as makeshift shelters for animals and the poor (Borges 1967).

One way to read Borges's story is to consider that subsequent generations did not discard the map so much as they simply internalized it. Who needs the physical map, after all, when its logic—down to the last sidewalk and park bench—resides in our minds and bodies? In this sense, the map's inutility stems not from its failure so much as its success. It becomes habitus. Like a flashcard (handwritten or digital), the map ceases to be of use once its information becomes part of our muscle memory. In this way, the temptation of temptation becomes a durable predisposition rather than something that must be continuously referred to and referenced.

In Carroll's version of the story, the map eventually becomes more real than the world it is meant to represent, in a sort of literary analog to Farinelli's critique. Halfway through Carroll's final novel, *Sylvie and Bruno Concluded*, the reader meets Mein Herr, an old man with a lingering enthusiasm for cartography:

"That's another thing we've learned from your Nation," said Mein Herr, "map-making. But we've carried it much further than you. What do you consider the largest map that would be really useful?"

"About six inches to the mile."

"Only six inches!" exclaimed Mein Herr. "We very soon got to six yards to the mile. Then we tried a hundred yards to the mile. And then came the grandest idea of all! We actually made a map of the country, on the scale of a mile to the mile!"

"Have you used it much?" I enquired.

"It has never been spread out, yet," said Mein Herr: "the farmers objected: they said it would cover the whole country, and shut out the sunlight! So we now use the country itself, as its own map, and I assure you it does nearly as well. (Carroll 1893, p. 169)

Here the world itself becomes an imperfect map, a useful simulacrum that "does nearly as well" as its two-dimensional representation. Carroll means for this exchange to be humorous, but it is hard not to view it without a certain amount of horror: Mein Herr's people wisely listened to the farmers and shelved their grand map, only to transform the physical world into a flawed shadow of their conceptual one. Reading the transition from nineteenth-century idealism to twentieth-century textualism as Richard Rorty does, it is difficult not to feel a certain kinship with Mein Herr, as if our teachers (from Arthur Schopenhauer to Jacques Derrida) had read Carroll himself as a map (Rorty 1981).

When all has become mapped, it bears repeating, there can be no closeness. This is so because there can no longer be any meaningful difference. In his reading of Exodus 24:7, Levinas points to a fundamental split between Jewish thought and its Western counterpart based on the latter's need to reduce alterity—dangerous, infinite, even disastrous—to something recognizable and manageable. More recently, it has become a commodity, a political instrument. If the Jews choose to serve God without first inspecting his demands from a safe distance, Western subjects choose to supplant God by systematically plotting the world, rendering everything in it instrumental or useful in some way:

The priority of knowledge is the temptation of temptation. The act, in its naivete is made to lose its innocence. Now it will arise only after calculation, after a careful weighing of the pros and cons. It will no longer be either free or generous or dangerous. It will no longer leave the other in its otherness but will always include it in the whole, approaching it, as they say today, in a historical perspective, at the horizon of the All. From this stems the inability to recognize the other person as other person, as outside all calculation, as neighbor, as first come. (Levinas 1994, p. 35)

Marie-Hélène Gauthier argues that in this world “all alterity is approached through a horizon that is already given and thus poses no danger to the subject” (Gauthier 2021, p. 19). It is a totalized world, empty of real danger. Far from the Negev and well beyond the voice of God, we meet the Other with a plan (or map) already in hand, and our contact is mediated by frameworks and taxonomies (raw/cooked, oppressed/oppressor, etc.) that serve by design to keep us at a distance, safe from contagion and danger. We may come to understand the Other in some sense, but we refuse to lower ourselves to serve them or even listen. We are Goethe at the Roman carnival, piqued by the madness of others, but sure of our own sobriety (Goethe 1913, p. 543).

It is fair to say that Odysseus does not hear the Sirens’ song so much as he collects it. He runs off with it in much the same way that Actaeon tries to escape with his own mental image of a naked Artemis. The difference, of course, is that Actaeon accidentally spies Artemis bathing and is killed. Odysseus, on the other hand, hears the Sirens’ song through an artful ruse and escapes with no penalty. Quite the opposite, in fact. In this, Odysseus paves the way for future acts of heroic collection, for future maps.

For Levinas, the Odyssean model of detached proximity—whereby one studies the world and tirelessly strives to form concepts and theories of everything and everyone, to remove every veil of mystery—is a foundational principle of Western philosophy. As he puts it: “philosophy [...] can be defined as the subordination of any act to the knowledge [savoir] that one may have of that act” (Levinas 1994, p. 35). Our philosophers wish to understand good and evil, but they are tempted by neither; they are merely tempted by the temptation to be a saint or a murderer, as if indirectly or in a mediated way. They play with the trolley problem as children might play with plastic soldiers, far from the grieving families and broken necks. Levinas’s own reference to the Sirens is no coincidence, given that Odysseus is an archetype of this stance. As his heroic descendants, we carry on with the process of collection. We hear and we are tempted by the temptation to do.

4. My Mother Is a Bird

Turning to the Sirens themselves, Circe underscores the allure of their “clear-toned song” (ἁοιδὴ λιγυρή). What she leaves out, however, is the fact that they are also a source of universal knowledge. Homer is clear about this. When Odysseus finally reaches the Sirens, they call out to him:

Come hither on your way, renowned Odysseus, great glory of the Achaeans; stop your ship that you may listen to the voice of us two. For never yet has any man rowed past the island in his black ship until he has heard the sweet voice from our lips; instead, he has joy of it, and goes his way a wiser man. For we know all the toils that in wide Troy the Argives and Trojans endured through the will of the gods, and we know all things that come to pass upon the fruitful earth (ἴδμεν δ’ ὅσσα γένηται ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρῃ). (Homer 1995, pp. 460–63)

The Sirens provide Odysseus with beautiful singing, but they also promise him access to knowledge of all that has “come to pass” (ὅσσα γένηται) in the world. They are, in a sense, immortal epic poets who recount the past in seductive, melodic stereo. The problem, of course, is that getting close enough to hear their song (and learn what they know) typically comes at the cost of one’s own life.

For most modern readers of Homer, the Sirens are a pair of feminine monsters inclined toward the sea, blanketing a portion of it with song. The sailors who hear the singing become enchanted (θέλω) and are overcome by a need to approach the shore, to hear the singing up close. They dive overboard and quickly drown, their bodies washing up on the shore. From this perspective, the Sirens are a trap to be avoided. Their singing produces a beautiful but lethal madness. To hear them is to die, unless one is Odysseus.

The knowledge that the Sirens offer is likely irresistible to Odysseus, who is still unsure about many things, including what awaits him in Ithaka. Has Penelope remained faithful? Is Telemachus still alive? Is there even a home to which he might return? This is all crucial information for Odysseus, given his obsessive reliance on advance intelligence and deceit as weapons of war. Classicists have pointed out, however, that the sort of knowledge promised by the Sirens is itself a trap, encoded as it is in language strongly associated with the *Iliad*. Pietro Pucci was likely the first to argue this, suggesting that “the Sirens’ conspicuous use of Iliadic traditional phrases [...] forces upon the listener the realization that they mean to define Odysseus as the Odysseus of the *Iliad*” (Pucci 1979, p. 124). Writing nearly two decades later, Seth L. Schein builds on Pucci’s argument, suggesting that the Sirens tempt Odysseus with Iliadic praise (rather than universal knowledge) to interrupt his homeward journey and bring him to a stop:

If Odysseus were to give way to their temptation and relapse, as it were, into that poetic genre, he would be destroyed and his bones would join those of other men rotting, as Kirke tells him, on the Sirens’ meadow, for no warrior heroism can resist the power of the Sirens’ song. Only the heroism of nostos poetry—poetry celebrating a hero’s ‘return home’—grounded in Odysseus’ characteristic cunning intelligence and mental toughness, is sufficient to withstand the Sirens’ temptation. (Schein 1995, p. 21)

The argument here is that the Sirens are a sort of poetic vortex that threatens to transform Odysseus—now an evolving hero moving deliberately away from Troy—into a tableau of his heroic past, a static image of “what has happened” that leads to little more than a corpse rotting in a meadow. From this vantage point, the Sirens are akin to sculptors, transforming seaborne movement into a fixed and lifeless pile of bones. Through their act of poetic reversal, life and forward progress devolve into paralysis and death. As Schein frames the episode, Odysseus and his crew risk being relegated to a shadow realm where *natura morta* stands in for life.² Thanks to Circe and Odysseus’s own commitment to prospective heroism, the argument goes, the Sirens’ plan fails, and Odysseus sails safely by and even hears them sing as his ship passes.

Pucci and Schein offer a compelling reading of Odysseus’s encounter with the Sirens; however, it remains incomplete. That is, while it is true that the Sirens’ song does indeed index poetic language from the *Iliad*, there is more to consider. When one examines, for example, the concrete language employed by the Sirens in their call to Odysseus, it becomes clear that the twin monsters promise him something even more troubling than a reversal into “warrior heroism.”

In the original Greek, the phrase commonly translated into English as “all things that come to pass” reads ὅσσα γένηται.³ The first term, ὅσσα, is the plural neuter form of the adjective ὅσος, which literally means “as much as,” and translates to “as many things as” or even “all things that” with little difficulty. The second term, γένηται, is more complex. It is the third-person aorist subjunctive form of the verb γίγνομαι, which means “to come into being” or, more colloquially, “to happen.” In this sense, the English translation works well enough: the Sirens know “as much as (or all that) has happened” on the all-providing earth.⁴ The use of the aorist form of the verb here points to an indefinite past rather than the present, and it bears emphasizing that the Sirens’ knowledge would explicitly be not of things that happen but rather of things that have happened. In strictly temporal (and intertextual) terms, Pucci and Schein are right to argue that the Sirens are committed to retrospection.

Beyond matters of verbal tense and aspect, however, the Sirens’ use of the phrase ὅσσα γένηται points to a more important distinction between praxis and ontology. This is so because the Greek verb γίγνομαι primarily signifies “to come to be” or “to be born”

and is linked to the noun γένεσις, which means “origin,” “beginning,” or “creation.” The adjectival form of γίγνομαι (γεννητός) also points in this direction. In a later example, from the first-century-BC Jewish writer Philo, the adjective γεννητός stands in seamlessly for “created” or “having come to be”: κύριος γὰρ γεννητός πρὸς ἀλήθειαν οὐδείς (For none that is created is truly a lord) (Philo 1934, pp. 154–55). Philo’s use of γεννητός further reinforces the idea that ὅσσα γένηται is more precisely a reference to “all that has come to be” rather than to “all that has happened.” English translators will often render γίγνομαι as “to come to pass” or “to happen,” especially in the context of epic narrative, where there is a tendency to focus on action and events. And while it is true that origin stories are often enough part of the epic narrative arc (as in Hephaestus fashioning Achilles’s shield in Book 18 of the *Iliad*), they seldom take center stage. Put another way, it makes conventional sense that an English translation of ὅσσα γένηται might focus on happening over becoming and birth; however, this choice places a veil over other, potentially more suggestive readings, ones that push the Sirens (as feminine monsters) to the very boundaries of the epic genre.

In the bridge that ὅσσα γένηται (and γίγνομαι) forms between imperfective doing and perfective coming to be, there is a miraculous and, for the Greeks, horrific gesture toward natality. Ancient and modern readers alike have understandably focused on the Sirens’ link to mortality (i.e., to approach them means death); however, it is their connection to birth and creation that makes them even more powerful and worrisome. That is, these creatures do not offer a dangerous return to Iliadic heroism so much as a glimpse of (or a listen to) a different order altogether. What they offer, in fact, eludes even Homer’s discursive control—he narrates only their invitation to listen but not their song itself. And this is precisely why the Sirens are monsters: not because they kill, but because they are hybrid beings who offer knowledge of a parallel course, one linked not to death but to birth.

What happens when we shift our reading of Odysseus’s encounter with the Sirens from an account of heroic, masculine sagacity to one of natality, of Odysseus the child and the Siren-mothers inclined over him? (Arendt 1998; Cavarero 2016). Is this reading possible, and if so, where does it lead? Does it resolve the problem surrounding the “temptation of temptation” to a meaningful degree? Much of this has to do with the question of gender, as these sweet-singing killers are unmistakably feminine. Often enough, they have come to stand in for the feminine itself.

What if the Sirens signal not death but new life? Dispossessed of their hard-won rectitude, one might imagine ancient sailors throwing themselves overboard and fighting through the sea to return to the scene of natality—a scene in which they face the m/Other (as Bracha L. Ettinger phrases it) once again in a relation of closeness, a relation in which all the dangerous alterity of that Other remains intact (Ettinger 2011). It is a kind of death, at least from the perspective of Homer’s epic, in that the hero is reduced to infancy, to a relation of vulnerability in which the Sirens’ song is not only heard but listened to. It is a place of danger for the upright subject, but it need not be a deathtrap. As Adriana Cavarero has argued, it can be Medea leaning over Mermerus and Pheres, but it can also be Mary leaning over Jesus. It can be a rebirth into a different order, one in which the temptation of temptation no longer has any appeal or power. Turning to another Borges story, does one imagine that the Quiché Maya priest at the end of “La escritura del dios” has died in any conventional sense? His place has not changed (he remains a prisoner of the Spanish), but he has been reborn into the plenum, into closeness (Borges 1974). To be close to the m/Other and immersed in the unscripted potentiality of that relation, to be newborn. For Homer and the logic of his epic, natality is thoroughly monstrous and foreign. His is a story-world of upright men, staring straight into the future and their own (im)mortality. It is, once again, a world of power and heroism. But again, it is a world devoid of alterity or closeness. Here closeness is a monstrous risk to be avoided or outsmarted. It is feminine,

inclined, and linked.⁵ The sirens are mothers in a world that never fully came to be, that was cast off as monstrous. Out of Odysseus emerges a different world, one that hears without commitment and collects everything in its path like a trawl net.

What is the song that enters Odysseus's (secured) body, and is it in any meaningful sense other than the melodies of Ithaka? And insofar as Odysseus's gambit has become a dominant mode of inquiry in the West, what is it that we hear from the relative safety of our own ships and river boats? How might we truly come to listen? What can literature teach us about this question? Can we ever free ourselves from Odysseus and his knowing bondage?

5. Afterward

Odysseus barely survives his ordeal with the Sirens, yet the experience oddly leaves no impression. He of course hears their song and nearly tears his joints apart to join them, but once his ship has gained some distance from their island, he manages to collect himself and move on as though nothing at all has happened. Much in the way one moves past a car crash on the side of the road, Odysseus and his men appear to go directly back to business after their encounter with the Sirens. As Odysseus himself puts it: "But when they had rowed past the Sirens, and we could no more hear their voice or their song, then straightway my trusty comrades took away the wax with which I had anointed their ears and loosed me from my bonds" (Homer 1995, p. 447). The very next line introduces Scylla and Charybdis, and Homer then turns his full attention to the new danger faced by Odysseus and his crew. In just a handful of lines, the Sirens are pushed aside, a minor episode in a much larger story.

There may be something heroic to Odysseus's apparent resilience, but one also wonders if the quick transition might not serve to suppress something, as if Homer somehow needs to move on quickly to prevent his hero (and the narrative) from becoming bogged down in something wholly other to the epic business at hand. How else to explain it? How is one to believe that Odysseus has even superficially listened to the Sirens and then minutes later has nothing to say about the experience? This is clearly what Homer expects his audience to believe, and within the logic of the epic there is little reason to question the decision. To linger over the Sirens' song, to allow Odysseus to be moved or in some way altered by it, is more the domain of the pastoral or even (some centuries later) the novel. Homer has other priorities, and for his purposes what matters is that Odysseus has emerged whole from his contact with these feminine monsters. Like quicksand, the encounter with the Sirens may well pose as much danger to Homer's narrative as it does to Odysseus's well-being.

Bracketing off the generic expectations of the epic, a question remains regarding what is latent in the aftermath of Odysseus's brush with the Sirens. In other words, what does Homer not tell us? What is the precise nature of this moment? What has Odysseus heard and how has it changed him? Maurice Blanchot has called attention to the aftermath of this scene, highlighting the odd spectacle of Odysseus somehow unchanged by his encounter with the Sirens. As he puts it, Odysseus survives the Sirens only to find himself "as he was, and the world is found to be perhaps poorer, but firmer and surer" (Blanchot 2003, p. 8). Odysseus, one might say (paraphrasing Levinas), has not survived temptation (e.g., diving into the sea) so much as the temptation of temptation. He remains tied to the mast, whole and ready to face whatever comes next.

Or does he? What remains—even if latent—in those few pregnant moments between Odysseus's stolen access to the Sirens' song and the new dangers faced at the Strait of Messina? One can only imagine the state of Odysseus's mind during those long, dangerous minutes while he and his crew "drive past" (παρελάυνω) the Sirens. What is there that is

not sung aloud (or told to the Phaeacian court)? If the Sirens made an impression, where and how does this register? Does it perhaps lie beyond both the story Odysseus and Homer are telling and the symbolic order they wish to control? Whatever the case, it is worth lingering a bit in that in-between time of earnest rowing and reticence to see what is there, what one might infer from pregnant silence.

One way to gain a better understanding of the temporal parenthesis between Odysseus's encounter with the Sirens and his turn to face Scylla and Charybdis is to examine what it means to listen. After all, Odysseus's clear intention was to listen to the Sirens' song, and it is worth articulating what this means, both in terms of the act itself and its aftereffects. One advantage to this approach is that it is by no means anachronistic, given that Homer and his audience would have been very attuned to matters of sound, resonance, and the auditory. Another point, possibly less readily apparent to the Ancient Greeks, is the idea that listening entails a stance of hospitality and even vulnerability that cannot immediately be shaken off. Following this logic, the Sirens' song will have produced an effect, even if Homer appears eager to elide it.

Roland Barthes begins his essays on listening by pointing out the distinction between hearing (*entendre*) and listening (*écouter*): "Hearing is a physiological phenomenon; listening is a psychological act" (Barthes 1991, p. 245). The fundamental difference between these two activities is a matter of intentionality; one hears willy-nilly, but to listen one must set out to do so and become attuned to what is being listened to/for. The nature of this act, according to Barthes, is indexical: "listening is that preliminary attention which permits intercepting whatever might disturb the territorial system; it is a mode of defense against surprise; its object (what it is oriented toward) is menace or, conversely, need; the raw material of listening is the index, because it either reveals danger or promises the satisfaction of need" (Barthes 1991, p. 247). As smoke points to fire, so listening points to threat or bounty—at least at its most basic level. In this, there is little difference between humans and other animals. A deer pricks up its ears to catch the sound of a potential threat, while a coyote listens attentively for sounds of distress from its potential prey. Humans differ from animals, according to Barthes, not because we listen differently, but because we have an expanded auditory repertoire. We also listen for the divine (to interpret its inscrutable word) and more recently we listen in psychoanalytic ways to reach the depths of the unconscious.

In all this listening, whether we mean coyotes, deer, or humans, there is an entering of one's territory—and a preliminary stance of hospitality to what lies beyond that territory. Listening makes us open to the world and opens a breach in our defenses. We let down our shields, and in the process, we become part of the world, lifted out of our solipsistic isolation like a pickle from a jar. To hear the world is to have one's ear pressed against the door, while to listen involves opening the door and stepping into its threshold. Here we can be saved or wounded or even killed. To the extent that this listening connects us to the world in this way, Jean-Luc Nancy argues, it is the phenomenological condition for the possibility of our being. As in Levinas's relation of face, it is an act that has already happened; and perhaps it is a more felicitous metaphor: listening over the visual metaphor of the face-to-face encounter. One listens, after all, with one's whole body, in an attitude of hospitality and openness to potential wounding.

This is what happens to Odysseus: he listens to the Sirens and opens himself up to wounding, to allowing them in. As in the Garden of Eden, when Eve listens to the serpent, Odysseus stands in the doorway to his home and allows the Sirens in. Only his diligence and preparation save him from ultimate ruin, but the damage has surely been done, has it not? Put another way, he may be striving for the temptation of temptation—and Homer's quick turn to the Scylla and Charybdis episode underscores this—but listening may well

have found him, nonetheless. In listening to the Sirens' song, Odysseus has been pried open like a can, and one wonders if he can ever be closed again. Can he forget the Sirens' song? Can such a wound—an incision made at the point of hospitality: I turn to you, and you insert the blade—be healed? Tied to the mast and protected from drowning, one can imagine that it is nonetheless possible for Odysseus to be overwhelmed and even undone by the Sirens' song of knowledge.

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Notes

- ¹ For a detailed account of such Brazilian encounters and their Biblical connections, see (Bacchini 2018).
- ² For more on this shadow realm, see (Levinas 1948).
- ³ Robert Fagles likewise translates ὅσσα γένηται ἐπὶ χθονὶ πουλυβοτείρῃ as “all that comes to pass on the fertile earth” (Homer 1996, p. 277).
- ⁴ The verb “to know” here is οἶδα, which is linked to the adjective ἔδρις (knowledgeable) connected to Odysseus.
- ⁵ For an artful re-reading of inclination in the *Iliad*, see (Oswald 2011).

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