

RICŒUR BETWEEN ITHACA AND THE ISLE OF THE PHAEACIANS

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Abstract: The aim of this contribution is to critically engage with the ricœurian reading of the topic of recognition in the Homeric poem *Odyssey*. The hypothesis presented here is that the ricœurian reading shows only one side of the coin, since it is almost solely focused on the recognition received by Ulysses when he comes back to Ithaca incognito. Ricœur stresses the unilaterality of recognition, which is only directed to re-establish Ulysses' power as king. Being recognized as the king of Ithaca does not imply, so Ricœur's argument goes, to recognize those who are subjected to him, and is a mere way of exhibiting power. But there is another possible reading of the scenes of recognition in the *Odyssey*, even if Ricœur does not take them into account. Indeed, another moment of the recognition story can be found in the Isle of the Phaeacians, and it cannot be traced back to the "will to power", but, rather, to Ulysses's fragility. When Demodocus, the poet at the court of the king Alcinoos, starts singing the story of the famous hero Ulysses, who is there incognito, Ulysses cannot hold back his tears, and in the end he discloses his own identity. Here, Ulysses does not look for recognition, instead recognition is granted to him in an unexpected way. This act of recognition reveals all the fragility of the hero, who discovers himself in the words of others, and understands that he depends upon them to be, to exist, and, in the end, to come back home. This sort of "recognition by fragility" is possible due to a narrative dimension where Ulysses is hosted, and whose configurative and refigurative power makes the hero able to name his feeling as a feeling of "nostalgia".

Keywords: fragility, narrative configuration, *Odyssey*, power, recognition.

Résumé: Cet article propose une analyse critique de la lecture ricœurienne de la reconnaissance dans l'*Odysée* de Homère. L'article avance l'hypothèse selon laquelle la lecture ricœurienne ne montre qu'un côté de la médaille,

Resumo: O objetivo deste artigo é fazer uma análise crítica da leitura ricœuriana da questão do reconhecimento na *Odisseia* de Homero. A hipótese que se apresenta aqui é a de que esta leitura ricœuriana só mostra um dos lados

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puisqu'elle est presque exclusivement centrée sur la reconnaissance d'Ulysse lorsqu'il revient à Ithaque incognito. Ricœur souligne ici le caractère unilatéral de la reconnaissance, dont le seul but est de rétablir le pouvoir d'Ulysse comme roi. Selon Ricœur cette reconnaissance comme roi d'Ithaque ne nécessite pas la reconnaissance de ses sujets, et revient à une pure forme de démonstration de pouvoir. Mais une autre lecture des scènes de reconnaissance dans l'*Odyssée* est possible, même si Ricœur ne les a pas pris en compte. En effet, un autre moment de l'histoire de la reconnaissance est à trouver dans l'île des Phéniciens, et cette histoire ne nous reconduit pas à la «volonté de pouvoir» mais plutôt à la fragilité d'Ulysse. Lorsque Démodoque, le poète à la cour du roi Alcinoos, commence à raconter l'histoire d'Ulysse, le héros réputé, Ulysse, qui est là incognito, ne peut pas s'empêcher de pleurer et, à la fin, il révèle sa propre identité. Dans cette scène Ulysse n'est pas en quête de reconnaissance, à l'inverse, cette reconnaissance lui est accordée d'une manière inattendue. Cet acte de reconnaissance révèle la fragilité du héros qui se découvre dans la parole des autres et comprend qu'il est dépendant des autres pour être, pour exister et, finalement, pour rentrer chez soi. Cette forme de «reconnaissance par la fragilité» est possible grâce à une dimension narrative dans laquelle Ulysse est accueilli, et dont le pouvoir de configuration et refiguration lui permet de nommer son sentiment comme un sentiment de «nostalgie».

Mots-clés: configuration narrative, fragilité, *Odyssée*, pouvoir, reconnaissance.

da moeda, uma vez que se foca quase exclusivamente no reconhecimento recebido por Ulisses quando volta a Ítaca incógnito. Ricœur sublinha o carácter unilatéral desse reconhecimento, o qual mais não visa que restabelecer o poder de Ulisses enquanto rei. De acordo com o argumento de Ricœur, ser reconhecido como rei de Ítaca não implica o reconhecimento dos seus súbditos, e mais não é que uma demonstração de poder. Contudo, há outra leitura possível das cenas de reconhecimento na *Odisseia*, ainda que Ricœur não as tenha em conta. Com efeito, outro momento da história do reconhecimento pode ser encontrado na Ilha dos Fenícios, e este não nos remete para a “vontade de poder” mas para a fragilidade de Ulisses. Quando Demódoco, o poeta na corte do rei Alcinoos, começa a cantar a história do famoso herói Ulisses, que ali se encontrava incógnito, Ulisses não consegue conter as suas lágrimas e, no fim, revela a sua identidade. Nesta cena, Ulisses não procura reconhecimento. Pelo contrário, tal reconhecimento é-lhe concedido de forma inesperada. Este ato de reconhecimento revela a fragilidade do herói, que se descobre nas palavras dos outros, e percebe que depende deles para ser, para existir e, no final, para regressar a casa. Esta espécie de “reconhecimento pela fragilidade” é possibilitada por uma dimensão narrativa na qual Ulisses é acolhido, e cujo poder de configuração e refiguração torna possível ao herói designar este sentimento como um sentimento de “nostalgia”.

Palavras-chave: configuração narrativa, fragilidade, *Odisseia*, poder, reconhecimento.

1. Introduction: two models of recognition in the *Odyssey*

The *Odyssey* is famously acknowledged as the poem of the *nostos*: the main character of the poem, Ulysses, has been trying to come back home for twenty years and in the end, with the help of the Phaeacians, he indeed returns home. The structure of the poem is not a linear one: all the adventures that the hero and his friends have lived are narrated by that same hero at the court of the Phaeacians. After having narrated all his adventures, Ulysses comes back home and reestablishes his kingdom through a progression of acts of recognition: what he asks is a unidirectional, unilateral recognition, and he is also recognizing himself as the one who used to be the master, and this is not an easy recognition. Quite the contrary, it is an attempt to regain an identity closely connected with the idea of possession and property.

Each *nostos* is also a form of recognition: self-recognition, recognition by others, and recognition of others, with a travel that digs deep into memory and the suffering from having been far from home for such a long time. This journey of recognition confronts the hero with his memories, while also being disorienting: home is no longer a place to rest, to find shelter, no longer the place of an ordinary and perfect state of fusion with the community. Thus, each *nostos* is also a form of misrecognition, the perception of an indefinite difference between what we remember and what the past really was. Recognition and misrecognition, thus, go hand in hand and can be traced back to what Freud labeled *das Unheimlich*: a feeling of disorientation which seems to unavoidably accompany the processes of self-identification. The core of the poem, which narrates only the last six weeks of the events that lead Ulysses back home, is his stay at the court of the Phaeacians, where he tells his story and his long wanderings across the seas. This episode at the court of the Phaeacians includes what I label here a form of “recognition by fragility”. The poem goes on with the story of the *nostos* of Ulysses to his kingdom. The reappropriation of his kingdom is the story of a progression of several recognitions, which I will label here, in turn, “recognition by power”.

The hypothesis leading this contribution is that, provided that there are two models of recognition at stake in the poem, the ricœurian reading of the scenes of recognition narrated in this classical masterpiece is focused only on the model of “recognition by power”, and does not consider the model of “recognition by fragility”, while this latter could be considered far more promising than the former. Indeed, recognition by fragility does not depend on the social or political roles of the recognized person, and for this reason it could be able to open the possibility for a biography to develop without having its meaning determined beforehand. Starting from the fragilities, the scars, and being recognized by the experiences of suffering, could be the

starting point of a recognition that does not depend on merit, and is far more universal than “recognition by power”. In this contribution I briefly describe these two models of recognition, and I clarify that the main difference between them lies in the different motivation behind those two models, i.e. the different reasons that lead to these two diverging models. In the “recognition by power” model the engine of the claim of recognition is doubtlessly the “will to power”, that is, the desire to affirm or reaffirm an authority perceived as fundamental for self-identification. Quite the contrary, in the “recognition by fragility” model the engine of the process of recognition is the fragility of the subject, the living and bleeding memory of the past suffering that claims to be welcomed, or at least to be listened. Thus, being recognized in one’s own fragility means to claim a sort of recognition that points to a shared trait that is similar across individuals, something like the tragic universalism or the common condition of being a stranger, a position in which every person is probably placed at least once in her life, and to which the duty to welcome should respond.

Here I first follow Ricœur’s reconstruction of the model of recognition by power; second, I focus on the model of recognition by fragility; third, I show how the recognition by fragility implies a reconsideration of identity on the basis of its unavoidably “nostalgic” trait, since a part of this fragility always depends on finitude, the transitoriness of time, the imagination which comes back to the past in search for meaning and sometimes for a restoration of a status in which no wounds and no scars were present, nor were they possible. These two models of recognition by power and recognition by fragility should not be considered only as two opposite ways of interpreting recognition, but also as two different models of interpreting human identity and the passing of time, together with the feeling of nostalgia that the distance from home and from the past elicits. In human experience, these two models are not as far apart as one could imagine. In fact, power and fragility, power and vulnerability, should be interpreted as two sides of the same scene, where activity and passivity are always already intermingled. Power and fragility relate to one another through Ricœur’s so-called triad of passivity (flesh, conscience and the other). It is to the extent that the person undergoes a condition of intense suffering, and to the extent that such suffering is made visible and audible, that it can become the starting point of a reactivation of human agency. In *The Course of Recognition*, Paul Ricœur focuses only on the first model. But the second model is far more promising, given that it relates recognition with narrativity, and it is precisely through narrativity that fragility can have a voice.

2. Ricœur's reading of the scene of recognition in Ithaca

We shall start by noting that the recognition by power analyzed by Ricœur as a form of affirmation of identity is more tentative than it might seem at first glance. Ulysses is not recognized and does not recognize: a typical feeling of *Unheimlich*³ pervades those scenes, and this procrastination of recognitions (plural) is what Honneth would define as a struggle for recognition⁴, even if, once attained, it is no longer an object of desire – allow me to remind that Ulysses expresses the intention to leave his kingdom again, after having reconquered it. Thus, the idea of a Ulysses anchored to his past identity – a Lockean person, whose consciousness coincides with his memory, a person who does not seem to try to come to terms with the question of his identity, apart from and beyond his role – is only in part capable of explaining the entire progression of recognition. As a matter of fact, the return back home of Ulysses is accompanied by the impression that what is gone is forever lost, and that, by coming back, the hero will never restore his identity precisely as it was. Such interpretation leads to the hypothesis that recognition by power, far from being attainable once and for all, runs the risk of transforming itself into a constant, unending, search for visibility and approval of one's own social and political status. The danger of this model of recognition is thus the fact that it is used to enforce hierarchies, find other forms of domination, and feed an asymmetrical idea of power as something to be confirmed through recognizing the value of hierarchies without discussing them.

The long scene of recognition of Ulysses in Ithaca opens the second study of Ricœur's book on recognition. Its second study, as is well known, is devoted to self-recognition. And there are some presuppositions at stake in Ricœur's interpretation of this episode.

First, that self-recognition falls short of mutuality; such lack of mutuality shows that the others are instrumental to the self: they can foster or impede self-recognition. Ricœur comments:

The famous story of the return of Ulysses to Ithaca is incontestably a narrative of recognition in which the hero is both the protagonist and the beneficiary. It is right to say that he causes himself to be recognized by other partners, following a carefully orchestrated climax and an art of delay often commented upon by critics⁵.

³ Sigmund Freud, *The Uncanny* (New York: Karnac, 2003).

⁴ Axel Honneth, *The Struggle for Recognition. The Moral Grammar of Social Conflicts* (Boston: The MIT Press, 1996).

⁵ Paul Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition* (Cambridge (Mass.): Harvard University Press, 2005), 72.

Thus, Ulysses is the only character to be recognized in his power. Furthermore, Ulysses in Ithaca becomes the paradigm of such self-centered process of recognition, aimed at maintaining the status quo, and if possible, at increasing it, since being recognized in one's own power –this power being something visible through actions – runs the risk of becoming an unending, unfinished, unaccomplishable, claim.

Ricœur goes on with his analysis with the following words:

Despite the distribution of roles among a number of characters, there exists just one among them who is the object of recognition, Ulysses come home to Ithaca. [...] It is not a narrative of mutual recognition [...] the recognition scenes stake out the reconquest of his household by an inflexible master, at the expense of usurpers in the posture of pretenders to possession of the legitimate wife. This aspect of violence means that a history of recognition finds itself inextricably entwined with one of vengeance. The rhythm of this second story governs that of recognition, to the point that the degrees of recognition are stages along the path of vengeance that ends with a massacre of pitiless cruelty⁶.

These remarks that conclude Ricœur's reconstruction of the Ithaca episode highlight how recognition in this case is a matter of role, it is an act of acknowledgement of a submission:

The Homeric characters who, we have granted, behave as “centers of agency” and “recognize themselves as responsible” are also capable of a recognition that passes through others, but which we cannot yet call mutual, because it is still focused on a single protagonist and limited to the role the tradition assigns to those who stand in the entourage of a master. For this master, to be recognized is to recover his mastery once it has been threatened⁷.

Here Ricœur grasps a relevant issue at stake in this model of recognition, but he does not seem willing to accept the conflictual component of recognition, neither does he seem willing to acknowledge that relations of recognition cannot be thought of as completely free from power dynamics. Rather, this account would have been more effective if he had considered the risks of recognition by power as inherent of each and any relation of recognition.

These risks become all the more apparent once the different types of relation in the Ithaca episode are analyzed. There is the sphere of familial bonds, which at first glance seems clearly separated from the “public” sphere, since the recognition directed to Ulysses by his relatives is different from the one provided (or not) by his subjects. But this is not the whole story. Ulysses, in Ricœur's reading, is a master, and claims the recognition of his identity as

⁶ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 72-73.

⁷ Ricœur, *The Course of Recognition*, 75.

such. He is the master of a kingdom, but also of his wife, his son, his relatives. The private sphere and the public sphere run the risk of speaking only one language, the proprietary language of possession. This reveals a clear idea of identity that should be put to discussion: identity as a property, and the property as what makes a man that precise man. It is not by chance that the *idem* identity contested by Ricœur finds its roots in the Lockean idea of identity, which has been interpreted as a proprietary conception of identity.

This process of recognition can be still traced back to a “unidirectional” recognition: it is Ulysses who wants to be recognized as a father, a husband, a son. He is the king and claims to restore his kingdom. He is fighting to regain his properties (including his wife) and to restore his power. In this instance, a powerful identity that claims to be recognized is what moves Ulysses in his path made out of revenge. Here, as previously noted, Ricœur suggests that the recognition of power is unilateral, and he distinguishes it from the idea of the struggle for recognition. On the contrary, I point out that each form of claim for recognition is also a claim for recognition of some power exerted over someone other. Recognition is a matter of power, both because power needs to be recognized, and because the act of recognition itself is an act of power, as many authors point out.

To sum up: Ricœur is right when he reads the process of recognition for which Ulysses is responsible as a process lacking mutuality. But there are some issues worth being noted. First, it would have been useful to highlight the idea of control, mastery, of a subject that is far from being fragile, far from being interested in making the others feel recognized in turn. The recognition of others is precisely the recognition of something related to status. But there are at least two traces which can lead to critically engage with this reading by Ricœur: first, the scene of the recognition by the scar; second, the scene of the recognition by the dog Argos, a non-human being which is not interested in the dynamics of power. These are two clues of the necessity to recognize elements of fragility even in the scenes where the king tries to be recognized in terms of his power, of his possessions.

Thus the first clue of another, different, possible interpretation of the scene of recognition in Ithaca is the scene of the scar:

The old woman took up a burnished basin she used for washing feet and poured in bowls of fresh cold water before she stirred in hot. Ulysses, sitting full in the firelight, suddenly swerved round to the dark, gripped by a quick misgiving – soon as she touched him she might spot the scar! The truth would all come out. Bending closer she started to bathe her master ... then, in a flash, she knew the scar – that old wound made years ago by a boar’s white tusk when Ulysses went to Parnassus, out to see Autolycus and his sons⁸.

⁸ Homer, *Odyssey*, Translated by Robert Fagles (London: Penguin, electronic version 2002) book xix, lines 337-447.

It is like one could be recognized also by the history of his fragility, whose traces are impressed, written, on the body. In this scene, as a matter of fact, Eurycleia recognizes her master not through his power, but, rather, through his fragility. In an analogous way, the humanity of Ulysses is at stake in the recognition directed to his dog Argos, which is not interested to Ulysses' power; in such scene, Ulysses feels free to recognize himself another living being, without expecting recognition in turn:

Now, as they talked on, a dog that lay there lifted up his muzzle, pricked his ears ... It was Argos, long-enduring Ulysses' dog he trained as a puppy once, but little joy he got since all too soon he shipped to sacred Troy. In the old days young hunters loved to set him coursing after the wild goats and deer and hares. But now with his master gone he lay there, castaway, on piles of dung from mules and cattle, heaps collecting out before the gates till Ulysses' serving-men⁹.

These two scenes attest to an unavoidable intertwining of the two models of recognition, since even in the core of the model of recognition by power it is possible to highlight some traces of a recognition by fragility.

3. Being recognized in one's fragility

The "recognition by fragility" model emerges from the reading of another scene of recognition included in the *Odyssey*: it is the scene of Ulysses at the court of the king Alcinous. Ulysses, a stranger whose identity is unknown, is hosted, welcomed, he is provided shelter and his request of receiving the means to come back home is approved without him being asked about his identity. The poet Demodocus is invited by Alcinous king of the Phaeacians to cheer the banquet with the singing of the deeds of the heroes:

That was the song the famous harper sang but Odysseus, clutching his flaring sea-blue cape in both powerful hands, drew it over his head and buried his handsome face, ashamed his hosts might see him shedding tears. Whenever the rapt bard would pause in the song, he'd lift the cape from his head, wipe off his tears and hoisting his double-handled cup, pour it out to the gods. But soon as the bard would start again, impelled to sing by Phaeacia's lords, who reveled in his tale, again Ulysses hid his face and wept¹⁰.

⁹ Homer, *Odyssey*, book xix, lines 319-326.

¹⁰ Homer, *Odyssey*, book viii, lines 99-109.

Ulysses weeps, and he cannot avoid it: he knows that Demodocus is telling stories about him, even if the bard does not know who Ulysses is. The following scene is the one in which Ulysses reveals his identity to the king Alcinoo:

I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, known to the world for every kind of craft – my fame has reached the skies. Sunny Ithaca is my home. Atop her stands our seamount, Mount Neriton’s leafy ridges shimmering in the wind. Around her a ring of islands circle side-by-side, Dulichion, Same, wooded Zacynthus too, but mine lies low and away, the farthest out to sea, rearing into the western dusk while the others face the east and breaking day. Mine is a rugged land but good for raising sons – and I myself, I know no sweeter sight on earth than a man’s own native country¹¹.

The hospitality received, as we will see below, allows for the disclosure of Ulysses’ identity. Before analyzing in a closer way this episode, let us focus on some structural analogies between the two episodes linked to the topic of recognition within the *Odyssey*. One of the most visible analogies is the graduality of the process of recognition, not to mention that in both cases recognition works as the engine of the narrative plot. Also, to the extent that there are some traces of “recognition by fragility” in the episode of the “recognition by power”, to the same extent it can be expected that in the episode of “recognition by fragility” there are some traces of the “recognition by power”. Such reciprocal traceability is telling of the conventional nature of this opposition, that should not be exacerbated.

Let us now focus on the differences emerging from the comparison of these two scenes. While in the Ithaca scene the graduality of the process of recognition is almost completely in the hands of Ulysses, here in the Phaeacians Isle he cannot control this process at all. It seems, rather, that he is mastered and dominated by the events, by his feelings, by the telling of his story by another man. The process of recognition is entirely determined by the practices of narration. Even if in both cases the graduality of the process of recognition is a narrative engine – and here we are reminded of Aristotelian *anagnorisis* – in the episode of the Phaeacians court, narrative and recognition are characterized by passivity: being narrated is being unintentionally hosted by the words of others. But let us now move to a brief analysis of the episode of a recognition that was not chosen – allow me to use such a periphrasis to describe Ulysses at Alcinoo’s court. This episode can be divided in three main scenes, which will now be analyzed.

¹¹ Homer, *Odyssey*, book ix, lines 21-31.

In the first scene, Ulysses asks the means to come back home: what he is asking is not the recognition of his power or of his identity, meant as an *idem* identity. Rather, he is asking that his travel be facilitated, recognized, even if nobody knows him and his destination. Such process of recognition could be labeled the “recognition of something undetermined”. The idea of an undetermined recognition is clearly explained by some authors, and its core could be described as follows: in order to assess its ethical import, recognition should be directed towards an indeterminate trait of personhood that could be associated with the indeterminate ‘becoming’, which includes under its umbrella the indefinite capacity for criticizing those patterns and models, as well as for interpreting the past in light of the future. It is in particular Heikki Ikäheimo who speaks of an “unconditional mode of recognition”,¹² and this seems precisely what Ulysses is looking for once arrived in the isle of the Phaeacians: a recognition which is not directed to a role, to a definite status, to some traits of a specific personhood. Rather, this recognition is both unconditional and undetermined, because it leaves the question of identity open to constant redefinitions and the act of recognition is not conditioned nor dependent upon precise and definite characteristics of a person, but is given regardless of who we are, just as the hospitality due to the strangers, the castaways.

Ulysses asks to be recognized in his humanity, not in his role. This could have been enough, but another kind of recognition takes place, without being looked for: it is the recognition of his role, of his own story. Here, what emerges is that recognition is something owed to everybody, no matter where they are going.

In the second scene of the episode, Ulysses – still incognito – is welcomed at the court and a banquet is prepared to celebrate the foreign man who is going to leave. Needless to say, unconditional recognition is something owed to the sailors, the castaways, and they must be celebrated and welcomed through banquets and parties. It is precisely in this context that Demodocus starts singing the dispute between Achilles and Ulysses during the Trojan war. Here one can doubtless state that recognition is something that happens beyond any claim: Ulysses is not asking to be recognized as the author of all the deeds told by Demodocus. And the first gesture that gives rise to this kind of recognition is the fact that he is hosted in the words and in the story that Demodocus narrates about him, without knowing him. As confirmation of this reading, recall that in the beginning of the scene he does not want to be recognized as the hero who leads his people to victory. Demodocus, completely unaware, is unintentionally recognizing Ulysses, and he is,

¹² Heikki Ikäheimo, “Conceptualizing Causes for Lack of Recognition: Capacities, Costs and Understanding”, *Studies in Social and Political Thought*, 25(2) (2015): 25-42.

unintentionally as well, providing the conditions of possibility for the hero's disclosure. The hero is given the possibility of recognizing himself through someone else's words, someone else's narrative configuration. The suffering experienced far from home, the will to leave and perhaps his feeling of guilt can finally find a narrative configuration, which are instrumental in his quest to get home, albeit not completely satisfied with his return.

In this context, Ulysses starts crying and covers his face with his hands, so that he is not recognized in his fragility: the process of recognition here is not mastered by Ulysses. Showing his fragility, here, would force him to reveal who he is. Thus, he prefers to cover his face and hide his tears. Ulysses, a strong and smart hero, does not want to disclose his identity but he perceives his fragility when his past is narrated by others, a moment when he somehow feels accepted by a community of strangers who ignore his identity.

In the third scene, Ulysses asks Demodocus to narrate the episode of the Trojan horse. Why such a request? We can put forward the following hypothesis. He is pretty sure that going back to a happy and fulfilling moment will have a healing effect on his memory, and that such recalling will enforce his self-portrait as the hero who does not cry, and is instead always strong and courageous. Here it is hardly possible to deny the narcissistic trait of such behaviour. In other words, here the model of recognition by fragility meets the character of the hero, and touches the recognition by power: I recognize myself as the winner of the Trojan war and I can be pleased by this thought even without being recognized by the others: a power that does not need to be recognized, since the subjects of recognition are not the people inhabiting the Isle of the Phaeacians, but rather his subjects in Ithaca.

But even in this case, once again, he cannot hold back his tears, contrary to his predictions. And this precisely because the "active" dimension of his deeds cannot be separated from the "passive" one, as his deeds implied a lot of suffering, not only because he was far from home.

At this point of the poem, the king Alcinoos asks him why he is crying, and who he is. Precisely at this moment, after having been involved in some races and plays, Ulysses decides to disclose his identity and starts to narrate his story. Thus, as previously stated, it is thanks to a "narrative hospitality"¹³, that the hero feels safe enough to disclose his identity and to ask for recognition.

It is apparent that the recognition he is looking for is not the same he will claim once in Ithaca or, to be sure, that recognition by power is not the only interpretative key of the entire *Odyssey*. Evidently, he is pleased, now that he has understood that he can be safe, to be recognized as the kind of Ithaca. But far from home he does not need to hide his fragility: he can be recognized as

¹³ Paul Ricoeur, "Reflections on a New Ethos for Europe", *Philosophy and Social Criticism* 21, 5-6 (1995): 3-13.

powerful and, at the same time, as a fragile, tired, worried king. He is asking to be recognized as a man who misses his past and his future, a man whose main feeling is nostalgia –, one that is both backward-looking and forward-looking, and as a man who has demonstrated that identity is not (only) a matter of property. His nostalgic attitude is not only fixed in an immutable and unavoidably gone past, but it is rather a force which compels the hero to think of the future, a future where he will try to understand who he is, beyond his being a strong and powerful king. Home, for Ulysses, is not only the place where everything began, but also the place to where he can come back in order to understand who he was, who he is, and who he wants to become. Thanks to his fragility, an unexpected fragility, recognition can be directed to his humanity as such, even when he is at last recognized as the king of Ithaca, the hero of the Trojan war. Thanks to the recognition of his fragility, the possibility of asking oneself who he is becomes real.

To sum up: while in the Ithaca episode Ulysses wants to be recognized as the king who at last came back, in the Phaeacians episode he does not want to be recognized at all, at least at the beginning of the episode. The hero finds an unaware narrative hospitality that not only facilitates the process of self-recognition, but also fosters the recognition of the other in her fragility: this could be the first step towards a mutual recognition. This access to mutual recognition is what I defined here as a “recognition by fragility” whose thread is of a narrative kind, and which is possible only on the basis of the recognition of a common trait of humanity, that corresponds to the possibility of suffering.

The narrative dimension of recognition is fundamental here: the transition between what the others narrate about his story and the will to narrate his own story is the key of any process of autonomy, of any process of reactivation of agency, which starts from the possibility of having a voice, of speaking, of giving an account of oneself, to borrow the terms of Judith Butler.¹⁴ Starting precisely by the narration of oneself, the disclosure of an identity is far from being decipherable only in terms of power: if in Ithaca recognition is claimed for Ulysses’ role, at Alcinoos court recognition is given to the person, to the fragile man who recognizes himself in the words of the others. The configuring power of narrative is here a means of self-recognition, but it is not limited to self-recognition: the objective of mutual relations of recognition is precisely the possibility to refigure together our past, present, and future. Moreover, the process of self-recognition narrated in this episode of the *Odyssey* is relevant since it shows that being recognized always precedes to recognize, and in this case what is recognized is humanity, an indetermined humanity, and it is from within this fragility that self-recognition beco-

¹⁴ Judith Butler, *Giving an Account of Oneself* (New York: Fordham, 2005).

mes possible. What the others narrate and recognize does not correspond to what we narrate and recognize of ourselves.

In this discrepancy between different accounts of ourselves lies the possibility of a decentered self: not only decentered because of the difference with the narratives of others, but also because of the non-coincidence with what one believed to be. Such changeability testifies once again the extent to which a kind of recognition which is directed to the personhood and not to specific roles or images of identity is fundamental. We could say, for these reasons, that the humanity behind the roles is the ‘third’ that allows for mutual recognition.

There is a last, but not less important aspect in the episode of the recognition at the Phaeacians court: that the idea of recognition by fragility arises also from the feeling of nostalgia. The concluding remarks of this contribution are in fact devoted to the link between recognition, narrative, and nostalgia.

4. Concluding remarks: how to recognize home?

In these concluding remarks I propose reading the episodes of recognition in the *Odyssey* through some critical contributions stemming from Barbara Cassin and Adriana Cavarero. These references can be useful to locate Ricœur’s analysis within a larger philosophical debate concerning the figure of Ulysses in relation to his travel towards home, his recognition of his kingdom, and the feeling of nostalgia.

Cassin comments the feeling of nostalgia as follows: “Nostalgia is what makes one prefer going home, even if it means finding there a time that passes by, death – and, worse, old age – rather than immortality. Such is the weight of the desire to return”¹⁵. According to the author, the desire to return home is quintessential to the feeling of nostalgia, and it does not exclude changes, differences between what we recall and what we find at home. Nostalgia, even Ulysses’ nostalgia, is not directed to something perceived as unchangeable, as a property always identical to itself. Cassin’s analysis points out the fact that it is not so obvious that Ulysses wants to regain his property, or that he wants to be recognized in his being the master. Rather, it seems that the hero is perfectly aware of the transience of time, of the precarity of his role, and of the situation he left behind. He is aware of the possibility of change to the extent that through his story one could ask how it is possible to recognize home:

¹⁵ Barbara Cassin, *Nostalgia. When Are We Ever at Home?* (New York: Fordham, 2016), 12.

But how do you know that you are back home? [...] When Ulysses sees Ithaca from the sea, he recognizes it with clarity, but his sleep makes him lose it again for another eight years, a whole Odyssey [...] This time is thus a second time. Ulysses has left Calypso's island on a raft; he has been shipwrecked as she foretold; exhausted, he has fallen asleep, on the shore, near a river. A ball wakes him up, that of Nausicaa and her attendants, who are playing while the laundry is drying [...] he comes to the Phaeacians' palace; he is given hospitality, hears the story of the Iliad and weeps, before then himself telling the tale of what follows. The Phaeacians, who are good ferrymen but who have incurred the wrath of the God of the Seas, bring him back, all alone, since his comrades have all died, one after the other. They leave him on his island – sound asleep once again, as he often is at crucial moments.¹⁶

It is difficult for Ulysses to recognize home as such. It is as if his attempts to approach his island were signs of the unfamiliarity that the idea of home, imagined and dreamed upon for many years, can foster. According to Cassin, Ulysses is the emblem of an open nostalgia, which she identifies terminologically as *Sehnsucht*. It is not the desire of the identical, and for this reason we can hypothesize that the identity that he asks to be recognized is not only understandable in terms of a property, but also in terms of something non possessable. This consideration of the feeling of nostalgia and its implications in terms of recognition of identity allows for some critical remarks of the ricœurian reading: Ulysses – the king of Ithaca – is not only the master who wants to restore his power, he can rather be seen and recognized as the hero led by the desire of knowledge, and by the awareness of the transitoriness of time, not anchored to the past as a property. Cassin distinguishes between *Heimweh* and *Sehnsucht*:

We could describe the internal tension proper to nostalgia in a different way: by using the two German words *Heimweh* and *Sehnsucht* as two representations of philosophy that the entire history of philosophy has never ceased meditating upon. On the one hand, *Heimweh* would be the desire to return, a closed-off nostalgia [...] On the other hand: *Sehnsucht* would be an open nostalgia that never “re-turns” to itself; it would be the indefinite infinite of the linear aition, nonidentifiable, nonthematizable infinite that flows but never stop [...] Ulysses the adventurer, the nomad, citizen of the world, at home everywhere and nowhere.¹⁷

There can be at least two models of nostalgia, and here Ulysses seems to be the spokesperson of the forward-looking one. He already knows that he is

¹⁶ Cassin, *Nostalgia*, 13-14.

¹⁷ Cassin, *Nostalgia*, 25-26.

coming back, but not in order to repeat the past and reproduce it in an identical way. Rather, his return is a move forward, an attempt to gain another perspective on his past, a sort of recognition of a growth, of a process, which does not necessarily ignore the fragility of the hero.

As for the narrative quality of the recognition experienced by Ulysses at the Phaeacians court, it is worth mentioning Cavarero's reading of the episode of the Phaeacians, which the Italian philosopher traces back to Hannah Arendt. She writes:

In one of the most beautiful scenes of the *Odyssey*, Ulysses is seated as a guest in the court of the Phaeacians, incognito. A blind rhapsod entertains those gathered with his song. He sings, 'the famous deeds of men, that song whose renown had already reached the wide sky'. He sings of the Trojan war, and tells of Ulysses and his undertakings. And Ulysses, hiding himself in a great purple tunic, weeps. "He has never wept before," comments Hannah Arendt, "and certainly not when what he is now hearing actually happened. Only when he hears the story does he become fully aware of its significance". We will call this scene *the paradox of Ulysses*. As we saw with Oedipus, this consists in the situation for which someone receives his own story from another's narration. And so it happens to Ulysses at the court of the Phaeacians. He weeps because he fully realizes the meaning of the story. But what exactly does the story *signify*? – neither the action itself nor the agent, suggests Arendt, but rather the story that the agent, through his actions, left behind him.¹⁸

This interpretation grasps a relevant issue: it is only by being told of it that people can see the configuration of their lives as a whole. Meaning can only be conferred *ex post*, rather than *ex ante*. Glory, fame, and the heritage left are the focus of Arendt reading in this scene. In so doing, she seems to trace the "recognition by fragility" back to a kind of "recognition by power". The centrality of meaning is only one part of being narrated. Ulysses does not cry for the meaning recognized, or for his being a famous hero. Perhaps, he cries for he is being compelled to recall the suffering experienced, the nostalgia felt, the need to be strong even when he would have had the possibility of showing his fragility.

Nonetheless, the tears of Ulysses show something more than a simple excess of narcissism, as instead seem to highlight Cavarero:

The problematic side of our approach lies precisely in this immortalizing function. However valuable the Arendtian idea of narration may be, its heroes,

¹⁸ Adriana Cavarero, *Relating Narratives. Storytelling and Selfhood* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 17.

like Achilles, continue to astonish us – if not trouble us – by their love of death. The emphasis on a desire (which is, in truth, rather virile) that combines the challenge of death with a fame that survives it, sounds much like a homage to the patriarchal tradition. To this we can add the autobiographical tale of Ulysses, which captivated the ears of the Phaeacians for four books of the *Odyssey*. The hero is excessive in all of his actions. He places emphasis on both action and autobiographical narration. But if it is the way that things are, what reasons do we have for privileging the biographical tale of the blind rhapsod, and for neglecting the relationship between the identity of Ulysses and the emphatic autobiographical exercise of his narrating memory? Have we been too moved by his emotion? Have we missed something in the hero's weeping?

As already stated, such interpretation overlooks precisely the implications of narrative hospitality, whose specific characteristic here is that it is not wanted, nor looked for. This point deserves further clarification. First, Ulysses claims a recognition which is owed to the entire humankind, the recognition of the possibility of coming back home, regardless who we are. It is also evident that his decision not to reveal his identity is a matter of prudence, the proverbial cunning of this hero. Second, precisely when he believes to have everything under his control, something happens: he finds hospitality in the account of the poet, who is completely unaware of the identity of Ulysses. The poet allows for a narrative hospitality, but his action is not intentional. When Ulysses listens to that story, he feels “at home”, and only by being hosted by this community of strangers, capable of solidarity, does he become aware that he can reveal his identity. It is not the glory or the power that moves him to tears, but rather his understanding that the help he asks is not given to him because he is the hero, but simply because he is a human being. He recognizes himself in the account made by Demodocus, and once again he appreciates such account because it is spontaneous, true, sincere, and it does not come from flattery. Such narrative hospitality fosters the memory of the hero, who at last decides to tell his own story. Far from being merely excessive, or from being the outcome of the patriarchal narcissism of the hero, this episode reveals the fragility of Ulysses as a person, as a man far from home, a frightened and nostalgic hero at the end of his journey, weak, worried, tired.

There is therefore a meeting point between the two models of recognition proposed here: the peculiar trait of human agency, always already intermingled with human passivity. Power and fragility, thus, can be seen as two sides of the same coin, precisely as agency and passivity. At the core of agency an amount of passivity can be found, and to the same extent at the core of passivity some kind of agency can be recognized. And it is precisely Ricœur that refers to this intertwinement, coining the expression “triad of passivity”:

“I suggest as a working hypothesis what could be called *the triad of passivity and, hence, of otherness*”¹⁹. If transposed in terms of recognition, the power that the subject wants to see recognized is not completely detached from the fragility of the wounds of an unending struggle to recognize oneself. Fragility and vulnerability, from such perspective, are the other side of power.²⁰ And recognition is an unending task possible only by doing away with a notion of identity conceived as property, in order to make room for a narrative, open, model of personal identity.

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¹⁹ Paul Ricoeur, *Oneself As Another* (Chicago/London: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 318.

²⁰ Estelle Ferrarese, *Vulnerability and Critical Theory* (Leiden, Brill, 2018), 1.

