

Christopher Nolan's The Odyssey: Dreams of Vengeance, Dreams of Home

After watching Christopher Nolan's *The Odyssey*, I talked with my old friend Mike about how the movie impressed me. Mike also enjoyed the film and had seen things in it that I'd missed. One observation he made which I'm sort of borrowing right now is that in ancient times dreams were closer to reality, or maybe even part of reality. This is no longer the case in the civilized West. My wife, who grew up in the USSR, doesn't let me talk about my dreams. She feels that speaking the dreams will manifest some evil. Most of my dreams are bad. She's probably right.

Before the events of *The Odyssey*, or even *The Iliad*, Hecuba, the wife of Priam, King of Troy, has a dream. She dreams that she will give birth to a flaming torch. Instead, she gives birth to a baby boy. As was the custom in the day, they interpreted the burning torch dream to be a premonition of doom; specifically, the destruction of Troy. Hecuba and Priam reluctantly decided to have the baby killed. Most people agree that they'd go back in time to kill baby Hitler if they could, so we understand the premise. Kill the baby, save the world.

Except the gods have other plans. A prophecy of doom isn't something to be taken lightly, and Priam and Hecuba made the classic mistake of having someone else do their dirty work for them. The baby survives and makes his way back to Troy as an adult where after several heroic adventures he is ultimately taken back in as Prince Paris. Paris' brother Hector, a brave and great warrior, hates Paris. There's the dream, for one thing. For another, there's the fact that Paris has run off with Helen of Sparta and now a bunch of Greek heroes are encamped outside Troy's walls. That all happens in *The Iliad*.

Later, after the vengeful Greeks destroy Troy, killing Hector and Paris in the process, different traditions propose various endings for Hecuba. I prefer the one where she is taken as a slave by Odysseus but turned into a dog by the gods and escapes to Hecate, goddess of the night. Most of the traditions agree that the former Queen of Troy gets polymorphed into a dog. The witch Circe uses a similar trick to turn Odysseus' men into pigs.

If this seems illogical and confusing, that's because it is obviously all part of a dream.

Mike and I have conversations when we watch movies like *The Odyssey* because we woke up in the same dream once, during training in Fort Benning. It was very strange. Everyone else from our training was there, too, in a church. There was a lot of shouting and shooting. The event was a kind of joke or prank gone wrong. Somehow the dream ended up being about sacrilege. Later Mike went to Iraq, and I went to Afghanistan. We share a common frame of reference by which to explore certain types of stories such as those dealing with war, and homecoming, and religion, and of course, the sacrilegious activities we participated in before and during war.

The Odyssey is about all four of those things. Mostly, it's about how war changes a person. In the film, Odysseus doesn't want to follow Agamemnon to make war on Troy; it's not really his war. He wants to remain with Penelope, or to run away with her and start over somewhere else. They have a baby, Telemachus, about whom there are no troubling dreams. Instead, there's Agamemnon, who kills his daughter for wind to sail against Troy. A bad dream might be a premonition of doom, but the enmity of a vindictive and angry king in the present is definite. Odysseus promptly pulls together a few ships worth of warriors and sets sail.

One thing leads to another. By the time the Trojan war's over, Odysseus is horrified by the actual sack of Troy, the murder

and the rape – again we’re talking about the film here, not the epic on which the film is based – and chafes at having to follow Agamemnon. He seems to regret his Trojan Horse trick and decides, impulsively, to take a different route back home to Ithaca. The other Ithacan troops are skeptical. Maybe they’ve heard that not every island is hospitable. Or maybe they’re just homesick. Odysseus boasts that they’ll be back at Ithaca before Agamemnon has returned to Mycenae. It makes sense in the moment. Probably some soldiers thought the Trojan Horse thing wouldn’t work either. If there are voices against his proposed itinerary they keep quiet.

Well, the islands are a mixed bag. The first is inhabited by regular people, who flee instead of trading with Odysseus’ men, who raid them in punishment. After that is the Island of the Cyclops, which we see killing and eating Odysseus’ men before they put its eye out and escape. Then they visit the Laestrygonians, giant warriors who slaughter the veterans of Troy with ease. It gets worse. Whatever military prowess or bravery the group once had, it has been replaced after their battle with the Cyclops by the latter part of the “fight or flight” instinct. Several minutes of the movie are dedicated to the Ithacans running away and struggling to push their ships away from hostile shores or being battered by waves and various monsters or turned into pigs.

If the trip home is hard, the homecoming is even worse; Odysseus arrives in time to help his son survive an assassination attempt. With great care and effort he seeks to preserve his marriage from the machinations of “dozens” (canonically we know this to be over 100) of suitors trying to claim his throne and the hand of his loyal wife, Penelope. This dream of home is also a dream of vengeance.

In what seems like a kind of double-curse, having lost all of his troops at Troy or during the journey back, Odysseus now finds himself in the unenviable position of having to kill yet more of Ithaca’s sons. Nolan’s version is much less bloody or

vicious than Homer's; Nolan spares the servants who work for the suitors, and about half the suitors. Nolan's Odysseus has very little help from Telemachus and none from loyal Ithacans – he has to fight the suitors himself. He wins. He and Penelope live happily ever after.

There's some messiness in the original Greek recounting of Odysseus' life, and there's some messiness in Nolan. They come in different places that probably say something about the culture from which the versions emerge. Nolan's Odysseus returns home wracked with guilt and self-doubt, bitterly ruing the part he played in destroying Troy. The Odysseus of Homer was a suitor himself once – one of Helen's suitors (Helen of Sparta, Helen of Troy, Helen of Sparta again – that one) who swore an oath to protect and come to the aid of Menelaus if anyone should abduct Helen (in fact, Odysseus cleverly uses this oath as payment for the hand of Penelope, who happens to be Helen's cousin, and whom Odysseus truly wants to marry) and is therefore responsible for the trick that leads to Troy, and the trick that wrecks the city. Homer's Odysseus doesn't seem as broken up about the killing.

Suitors and important women; Odysseus "wins" the hand of Penelope over the objection of her father and over the feats of other suitors. But later, while he's at Troy and wandering, and she's waiting for him to return, her legendary chastity and faith in Odysseus must be built on *something*. Nolan decides that it's love. Penelope tests that love in the film, and we get the scene with Odysseus' famous bow, which lives up to the buildup. He "wins" her back, through the aforementioned trial by combat which culminates (rather than starting, as in Homer's epic) with the killing of Antinous.



Odysseus chases suitors with a bow, shooting them with arrows

What to say of Antinous? He's the ringleader in both Nolan and

Homer's versions, the first to die in Homer, the last in Nolan. Nolan humanizes him, gives him a backstory where one could see in him a distorted Odysseus; a man with much craft and guile, but none of the strength or bravery. Too many of the faults and none of the favors, save that he is handsome.

But Antinous is no more the villain of *The Odyssey* than Odysseus' bow is the hero; both are devices. Here is where the differing versions converge: on the point of religion. Odysseus cannot get home in either version because in some sense he defies the gods' desire for him to come home in a certain way. This obstinacy gets him shipwrecked with Calypso, a woman many combat veterans know well – the bewitching and pliable yoga instructor out in Santa Monica who could be 35 but is in reality an ageless 47.

While on Calypso's island, in the film and in the epic, Odysseus is a kind of prisoner. It is less explicit in the film. There, it is a sort of lobotomized Odysseus who I should mention here is played by Matt Damon who dwells on the island eating lotus leaves and presumably mechanically and absently banging Charlize Theron (Calypso), desperate not to think about his losses (ship, family, soldiers, honor). Zeus instructs Calypso to let him go through two strategically placed peals of thunder, and she weans him off the narcotizing plant, telling Odysseus that only when he puts his faith in the gods will he return to Ithaca.

Both personally and per the plot Odysseus is not ready to return home until he discovers faith. After a storm there he is, washed ashore, preserved by Zeus as though by magic. Athena is beside him. He doesn't recognize Ithaca, at first. He thinks after all this time that it's just another island.

There's a series of myths or legends about Odysseus that are not commonly read or told. In them, he has a son with Circe, named Telegonus (like Telemachus). Telegonus is sent in this myth to find Odysseus, and is shipwrecked on Ithaca, which he

does not recognize because he's never been there. He begins raiding the countryside, and Odysseus and Telemachus respond. Telegonus kills Odysseus, at which point depending on the myth, either he brings Odysseus back to Circe and she revives him, or Telegonus marries Penelope and has a child with her, Italus (for whom Italy is named) while Telemachus marries Circe.

What to make of this, beyond the Greek fathers and sons of antiquity had some serious issues to work out – both with each other and with each other's respective wives and mothers? Perhaps Odysseus is a reflection of whatever stories gave rise to Oedipus, and to Osirus and Isis, part of that protean prehistorical pre-time when stories about creation got told and retold by different tribes until every tribe could feel confident that they had their own, special creation myth, at which point the story became a religion.

That diversion (or *is it?*) aside, the idea of not being able to recognize home does resonate for many veterans of war or combat. Nolan's Odysseus has legitimately been changed by the war he took part in – of which he was a hero. His agony is earned; he has led men to their deaths, and fought, and felt fear, and consorted with the gods (but especially with Calypso).

For all that, he keeps his humanity. He has pride, and in both Nolan's film and Homer's epic this gets him into plenty of trouble. But it does not spill over into hubris. His rejection of the gods, to Nolan, is not out of arrogance, but out of desperation, out of a hope that he can salvage something from the ruin of Troy. The gods tell him that he will be lucky to salvage a piece of himself, and his family.

In the end Odysseus takes that deal. Who wouldn't? It's great. Nobody's ever had a better deal. All Odysseus has to do at the end of the film is step down from the throne, leave it to Telemachus, and sail into the sunset with the beautiful

Penelope, who loves him. In exchange he must lay down the idea that he doesn't deserve any of it, or that it was ever him to begin with.

After all, it's just a dream. What does it matter?

New Fiction by Eugene Samolin: Narcissus Mask



Olly stood on a chair in his studio with a noose around his neck. "I'll never love again," he moaned. He stared at the blank canvas in front of him. I love my paintings, he thought. But they can't love me back.

The empty canvas whispered: "Olly..."

He sniffed and slipped off the noose, deciding that he'd do the right thing by the canvas and paint it before he died. A last work to say goodbye to the world with. He trudged to his bedroom, tucked under the covers, and drifted off to sleep...

It was night in the forest. He looked around. *How did I get here?*

The sound of a lullaby echoed toward him from somewhere off in the distance. Now he was moving through the foliage towards it, and he came to a clearing in the woods, where a woman sang the childlike hymn while sitting by a pond which reflected the moonlight.

"Hello?" he asked.

Her song stopped; she turned around, revealing her face. Olly gasped and sat upright in bed. He looked around his darkened bedroom as he regained consciousness and the dream faded from memory. The sound of the lullaby persisted, though, echoing into his bedroom from down the hall.

He untangled himself from his sheets, followed the tune to his studio and switched on the light. A woman strolled around inside the empty canvas, singing the same song that had serenaded him in his sleep.

Olly was astonished. "Hello?"

She turned toward him, revealing a white mask with piercing eyes and red lips over her face. "Hello?"

"How'd you get in there?" he marveled.

"I don't know," she said.

"What's your name?" he asked. "I'm Olly."

"Olly," she said slowly. "Sounds familiar. I'm Ella."

"Ella," said Olly, scratching his head. "I think I remember you, too. But I'm not sure where from."

"What do you look like?" asked Ella. "I can't see you."

"What can you see?"

"I can see myself," she said. "Through your eyes."

"So we're both looking at you..." Olly pondered. "Can you take off that mask?"

Ella struggled with the mask. "It's stuck. What's going on, Olly?"

"I don't know. But don't worry—I'm an artist. We'll figure

something out.”

Olly was at the exhibition opening the next day. The portraits of heroes from Greek myth adorned the walls. Orpheus, Aphrodite and Apollo stared into the room. Their eyes twinkled triumphantly, pompously, mocking the frail imperfections of their human onlookers from deified perches of immortality.

“What is it that inspires you to paint?” asked a journalist from the local arts intelligentsia.

“I paint in order to know myself,” said Olly. The journalist scrawled away in her notepad. “With every painting, I reach inside and take a piece of myself and transmute it through my paintbrush and onto the canvas.”

She laughed. “Nice metaphor.”

He nodded in all sincerity. “I’m serious. I picked up the technique by accident when I did my portrait of da Vinci, and apparently he used it on the Mona Lisa to paint a part of his soul onto the paint, and that part is still alive today, looking out at the crowds who come every day to admire and adore her.”

The journalist pointed at Aphrodite. “So, is there a piece of you inside this painting here?”

“As a matter of fact there is. There are several pieces, actually, comprised of both organic and ethereal materials, which—”

“Olly!” bellowed Bruno, lumbering boisterously in. He gripped Olly’s hand and gave it a shake. “Keeping well?”

Olly nodded. “I’ve got a new piece coming along.”

Bruno roared. “A new piece!” He smiled at the journalist.

"Good for your head, but not for your soul. I asked about your soul. You, Olly, you. Are you keeping well? How is your soul?"

"That's the thing I'm saying about this piece. I think I may have raised the transmutation process to a whole new level."

Bruno laughed incredulously.

"I'm serious, Bruno, there is something about this new portrait. Otherworldly powers are at work."

"That's good," said Bruno. "Now don't forget, the Art Monthly interview's next week, yeah?"

Olly lit up. "Yes!"

"Then the Arts Festival fortnight after."

"Oh, yeah, I forgot about that," said Olly, beaming. "My mind's been wandering, lately."

Bruno clapped him on the shoulder. Rolled up shirt revealed strong biceps, he smiled nonchalantly, unsympathetic to Olly's mental alienation. "Olly, my good man, step back and smell the roses once in a while, eh?"

Olly nodded. "Okay, I will. Thanks, Bruno."

Olly burst into the apartment and raced into the studio.

"Olly!" cried Ella happily, and she danced a jig. "You're home!"

Olly looked at her, still amazed at her appearance in his canvas. He'd half-expected her to not be here when he got home, that she was a figment of his imagination, created by his ego to counterbalance his manic depression and prevent the loss of hope. But here she was, right before his eyes in the canvas, with a mind of her own, completely outside the range

of his influence. He looked at her in amazement. "I figured it out," he said, slinking off his jacket.

"Hooray!" said Ella. "So tell me, what's going on here?"

"Well, I learned this trick, see, where I can take a part of myself, like an emotion, or an ideal, and transmute it into the paint as it hits the canvas when I'm painting a picture of something, or someone." He pushed the canvas containing Ella into a position where he'd be able to look at her and another portrait of Orpheus simultaneously. "See that portrait of Orpheus?" he said, looking partially at Orpheus, who was plucking his lute, and Ella, as he said it.

"Wow. Incredible," said Ella softly.

"I'm going to put you right up next to him so you can hear it." Olly turned the canvas around and put it against the canvas containing Orpheus so that they almost touched.

"Listen closely," he said, pressing his ear up to the canvas as he held Ella close to Orpheus. Ever so faintly the music played; Orpheus plucked surreal melodies from his lute.

"Is that real?" asked Ella.

Olly nodded. "As I painted, I channeled my creative juices through a filter of musical inspiration and released them into every brush-stroke on that canvas. And as the painting emerged, I could see those bits of myself, those parts that I had infused into, over and on top of the actual paint, and I listened closely and could hear the basic tone of the lutes sound, the general rhythm of the melodies. And with that feedback it became easier and easier to tap into that same part of myself and get it out and onto the canvas, and so the music emerged."

"What did you imagine when you painted me?" asked Ella.

"Nothing, that's the thing, I never painted you. But the other

night, I interacted with the canvas you're now a part of. I loved it, in a way, loved it more than myself, which isn't much, but it was enough to keep me going another day. Even though it was a canvas and incapable of love, and I'm a human, we were nevertheless equal."

She walked around in circles in the canvas, processing what he'd said. "You're brilliant," she muttered, then she stopped. "So I'm the part of you that loves." She spread her arms: "The best part of you!"

"I don't think so," said Olly.

"You said it yourself," said Ella. "You put your last shred of love into me. Beyond me, there's no love left in you."

Olly searched his feelings. He raised his eyebrows. The pain was gone. And so was the love. There was nothing left of him on the inside. No more creative juices. He was empty. All that remained was his body, his outer shell. He patted his chest to make sure it was there. "You might be right," he said.

Ella nodded sympathetically. "You must feel horrible right now, without me, without any of the good left in you. But even though it seems to you like you're all bad, it's not the way it is, because I'm the better part of you, and I love you more than you love me. See?"

"Are you talking in riddles, now?"

She smiled self-indulgently. "I'm good, aren't I?"

Olly chuckled. "You are good," he said, looking up at her shiftily, aware that she was watching him through his own eyes; she couldn't see the evil expression growing on his face. "But the thing is, Ella, the thing is...everything happens for a reason, yeah? I think the reason this has happened is because, it's like Bruno said, I need to focus on my soul. Do some soul work. And now that my feelings are gone, and I no

longer care, believe it or not, strange though it may seem to you, I think I like it better this way. I freed you, that's what I did—I freed us, both of us."

"What are you saying?" she asked.

"I think we're better off apart. It's not you; it's me."

She was incredulous. "I am you. You are me. Which means that by loving you, you're loving yourself. And by denying me, I'm denying me."

He furrowed his brows. "That doesn't make sense."

"Trust me, it's true," she said firmly. "You're in denial. And besides, what about me? Spare a thought for me, Olly. What am I to do? Trapped in here, all alone, full of love, nothing to do." She watched herself through Olly's eyes as she tried to scratch away the canvas as a way of escape, to no avail.

"It's not my fault you got trapped in there," he shrugged. "Besides, you'll be okay. I'll take care of you, entertain you, like a pet. We'll hang out together, I swear."

She flushed with anger, furious at the turn of events. "It's your fault!" It took all her will, went against all her instincts, to commit an act of emotional abuse against Olly and deliberately turn away from him and ignore him. As she did so, she lost her sight and simultaneously disappeared.

A lump caught in Olly's throat. "Hey! Where'd you go?" She didn't respond, and Olly felt queasy, on the verge of fainting, as parts of his soul were sucked into the empty space left by his unanswered question and forever lost in the void. Some kind of metaphysical connection existed between himself and Ella in the canvas, now. In order for him to be happy, Ella would need to be happy, too.

After a sleepless night, Olly entered his studio and approached the canvas, which he tapped with his finger. "Ella? Come out, come out, wherever you are!"

Silence. "I've figured out a way to fix this situation," he said.

Ella turned around and appeared again. Despite the mask, she was beautiful. "Really?"

"Sure. I don't know how to get you out, but I think I can transmute the rest of myself into the canvas as well."

"You would do that for me?"

"I've realized that if you're not real, then I'm crazy. And if you are real, then this way we can live together in perpetual bliss, untroubled by the cares of the world. Either way, it's a win-win."

Ella thought about it. "For you it's a win-win. But I'll be stuck here, inside the painting," she said. "And it won't be true love. We'll only be loving our self."

"You'll be loving me, actually. I'm going to paint myself in as the landscape around you. I'll be your whole world, your everything."

"But it won't be real!"

"Relax. You won't know the difference. It'll be like a dream for you, a beautiful dream." Olly picked up his paintbrush and began filling in the landscape around Ella. He decided to paint her in a clearing in the forest by a pool. As he painted, his body was transported into the canvas. He started with the ground, and as it appeared on the canvas, his feet disappeared from the studio.

"There has to be a better way," said Ella, panicking. "A way for me to get out of here and become a part of you again."

“Isn’t this what you wanted?” said Olly. “To be together again?”

“Not at the cost of our identity! Don’t do it, Olly! You’re only trapping yourself.”

“I’ve thought about it,” he said as he painted away his legs into the painting. “And I’m happy to settle for ignorant bliss.” He began painting, singing the lullaby as he did, to help ease Ella into a state of narcosis.

Tears welled in Ella’s eyelashes as she watched herself through Olly’s eyes running around the canvas, looking for a way to escape. Before long the foreground, replete with a deep pond, was finished, and Olly began working on the thick foliage of the forest in the background. His legs had all but disappeared, and all that was left of him was his torso, floating in the air. He sang happily as he brushed away.

Ella couldn’t help forgetting what was going on; the world became more and more like a dream. She began to weep. The tears that fell down her face began to wash away the mask she wore in the painting, and her vision shifted from Olly’s eyes to her own, gradually immersing her into the world of the painting, where it seemed to her as if she was awakening from a dream that she couldn’t remember.

Olly’s arms had disappeared, now, and there was nothing left but his head. He put the paintbrush in his mouth to paint the last of himself into the canvas.

Ella looked around at the forest, dimly aware that something wasn’t right, that she had to do something, to take some action, to get out of here. The distant echo of Olly’s voice singing the lullaby momentarily triggered her memory, and she realized what must be done. She calmly went to the pond and knelt over it, seeing her face for the very first time. As she peered at the reflection peering back at herself in the pond, it all came flooding back, and she remembered how she’d gotten

here in the first place, how she'd come to set the trap so she could be free, and it had gone according to plan. She smiled. She was no longer afraid. She leaned into the pond and waited till the final notes of the lullaby were being sung before falling in and immersing herself into the loving embrace of her own reflection.

Bruno swung his convertible around the corner and skidded to a halt out the front of Olly's building. He grabbed his crowbar, marched up the stairs to Olly's apartment and knocked. "Olly? You missed the Art Monthly interview, and the Fine Arts Festival. What's going on?"

The light of the hallway flooded into the darkened apartment as the door burst open and Bruno stepped in. "Olly?" The apartment was silent. He turned down the hallway and marched into the bedroom. Empty.

He went to the studio, switched on the light, and was struck numb by the sight of Olly's large face, which stared into Bruno's very core from the reflection of a pond within the canvas.

Bruno clutched at his heart and dropped to his knees as Olly's penetrating gaze pierced through the shell of Bruno's frustration and wrenched every last shred of empathy from him. The air caught in his throat, rendering him incapable of breath, and he kneeled there on the studio floor suffocating for several interminably long seconds as his mind grappled with the painting's incomprehensible beauty. Olly wore a singular look of sublime love that captured everything good in humanity. His eyes twinkled triumphantly, mockingly, from a perch of immortality, down upon Bruno, humbling him into a crumpled lump of self-loathing that trembled piteously on the studio floor.

Try as he might, he was unable to tear his eyes away. Tears

came unbidden to his eyes as he saw how impossibly short humanity fell of the ideal represented by the integrity of the young man's face in the painting. He thought about how he'd used Olly, how he'd taken him for granted, how he'd secretly despised him, when all Olly had ever tried to do was inspire people to build a better world for everyone. He was wracked with a bout of guilt that shuddered over him in heaving sobs, and he was swept away, far away from the present, carried across an ocean of forgotten emotion, and finally washed up on some distant shore, never to be the same again.

Bruno tore his eyes from the canvas and looked back upon the ordinary world, which appeared bland, lifeless, grim in comparison to the timeless splendor of the painting. He wheezed and wiped his tear-stained face with his sleeve as he took the necessary time to compose himself before taking out his phone and calling the authorities. "Hello, police? I'd like to report a missing person."

Weeks later, Olly's self-portrait hung on the wall of an expensive restaurant overcrowded with fancily dressed people who chattered gaily.

Looking out from beneath the surface of the pond and into the world beyond, he could see them all, dressed in their cocktail suits and dresses, oblivious to all that lay outside the boundless egotism of their own self-absorption. He heard the timbre of their voices, but the words were all the same: "Olly," they mocked. "Olly-Olly-Olly-Olly-Olly." Their faces, too, were unknowable to him—every single one wore Narcissus' mask.

He called out to them, trying to help them to see true beauty, to know the real love that was here for them in these layers of paint, so they could escape from themselves and not need to

hide their true faces behind the grandiose facades they wore. But the water muffled his screams, and the people laughed all the harder at their own wit, their joy increasing inversely in proportion to his suffering. He thrashed about wildly, trying to move, trying to change, trying to do something, but it was no use: he was unequivocally trapped beneath this watery grave, irrevocably framed within the borders of this canvas, immortalized indefinitely with this heroic expression on his face, unable to ever close his eyes, to look away.

He wailed in unfathomable agony, "Ella!" and yearned with all his might for the people he saw to give him even a cursory glance, to take in just a portion of his quintessence, and save him and themselves both. But they were so engrossed in themselves, so taken in by their own quintessences, that even when a pair of eyes chanced to look in his direction, they saw nothing of him beyond the parts that reflected themselves.