

## **PENELOPE'S TRADITION: REINTERPRETATIONS OF THE MYTH IN CONTEMPORARY PORTUGUESE POETRY**

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### **Abstract**

Any reflection on contemporary rewritings of the myth of Penelope should first establish the conventional threads in the Greco-Latin tradition, to which they are all indebted. Fragility and suffering, violence and harassment, insight and talent, recognition and reunion are structuring motifs of this narrative. Although we know the diffusion that, since remote times, is hidden behind fragmentary references, we take for granted that the determining roots that have lasted throughout the centuries are the *Odyssey* and Ovid, *Heroides*. Portuguese literature has also submitted to the fascination of the episode and the symbolism it contained. If we take into account only contemporary poetry, there are multiple authors who, in an explicit way, returned to the subject. From this patrimony, we will consider two poets, Miguel Torga and Manuel Alegre, in a way articulated in their thematic and aesthetic treatment of Ulysses and Penelope.

### **Keywords**

*Odyssey*; Ovid; reception; Torga; Alegre.

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## Resumo

Qualquer reflexão sobre reescritas contemporâneas do mito de Penélope deverá estabelecer previamente os tópicos convencionais na tradição greco-latina, de que todas elas são devedoras. Fragilidade e sofrimento, violência e assédio, perspicácia e talento, reconhecimento e reencontro são motivos estruturantes dessa narrativa. Embora sabendo a difusão que, desde tempos remotos, se oculta por trás de referências fragmentárias, damos por certo que as raízes determinantes para todo esse lastro que perdurou, ininterrupto, ao longo dos séculos, são a *Odisseia* e Ovídio, *Heroides*. A literatura portuguesa também não se isentou do fascínio pelo episódio de Ítaca e pelo simbolismo que continha. A termos em conta apenas a poesia contemporânea, são múltiplos os autores que, de modo explícito, regressaram ao assunto. Desse património iremos considerar dois poetas, Miguel Torga e Manuel Alegre, de certo modo articulados no tratamento, temático e estético, que dedicam a Ulisses e Penélope.

## Palavras-chave

*Odisseia*; Ovídio; recepção; Torga; Alegre.

## Penelope: relevant threads in the weaving of a myth

We depend largely on the *Odyssey* to establish a profile for the figure of Penelope. As a transversal presence in the poem, the configuration of the queen of Ithaca takes on various components: of queen regent, in the absence of the lord of the kingdom, of woman victim of harassment by numerous suitors, and of mother and wife, challenged by a long loneliness, which left her in charge of waiting for the return of her husband absent in war and raising, alone, the son still a child. The character integrates, therefore, political traits, along with other domestic, personal and emotional ones.

Considering the structure of the poem, Penelope is not a static figure; throughout the narrative, she undergoes an evolution, in which what seems surrender to suffering gives way to a more energetic and ingenious intervention, which may become competitive with that of the hero. Just as Ulysses struggles to return home and resume his role, the queen strives to preserve power and heritage while awaiting its rightful holder. So that her contribution to the return of normality to Ithaca is no less than the *polymechania* of Ulysses; it is also the result of the persistence and finesse of the one who, in the palace, lives her own adventure.

The evolution proposed by the *Odyssey* includes, first of all, the topic of fragility and suffering. As a result of her loneliness, Penelope is confronted with the longing for her absent husband (1.325-44), with the fear for the safety of her son, still very young, who has left in search of his father (4.675-8, 4.697-702, 4.707-10), and with the need to face the harassment of suitors. The tears then become her trademark (1.363, 4.800-1, 11.181-3, 13.336-8). Beauty, a conventional quality of the female portrait, in the context of absence and loneliness constitutes an aggravating factor for the violence that surrounds Penelope;<sup>2</sup> but when the time comes for a reunion, after so many adventures - also romantic ones - that punctuate Ulysses' journey, there is an attraction between the couple that persists and rebuilds the complicity of the lords of Ithaca (23.231-2, 23. 254-5, 23.257-8).

In addition to abandonment and solitude, Penelope expresses another paradigm, that of the victim of harassment by suitors who relentlessly attack her reserve and resistance (2.50). The gods, however, have not abandoned her; impressed by her sincere pain and piety she has always

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<sup>2</sup> Turkeltaub, 2014: 114 sees Penelope's beauty in a double perspective: that which characterises her as a type of seduction and makes her a factor of ruin for those around her; or, on the contrary, the identifying trait of the matron, mistress of the house, tempered by suffering.

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shown, they convey to her in dreams consolation and energy, ensuring that, in the palace of Ithaca, a metamorphosis takes place: that of a queen harried by many ambitions around her, and of a suffering wife and mother, into an active and struggling heroine.

With the recovery of energy, Penelope's acumen and talent for forging strategies is also revealed, which are, in Homer, her main weapon of defence against suitors. From the stratagem of the web,<sup>3</sup> the continuous doing and undoing of a task, which suspends time and perpetuates her resistance, "deceit" (*dolos*) is projected (2.88-106).

The last Books of the *Odyssey* - which recount Ulysses' return, the reunion with his wife and the reestablishment of the authority of the sovereign - revitalise the portrait of Penelope. Her profile is now sharper and more enigmatic. This is the moment for the wife to act and to show her gifts of wisdom and intelligence, in a game that becomes one of challenge and complicity with the newcomer.

It is in the confidences of the night, after the suitors had retired, that the poet provides a first meeting between the royal pair. In the beggar in front of her, the queen sees only an informer who can give her news of Ulysses, although his appearance suggests a resemblance to her husband.<sup>4</sup> Intuitively Penelope feels, in the strange visitor, a confidant to whom she confesses the tricks she has used to deceive her suitors, fed by a divine inspiration (19.136-47). The web she is making and unmaking - she now openly admits - is no more than a pretext, but the stratagem ran out and the obligation of a new wedding appears inevitable (19.157-9). Tears dominate this episode, in which Penelope expands her grief at the absence of a husband she has before her and is not yet able to acknowledge. Ulysses, moved, but understanding that the time had not yet come to reveal himself, "as if they were of horn or iron, on his eyelids" kept his eyes immobile and held back tears. This scene is a sketch of recognition, where, under the intention of interrogating someone who will bring her news of her husband, Penelope feels an inexplicable attraction to the one who turns

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<sup>3</sup> Although narrated several times in the *Odyssey* - cf. 2.94-110 (by Antinous), 19.137-56 (by Penelope before an unrecognized Ulysses), 24.128-46 (by one of the suitors, in Hades, before Agamemnon) - as a fact already past, the emphasis given to this resource by Penelope does not, in Homer, have the visibility that the later reception gave it.

<sup>4</sup> For some scholars (cf. Emlyn-Jones, 1984: 2) this is the moment of a 'subconscious' recognition, which Penelope hesitates to confess, but which is consummated in her innermost.

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out to be Ulysses. But the resistance of her interlocutor prevents the revelation that seemed so close.<sup>5</sup>

Vengeance and slaughter of the suitors is a male function, put in the hands of Ulysses and Telemachus. Penelope, withdrawn in her chambers, is granted a sleep by the gods which absents her from the events in progress. When she awakes, the revenge is consummated against unfaithful suitors and servants. All that remains is the final denouement, the consummation of *anagnorisis*, which the poet elaborates with delay.<sup>6</sup> The reunion with Ulysses is difficult: how to act, question him in detail or simply give him a welcome kiss? (23.85-7). A prolonged silence allows Penelope to recognize every trace in her interlocutor (23.90-5), at a distance that not even the reproaches of Telemachus - in the role of mediator between the parents - and Ulysses - for an apparent harshness on the part of his wife - can break (23.96-107, 23.166-72).<sup>7</sup> The last doubts need unequivocal signs, those that constitute the complicity of a couple (23.107-10). Only the conjugal bed, bearer of a secret known only to the two of them - the direct carving of an olive tree that makes it immovable - brings the final proof; only then does Penelope surrender and appease, so that an exuberant joy replaces long years of sadness.

The Homeric portrait of Penelope, at once suggestive and enigmatic, became a flexible standard for those creators who, over time, have wanted to take it up, manipulate it, reinterpret it and remake it. There are countless testimonies of the popularity of the myth of Penelope throughout Greek and Latin antiquity. However, due to its repercussion in modernity - and, I believe, also in the Portuguese versions - it may be interesting to refer the treatment that the queen of Ithaca deserved in Ovid's *Heroides* 1. Without betraying Homer, Ovid, in a letter written by Penelope to Ulysses,

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<sup>5</sup> Ulysses worries about security so that nothing fails in his revenge, but it must be acknowledged that some doubt remains in his mind as to Penelope's loyalty. Cf. Carlier, 2002: 290.

<sup>6</sup> Emlyn-Jones, 1984: 1 underlines the delay of this encounter, which makes the recognition of Ulysses and Penelope a central episode in the Homeric version of the myth. According to this scholar, the process that leads to *anagnorisis* stretches from 17.508, in which Penelope asks Eumeus to bring the stranger to the palace to question him about the whereabouts of Ulysses, to 23.205 in which the queen tearfully greets her husband's presence at home.

<sup>7</sup> Roisman, 1987: 62 sees in this reserve of Penelope some resentment for the secrecy to which husband and son condemned her. After all their silence left her in a position similar to that of the traitors - suitors and unfaithful servants - to whom Ulysses destined the same treatment.

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psychologically deepens the feelings of an abandoned and unsatisfied woman, moved by an explicit and innovative range of emotions.

This is a wife for whom the delay in her husband's return is due not so much to fate as to his will. Recalling the proceedings of the war (1.33-56), her words do not praise the hero - whom she accuses of being 'slow' in returning (1.1) - nor the victory; jealousy is added to all her torments as a new feeling: if many of the warriors are already at home, if the world is returning to normality, why is her husband delaying, perhaps involved in new and attractive loves (1.75-8)? To fidelity, Ovidian Penelope superimposes a confessed love for Ulysses (1.83-4) and it is in the name of this love that she claims the urgency of his return. But important for Penelope's appeal is also that past beauty of a young girl that the years have converted into an old woman (1.115-6).<sup>8</sup> Among all the penalties, time will prevent the resumption of a passion that wrinkles deteriorate. In a word, in Penelope as created by Ovid, fidelity is imposed not for its own sake but in the name of a deep and monogamous love.<sup>9</sup>

The main oscillations in the reception of this myth reside in the feelings experienced by Penelope, sometimes fearful and desperate in the face of the pressures that surround her, sometimes firm and believing in a future of happiness that the promises of Ulysses and the divine protection guarantee her. Perseverance and fidelity are expected from her, overshadowing other feelings or reactions to which the creators paid more and more attention. In the reunion, emotions are often measured on Penelope's side. Many of the emotional gaps that the *Odyssey* left open - Penelope's conjugal and personal dissatisfaction, the frustration before a life in suspense, the compensation that could be found in a new marriage, the state of mind that such a long absence of Ulysses was creating - conditioned, especially in the 20th century versions, the episode of the reunion. Within this context, Penelope will always be dependent on that factor that conditions her own will, the return of Ulysses. She will be, therefore, an "open" character, in the sense that all her emotions and attitudes depend on an absent husband who is the reason of her life.

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<sup>8</sup> The *Odyssey* also points out the passage of time and the damage it does to beauty, without it being a problem. Ulysses, before the immortal beauty of Calypso, recognizes that Penelope is mortal and subject to the deterioration of the years (5.218); in the same way Penelope, before the recognition, imagines how aged Ulysses could be (19.358-60).

<sup>9</sup> Very physical, as the insistence on sexual vocabulary makes clear; cf. Jacobson, 1974: 268-73.

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## Penelope in contemporary Portuguese poetry

... precisely because of what is incomplete, fragile, crude and mortal about her,  
I love her, and I long for her congenial company!

Eça de Queiroz, *Perfection* 236

Perhaps these words of Ulysses characterizing Penelope, as Eça portrayed her in his short story "Perfection",<sup>10</sup> are a synthesis of the preferences of Portuguese authors in the manipulation of the lady of Ithaca. What Ulysses claims is the right to be mortal, with all its inherent imperfections, alongside a Penelope who shares this same quality with him (*Perfection* 237): "Therefore will I suffer, in a patient spirit, all the evils with which the gods assail me in the gloomy sea, to return to a human Penelope whom I command, and console, and rebuke, and accuse, and thwart, and teach, and humble, and dazzle, and therefore love from a love that constantly feeds on these waving ways, as the fire is nourished by contrary winds!" The complicity and humanity of the royal couple of Ithaca is a perspective that, among the essential topics in the myth, has become dominant in Portuguese readings of Penelope.

It is above all in poetry that, throughout the 20th century in Portugal, the myth of Penelope has made its mark on us. Absence, the emptiness of war, the dangers of the journey, the waiting translated into the making and unmaking of the web, the unstoppable flight of time, the ephemeral nature of feelings, continue to be the most common topics, sometimes focused on Ulysses, sometimes on Penelope. "Penélope" has been the title of several poems by well-known Portuguese authors: Miguel Torga (1907-1995),<sup>11</sup> Sophia de Mello Breyner Andresen (1919-2004),<sup>12</sup> David Mourão Ferreira (1927-1996),<sup>13</sup> Fernando Guimarães (1928-),<sup>14</sup> Hélder Macedo (1935-),<sup>15</sup> José Augusto Seabra (1937-2004),<sup>16</sup> Nuno Júdice (1949-).<sup>17</sup> Or else, one of her usual attributes is adopted as the title instead of the name, as in the case of

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<sup>10</sup> See Silva, 2019: 73-90.

<sup>11</sup> *Diário X* 1968: 54.

<sup>12</sup> *Coral* 1950, quoted from Sousa's edition 2015: 288.

<sup>13</sup> *Obra poética I*. 1980: 134.

<sup>14</sup> "Algumas palavras de Penélope, outras de Ulisses" (Some words of Penelope, others of Ulysses), *Casa: o seu desenho* (1982-1985), *Poesias completas 1* (1993) 200-3. Hidden under the title *A analogia das folhas* (1990: 51) the myth of Penélope returns as the one who knows to deceive.

<sup>15</sup> *Poemas novos e velhos* 2011: 55.

<sup>16</sup> *Gramática Grega* 1985: 31.

<sup>17</sup> Published in *O movimento do mundo* 1996: 663; quoted from *Poesia reunida 1967-2000* (2000). Lisboa, Dom Quixote: 663. By Nuno Júdice as well, and on the confrontation between Ulysses and the suitors, is "Ladainha de Ulisses", *A matéria do poema* 2008: 46. ***Heródoto, Unifesp, Guarulhos, v.7, n.1 - 2022.1. p. 42-61.***

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“Tecelagem” (Weaving),<sup>18</sup> “*Sunt lacrimae rerum*”,<sup>19</sup> de Fiama Hasse Pais Brandão (1938-2007) e “Ítaca”,<sup>20</sup> de Daniel Faria (1971-1999).

From this poetic heritage inspired in the sovereigns of Ithaca, we propose to analyse some examples, with the particularity of having as a common thread a dialogue between Ulysses and Penelope. After a poem by Torga, which seems to contain some elements of reference for other Portuguese treatments of the myth, we will pass to Manuel Alegre who, in several poems, redesigns the same face to face between the famous pair. In their diversity and innovation, these poems are faithful to the mainstays of the classical sources, because they are based on the themes that Homer and Ovid equally privileged: fragility and suffering, violence and harassment, wit and talent, recognition and reunion.

### Miguel Torga<sup>21</sup>

(Poem written in Coimbra, on the 1st June 1965)

Penelope

Ulysses banished  
In the sea of life,  
I say your name and fill the loneliness.  
But then I ask my heart  
For how long can you still  
Weave and unweave the canvas of longing...  
Don't despair  
And wait for me  
Until I come back, and in the shadow of old age  
Tell you, ashamed,  
The unworthy deeds  
That I committed  
In the skin of the half-god I never was

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<sup>18</sup> *Obra breve* 1991: 190.

<sup>19</sup> *Obra breve* 1991: 504.

<sup>20</sup> *Poesia* 2012: 319.

<sup>21</sup> Miguel Torga (1936-), a doctor by profession, is a well-known Portuguese poet, playwright, novelist and short story writer, who has always declared himself independent of any literary movement. He was a member of *Presença*, a magazine aimed at those who wanted to break with the weight of convention, which he abandoned because he felt that *Presença* was not entirely fulfilling its purposes. In the *Diaries*, which he wrote throughout his life, he relates "the discovery and subsequent personal fulfilment" (Álvarez, 2005: 462). Titles from poetic collections such as *Odes*, *Nihil sibi*, *Cântico do Homem*, *Orfeu Rebelde*, bear witness to the very abundant classical imprint on his creations. See Rocha Pereira, 2019<sup>a</sup>, 2019<sup>b</sup>.

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Be you divine, really, there,  
On that island of hope,  
True to our love  
Of human creatures.  
Make it beautiful  
The myth  
of my adventures.

*Diário X* 2007: 1065.

Torga's poem uses transversal elements in the Portuguese lyric dedicated to this myth and may have left resonances in other creators. It is built on a monologue of Ulysses, in a context of absence. "Banished", the epithet that qualifies him right at the opening of the poem, gives "the man of a thousand devices, who wandered so much" (*Odyssey* 1.1.) another profile.<sup>22</sup> He does not have that resistance and combativeness of tradition, promising success and victory to the hero of Ithaca. There seems to be, on the contrary, some exhaustion and disappointment caused by distance and time; the fragility that usually attends those who await him is, in this case, transferred to the seafarer himself; because, like his model, Ulysses sails, tormented, "in the sea of life", this verse assuming the traditional symbolism of Ulysses' journey: the tormented search of himself and of his path. Solitude is now the surrounding context and the only enemy, replacing all those, friends and enemies, who populated the route of the Homeric hero. Left to himself, Ulysses takes refuge in a name, in which memory and hope are contained: the traits that characterise the memory of a beloved woman and the expectation of reunion. "Penelope", a simple name, contains all this potential.

The resistance and overcoming of the pain of absence is then transferred to Penelope. The violence and harassment of which she is a victim are only perceptible in the mention of the web, her weapon as always. The threat of the suitors does not exist; Penelope's greatest enemy is time, and the usual "waiting" to which she is subjected.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Ulysses receives, in the *Odyssey*, several epithets that emphasize the dangers to which he was exposed and the winning versatility of his character: *polyphron* "of much talent", *polymechanos* "of many strategies", *polymetis* "of great prudence", and *polytlas* "who suffered much".

<sup>23</sup> In the *Odyssey*, the epithets applied to Penelope value her wisdom and prudence (*periphron* "pondered", e. g. 1.329, 4.787, 4.808, 4.830, 5.216, 11.446, 14.373, 15.41, 16.409, 16.435; *echephron* "wise", 4.111, 13.406, 16.130, 16.458, 17.390, 24.198, 24.294; *aidoie* "modest", 19.336; *pinyte* "careful", 21.103). These merits are superimposed by the talent for mastering stratagems; see Mueller, 2007: 337-62.

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For this reason, it is on her that the reencounter will depend. And the picture that Ulysses foresees is stripped of that youthfulness that Athena guaranteed to the lords of Ithaca in the *Odyssey*. If the journey did not ensure glory, it ensured Ulysses maturity and knowledge, but also the woman who awaits him. Humanity is once again the feature that imposes itself. But if the gods are absent from Torga's poem, their epic existence marks, in a way, their presence. Ulysses divests himself of the gallants of "half-god (I never was)", to give Penelope that status, she is "divine, really", "for the fidelity she places *in our love*, for being *a human creature*, but behaving in a superior way" (Aguilar, 2010: 73). The returning warrior is an old man, worn out by the years and stripped of a hero's robes. The celebration of glory is nothing but the invention of poets, which reality does not consent to. For this reason, the account that Ulysses will give of his journey - just as his model told it to the Phaeacians, in a mixture of pain and pride - is now the ashamed statement of someone who has nothing more to tell than "unworthy deeds". With this confession, the poetic self transforms into *Penelopeid* what was once *Odyssey*.<sup>24</sup> It is Penelope's excellence (*arete*) that saves, based on hope and fidelity. Just as the epic poet embellished the merits of the hero, in the Portuguese lyric it will be the beloved woman who will receive the crowns, for guaranteeing success to the "myth of my adventures".

It is undeniable how much Torga's poem owes to Homer, in its motifs, symbolism, and even in some formal echoes. But Torga's option is also, to a certain extent, a kind of subversion of Ovid. In the *Heroides*, Penelope is the one who despairs, writing to Ulysses (I - "From Penelope to Ulysses"), asking him to hurry up and return. She then tells him of her nights spent weaving an unfinished web, of her inability to lie down on an empty bed (1.7, 9-10). This is the wife who suffers and is distressed by the fragility of the family and the kingdom (97-8). At the end of her missive, like Homer's Penelope and Torga's Ulysses, she reflects on ageing, regretting that life has not allowed them to enjoy their youth side by side (1.115-116; cf. *Odyssey* 23.210-2). Homer and Ovid seem, thus, to be reconciled, in Torga, in harmonious complicity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Cf. Gilchrist, 1997: 104-5.

<sup>25</sup> On the use of Penelope's web by Torga, as a metaphor of poetic creation (*Diário VI* 3, 1978: 148, *VIII*, 1976: 164, and of painting in *Diário XI*, 1973: 94), see Ramos, 2013. Aguilar, 2010: 73 considers that the poem "Penelope" can also be read according to the same metaphor. On the Ovidian influence in the poem "Penelope", see Aguilar, 2010: 71. About the interpretation of the poem, see also Ferreira, 1996: 437-62.

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## Manuel Alegre<sup>26</sup>

Like Ulysses I seek you and despair

Like Ulysses I seek you and despair  
like Ulysses I trust and distrust  
and as a river flows into the sea  
to you I go. Only Homer does not sing me.

But like Ulysses I pass through a thousand dangers  
I listen to the siren and struggle to support myself  
and although I have everything I have nothing  
that in not having you everything is punishment.

Only Homer does not sing me. But as U-  
lysses I go with my song like a boat  
hearing your call - Siren Homeland  
Penelope who won't surrender - you

that wait weaving a time idea  
that your people may again wield the bow  
as Ulysses for you in this Odyssey.

*O Canto e As Armas* 2017: 83

In this poem, as in the following ones by M. Alegre, the structure is based on a monologue of Ulysses. Despair, a feeling associated to exile and search, when hope seems to collapse, also echoes in a certain way the tone adopted by Torga. But the scope of the composition, which in the poet of the *Diário X* was universal, focus, in Alegre, on a personally experienced absence, by political estrangement; something biographical is associated with the motif of Ulysses and Penelope, which serves so well the life path of this author.<sup>27</sup> Penelope, more than the beloved wife or the queen regent,

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<sup>26</sup> Manuel Alegre (1936-), a well-known personality in Portuguese intellectual and political circles, jurist graduated at the University of Coimbra, has divided his activity between a prominent political participation and poetic creation. His life path as a politician in exile (1964-1974) and democratic activist has directly influenced his poetic thought and production. It is this connection, expressed in his first titles *Praça da Canção* (1965) and *O Canto e as Armas* (1967), that justifies the censorship of these productions by the political police in the service of the dictatorship. This was only the beginning of a honorable process of citizenship, and of a successful and award-winning literary career.

<sup>27</sup> The comment of Santos, 2020: 80 is enlightening about this symbology: "In literature, exile is a recurring theme for the diversity and richness of meanings that the word assumes, especially in the poetic field. The work of Manuel Alegre is no exception; however, in this work, as in the great poetics, exile is moulded into its own unique form and semantics that run through and multiply its vast expressions. In this sense, the Spanish comparatist Claudio Guillén (Guillén, 2005: 139-142) distinguishes three types of exile: exile as an original condition of humankind, linked to the expulsion from *Heródoto, Unifesp, Guarulhos, v.7, n.1 - 2022.1. p. 42-61.*

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is the homeland for which the poet aspires with anguish; it is she who nourishes the hope of survival. Therefore, Ithaca offers to Alegre's existence the right symbol in all its motives.<sup>28</sup>

The refrains "like Ulysses" and "only Homer does not sing me" mark two essential aspects in the poem: the model it obeys, that of the *Odyssey* and the experience of its protagonist; and the style the author gives to the rewriting, silencing the epic tone so that humanity - which is also identity - prevails.<sup>29</sup>

The voice heard in the first person is that of the poetic self/Ulysses, addressed to a single interlocutor, Penelope; the similarity with Torga is evident. The antitheses, expressing suspension and doubt, fragility and suffering, are also common to both: "Weave and unweave", "don't despair/and wait for me", in Torga; "I trust and distrust", "and although I have everything I have nothing", in Alegre.

Ulysses is the focus of this approach. A Ulysses more in line with "the one who suffered a lot" and "wandered a lot" than with "the one of a thousand artifices". Although despair is the overpowering feeling, in the face of the dangers that populate his wandering and punish him for a crime not committed, there is a perseverance that lights up in the darkness of absence: "and as a river flows into the sea/to you I go", "struggle to support myself".

Penelope, more than a name, has the seduction of a siren, who attracts the lost sailor to herself. Of the encounters that the *Odyssey* multiplies, which represent so many barriers between the hero and the desired return, the episode of the Sirens is the one that most resonates in Alegre. And there is no surprise in this, if they are the traditional holders of the song and

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Paradise, historical and real exile, for political or economic reasons, and, finally, the feeling of physical and spiritual exile in relation to life itself".

<sup>28</sup> As he states (Silva, 2020: 95): "...I think Homer's *Odyssey* is the great metaphor of our life. Ulysses' wandering is our search, the dissatisfaction, the non-conformism".

<sup>29</sup> Rocha Pereira, 2019b: 425 underlines the epic facet in M. Alegre: "*Aoidos* have called Manuel Alegre some of the best critics, certainly for seeing in him the poet who transmits the glory of the heroic and recent past, preserving much of the tone of the epic". And about the adaptation of poems by Alegre to music and song, she adds: "And that the main mode of transmission of some of his most famous compositions, from the times of the *Praça da Canção* (Song square) and *O Canto e as Armas* (Singing and weapons), was the song, everyone who dedicates himself to the study of his work knows it. Moreover, even though it may not be intentional, the insistence on words in the semantic area of "sing" in many poems, and even in the titles of the books just mentioned, cannot be considered devoid of meaning". Rocha Pereira, 2019b: 427 also acknowledges Homer, along with Dante and Camões, to be the most influential sources in M. Alegre.

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manipulators of its power. Only the effect of their song is inverted, from being a threat to the continuation of the journey to a stimulating melody, which unites the poet/traveler to the inspiring muse/country.

The song becomes the poet's mark, the statement in which the poetic self and Ulysses converge, now that Homer has consigned himself to silence; it is up to them not to celebrate, but to cry out against the dangers and threats upon Penelope. In her steadfastness and endurance lie, in contrast to the incidents that afflict the man lost at sea. The web is her weapon and guarantee of reencounter. And this time the web contains a message, addressed to a traveler who is also a people: that, with an eye to the past, he thinks how to ensure his future. Because this has always been the ultimate meaning of an *Odyssey*, starting from the most paradigmatic of them all, Homer's.

Where will you be Penelope who already

Where will you be Penelope who already  
I don't know if you wait I don't know if you weave  
a carpet and garlands? I wish  
you won't forget love if you forget me.

I wish it were your voice that I hear  
in this voice that I don't know if it's of sirens  
if it's your voice singing in my veins  
love that has become an idea that I fight for.

Because every poem is like a ship  
in which as Ulysses for you I am the sailor.  
I wish I were still the most accurate

when Ulysses for you wields the bow  
Penelope who borders with longing  
this love that binds me. And it is freedom.

*O Canto e As Armas* 2017: 84

There is in this sonnet an insistence on topics and aesthetic strategies that not only seem to echo those of Torga, but also establish a certain resonance between the two poems dedicated to Penelope, in *O Canto e As Armas*. In the first stanza we detect echoes of the composition that, two years earlier, Torga had dedicated to Penelope. What in it was the indirect enunciation of the doubt installed in the spirit of the absent – “But then I ask my heart/for how long can you still/weave and unweave the canvas of longing...” – gains in Alegre the acuity of a direct question: “Where will you be Penelope who already/I don't know if you wait I don't know if you weave/a carpet and garlands?” Desire and hope are superimposed to

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doubt, in both poets, suggestively expressed by an antinomic effect: in Torga, "Don't despair/ And wait for me/ Until I come back", reflected, in Alegre, by "... I wish/ you won't forget love if you forget me". This is, one might say, the expression of the Homeric component underlying both poems and, it seems to me, also reasonably parallel between the two.

More flagrant are the echoes that bring Alegre's two poems together. From the repetition of "I wish", the poet aspires to resume, in his path, each one of Ulysses' most remarkable adventures: that of the seafarer, in the first place, "Because every poem is like a ship/ in which as Ulysses for you I am the sailor"; but for the journey to culminate in success (and return), "I wish I were still the most accurate/ when Ulysses for you wields the bow", in the evocation of the test of the bow in which Ulysses participates in *Odyssey* 22 - already recalled, "that your people may again wield the bow" -, decisive for the recognition and reintegration of the absent in a finally recovered Ithaca.

In this case, from the second stanza onwards, a sense compatible with the particular reading that the poet of *O Canto e as Armas* makes of his model is also imprinted on the composition. The song of the poetic self merges then with the voice of seductive siren with which the homeland attracts him. And not only is the idea common to both poems, as the words themselves are close: what in "Like Ulysses I seek you and despair" was said "But as U- / lisses I go with my song like a boat/ hearing your call - Siren Homeland", now becomes "I wish it were your voice that I hear/ in this voice that I don't know if it's of sirens/ if it's your voice singing in my veins/ love that has become an idea that I fight for".

The essential meaning of "Where will you be Penelope who already" is affirmed, at the poem's close, with an expressive oxymoron, "this love that binds me. And it is freedom". In this cry goes all the love of the patriot, who sighs for a renewed homeland, where all the exiles can finally be guaranteed the ineffable happiness of being free.

#### Penelope or the Third Poem of the Wandering Portuguese

Every day I ask for Penelope  
every day I look for her carpet  
sometimes I arrive tired at the end of the afternoon  
with all the returns blocked  
and in the middle of the traffic queue I look for  
the lost path to Ithaca.

And when I knock on the door wet to the bone  
drenched in the rain of boredom and disaster  
sometimes you emerge from among the children and the routines

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the one I asked if she wanted to come  
when she embroidered a carpet and I had a boat.  
Then I remember the house in exile  
the small print of Ithaca  
the poem by Cavafy  
I remember the first child the nappies the fear  
to pick him up and bathe him.

So many moons so many seas have passed  
but you open the door and are waiting  
you help me to take off my coat  
and suddenly I know I'm back again  
like Ulysses to the beloved Ithaca.

*Livro do Português Errante* 2001: 41-2

Composed at a time when the political instability of the country belonged to the past, this poem by Manuel Alegre inspired by Penelope takes up the myth of Ithaca as an expression of the search for identity and a meaning to existence, in an ordinary everyday life. It is not about the poet in exile, but only about Man, for whom the routine of everyday life is a small but real and continuous odyssey. The touches of modernity are the mark of another tone and a new approach.

Time remains a prime factor in the adventure of any Ulysses. "Every day", an anaphora repeated in the first two verses of the poem, expands time beyond the wandering of the protagonist of the *Odyssey*; the journey does not finish in Ithaca, it will be repeated until the end of life, this being the ultimate goal of men. A journey in which obstacles, for any mortal of the 21st century, are the "blocked returns (...) in the middle of the traffic queue".

The reunion with Penelope is now far beyond that unique day when, after many years, the lord of Ithaca once again knocked at the door of his palace, hidden under the rags of a beggar. A "when I knock" promises repetition and routine to the gesture of the one who arrives, even so carrying the wreckage of a long and eventful journey, "wet to the bone/drenched in the rain of boredom and disaster". The famous episode that serves as a model to the adventure of each day is already past, only the memory of "the one I asked if she wanted to come/when she embroidered a carpet and I had a boat". But it works as a starting point, as if there was nothing to remember beyond it. After all, it had its origins at the end of time, the end of those times of which "the small print of Ithaca" keeps the memory and the expression. After Homer, the episode travelled through millennia, went

through various stages, like “the poem by Cavafy”.<sup>30</sup> Incidents were repeated, storms and dangers populated an always bumpy route. Until the moment, striking for all, when order settled in Ithaca, with the normality not exempt from fears that living always entails.

Penelope is once again the firm hand that welcomes the visitor with hospitality. Despite all the time that has passed, the same firm gesture is repeated in the opening of the door and in the taking off of the overcoat, of one who arrives battered by storms and winters. And as if universal time were suspended by a miracle of Penelope, "suddenly" fears give way to certainties, insecurity to peace of mind. The poetic self is again Ulysses, no longer "the one who suffered a lot" or "wandered a lot", but the one who reached safe harbor, "like Ulysses to the beloved Ithaca".

## Conclusion

Among the countless possibilities of recovering echoes of Penelope's myth from contemporary Portuguese poetry, we have chosen two poets, Miguel Torga and Manuel Alegre, in the first place because we feel that there is some resonance between both in their interpretation and writing; but also because, from the comparison between the two poets and between the successive creations of Alegre, we can draw some lessons on rewriting strategies.

For both, the undisputed models are Homer and Ovid, with obvious modulations. In all the compositions we have analyzed, the focus is placed on the relationship, close on different planes, of Penelope with Ulysses. The voice is always that of the exiled, although it does present a Penelope who, even if distant, is an integral and indispensable part of the construction of the pair. Other primordial components in the epic tradition - the suitors (here very indirectly suggested by the mention of the web), Penelope's motherhood or her condition as a lady in the female world of the palace - are simply erased so that the frame is narrowed to only one motif: the couple.

Time remains a central theme, responsible for the distancing with all the dangers it entails, but also for the threat of forgetting, which the sailor fears, and which Penelope, as always, counteracts with her tireless

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<sup>30</sup> On the Homeric element in Cavafi's poetry, see Kamperi, 2013. To the myth of Ithaca, Cavafi dedicated a poem entitled "Ithaka", in which he praises Ulysses' journey not as a succession of torments and trials, but as an experience rich in novelties and teachings; and if the return is assured to him, Ulysses, already old, on the point of finding his island again, will be a man "enriched by what he accumulated along the way".

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weaving. Between an "I" and a "you", each poem is also weaving the portrait of two souls. As if a complex encounter, which is, in a way, 'recognition', imposed itself, as in the Odyssey, as the unavoidable outcome of the adventure, that of life more than any other.

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