

## Fiction and Self-Knowledge: Daniel Mendelsohn, *An Odyssey. A Father, a Son and an Epic*

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### **Abstract:**

This study analyses Daniel Mendelsohn's recent work *An Odyssey. A Father, a Son and an Epic* through the connection between its two main levels: autofiction, which deals with the father–son psychoanalytic relationship, and the metatext of the *Odyssey* read as a narrative of searching the depths of human relationships. The distribution of the factual material according to this connection illustrates the function of literature to act like a mirror for our confusing and incomprehensible experiences. The pragmatic theory of the narrative formulated by Paul Ricœur in *Temps et récit*, according to which fiction becomes a mediator of self-knowledge, is invoked in relation to how the text handles the evolution of the father–son relationship.

**Key words:** rewriting, autofiction, metatext, identity, self-knowledge, refigure

What is the role of literature in self-knowledge? How do canonical books influence our life? These are the questions that Daniel Mendelsohn's autofiction *An Odyssey. A Father, a Son and an Epic* answers from the perspective of pragmatic reading, reuniting autobiographic experience and literary hermeneutics in an original approach. It is a story that pretends to be “true” and thematises the power of (Homeric) literature to reintegrate itself into the social, in this case the sensitive context of the genealogical relationships anticipated in the subtitle.

Classic examples of the dangerous identity relationships between literature and reality, Quixotism and Bovarism are concepts that reveal the capacity of a text to act upon life, when to grasp the meaning of a text means to go beyond ludic representations. The sociology of literature includes extreme cases indicative of the effects books can have on the reader, from banned books to *The Sorrows of Young Werther*, which triggered the copycat suicide phenomenon among teenagers, or to engaged literature written exclusively on content-related criteria. All these forms of mimeticism or epigonism validate the power of fiction to substitute for reality or at least to influence it.

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However, literature can also mirror our confusing, disorganised and incomprehensible experiences. In Dante's *Divine Comedy*, when Francesca da Rimini and Paolo Malatesta declare their love for each other, the book about Lancelot and Guinevere speaks on behalf of the two adulterers who are afraid to do it. This is another kind of effect literature can have on life, an effect that, *grosso modo*, is expressed through acknowledgment. "This story is about me", Mendelsohn's story seems to say, as a testimony to the beneficial consequences that understanding literature has on self-understanding, to the literature that reveals the reader's own range of feelings, perceptions and attitudes to conscience and verbalises them.

### **The *Odyssey* in counterpoint to life**

Mendelsohn's book does not belong to a certain genre. It is a hybrid work: autobiography, critical metatext, literary psychoanalysis, an example of literary praxeology. Or, as Dwight Garder says, it is "a classroom drama", "travel writing", "a work of biographical memoir that investigates the circumstances of Jay's life", "a work of literary criticism" (Garner, 2017). The six chapters synthesize the themes of the epic: *Proem (Invocation)*, *Telemachy (Education)*, developed on two levels, *Paideusis* (about fathers and sons) and *Homophrosyunê* (about husbands and wives); then *Apologoi (Adventures)*, *Nostos (Homecoming)*, *Anagorisis (Recognition)* and *Sêma (The Sign)*. The autobiographic material is also structured according to the themes of Homer's epic that classicist Daniel Mendelsohn teaches his students at Bard College, book after book, for sixteen weeks. The closely observed structural parallelism reminds of how Joyce sets the pace of Leopold Bloom's day, following the topoi of Ulysses' homecoming symbolically and naming the chapters in the first edition of his novel after them. In Mendelsohn's work, his own experience is a rewriting of the *Odyssey*, while the *Odyssey* is an inspiration for experience. This highlights the correspondence between "life" and its "commentary", within a system of mutual investitures: the personal event acquires meaning in the father – son dialogue prompted by the epic text, while the impression is that the epic stages, *a priori*, the lives of the two characters.

On the other hand, Mendelsohn's book reproduces the ring composition of the *Odyssey*, expressed by the Greek word *polytropos*, a composition relying on numerous additions that are not digressions, but a way to integrate the past, and sometimes even the future, into the present through associative spirals derived from the narrative thread – analepses, like the story about Ulysses' scar, or prolepses, like those in the proem or the prophecies of Tiresias or Poseidon. Their purpose is to make the history of the characters complete, to create their full

biographies. Mendelsohn's life story advances in a similar digressing manner, which is an exercise of imitative hypertextuality – a subtle homage to Homer and even Virgil, who quotes the former<sup>1</sup> in the first line of *Aeneid's* proem and then borrows his tropes and topoi that characterise the genre.

Interpreting Homer is a close reading and a psychologising hermeneutics that retains the generally valid human meanings of the epic rather than the mentality-related mutations occurring from Homer's time to the 21<sup>st</sup> century, all written in a language that remains critical yet never scholarly, uninhibited yet never vulgar. It is a different approach than that in Margaret Atwood's *The Penelopiad*, which criticizes patriarchy from the perspective of the current values and underlines the devastating consequences of phallogocratic dominance. In Mendelsohn's approach, the *Odyssey* becomes a "fresh" text, a gratifying lesson of contemporary life, with characters seen as real instead of imaginary people. The emphasis laid on its contemporary aspects puts the many traditional scholarly interpretations the *Odyssey* has generated for two millennia on a second place, because the history of understanding Homer's works is included into the story and explained quite naturally. The common reader confronts the professional reader and they both learn from each other, so that in the end the celebrated fictional text is read especially for its non-fictional value. "Life" and "the commentary", the facts and the visions are interwoven imperceptibly, proving that any life is liable to be read according to an archetypal behaviour and that such reading has the advantage of making the axes of a destiny discernible. The myth, says Durand, is the norm for the fullness of the novel (1992: 174). Mendelsohn's book proves that the myth is also the norm for autofiction, for "the story of life" that is, in turn, "a pocket epic". All the mythical scenarios of the family theme are scenarios of the son's search for his father (Jesus and Joseph, Jacob's son) and the mother's search for her son (Mary, Isis). The canonical works of fiction based on the paternity theme, with avatars like Hamlet, Edgar, Stephen Dedalus, Apostol Bologa, Niculae Moromete or Gheorghiuță from Sadoveanu's *The Hatchet* speak about the return of "the prodigal son" and his identification with his father.

### **You do not exist unless you have been recognised**

*An Odyssey* compares the odyssey of a Ulysses with that of the *writer* and Classics professor Dan Mendelsohn based on a common

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<sup>1</sup> *Arma virumque cano* is a reference both to *The Iliad*, which is about wars, and *The Odyssey*, which praises the clever man who travels the seas and will be given a name only later in the epic.

theme: the father–son relationship. It is an aspect that the Homeric commentary ignored, as the Odyssean myth has two directions of interpretation: a pattern of homesickness and a superlative example of the idea of conjugal love. However, Daniel Mendelsohn demonstrates that this theme is by no means inferior to the others, since the insistence upon it is revealed in the ring composition of the epic. The *Odyssey* begins with the *Telemachy* or the story of the son searching for his father, and ends with another son, Ulysses, who finds his father, old Laerte, after twenty years, withdrawn from public life.

In Mendelsohn's view, the *Odyssey* is not so much the narrative of the search of a physical place called "home", but a search within the area of interpersonal relationships: father–son, husband–wife, master–servant, king–competitors. It follows from his book that the "validation" of such relationships creates the feeling of "home" and not just the mere possession of a place or a rank. Therefore, the focus of the hermeneutics he applies to the Homeric text and his own life is the concept of *recognition*, with the tension between anonymity and identity, a concept thy will become his own mandala in his relationship with his father. In the *Odyssey*, Ulysses is recognised by his faithful swineherd, his dog Argos and his nurse Eurycleia as their master; by Telemachus as his father, by Penelope as her husband, by the suitors as their king and by Laerte as his son. Only after he has passed all these tests of fractured identity can he become what he was twenty years back again. We do not truly possess a certain quality if it is certified only externally and formally. We possess it on condition it is confirmed by the feelings and attitudes of the people we relate to, in other words, when the difference between what we are and what the others know about us is reduced to the revelation of an immutable inner "I". In this way, Mendelsohn develops a idea that is recurrent in the Homeric interpretation, namely that his epics are not focalised on exterior events – the Trojan War or the Greeks' navigation experience at the beginning of the Mycenaean period –, but they debate on the moral situations that these events produce (Drimba,1998: 58-59, 64). In Mendelsohn's perspective, Homer's major theme, both in the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad*, is that of the interpersonal relationships built during "a man's journey through life, from birth to death".

To make a parallel, we can say that Mendelsohn's character, the Father as a prototype, acquires this quality only toward the end of his life, when his son, a writer and a Classics professor at Bard College, conducts a seminar about Homer's *Odyssey* for his teenage students, and he, a retired eighty-year-old mathematician once fond of Latin, asks permission to assist. The dialogue between different ages, experiences and mentalities reproduces and stages, in the seminar room, the whole

range of masculine psychological and behavioural types that the Homeric bard expressed within a system of mutual implications: the boy (Telemachus), the man (Ulysses) and the old man (Laerte) or the son, the father and the grandfather. Consequently, the paternity theme opens to the larger theme of masculinity caught in the major moments of its evolution. The pattern of the three ages had already been described in the *Iliad*, where between Achilles and Paris on one side, and Priam and Nestor on the other, stands the long row of middle-aged heroes with an already established status both as brave warriors and wise men – the two areas in which, according to the Greek educational model, a man must be confirmed (Răileanu, 1990: 131-134). The epics are poems of the ages, the young and restless age of Achilles in the *Iliad* and the mature, versatile age of Ulysses in the *Odyssey*.

In Mendelsohn's approach of the Odyssean ideology, the Homeric text appears like a man-centred chronicle of family life. Among man's familial representations, the most interesting subject to analyse, says Mendelsohn, is not the growing young man, but the father as seen by his son: Ulysses viewed from Telemachus' angle, Laerte seen from Ulysses' perspective. This is not because of the motive of "descending generations", which is quite common in the Homeric epic, but because the main assertion about Mendelsohn's personal *quest*a is that, for a son, the father has a complex and mystical aura only because he precedes him, "A father makes his son out of his flesh and out of his mind and then shapes him with his ambitions and dreams, with his cruelties and failures, too. But a son, although he is of his father, cannot know his father totally, because his father precedes him; his father has always already lived so much more than the son has, so that the son can never know everything"<sup>2</sup>. Could this be the reason why Daniel Mendelsohn, in his private life, wished to be a father and had a family, even though he recognised his homosexuality in public? Could one discern, behind the writer's desire to have a family an "archetypal" initiative, an aspiration to paternity that opposes the fatherly model an equivalent force? This is what Lily, the woman for whose children he accepts to be "some kind of father figure" seems to imply, "It's funny [...] that you ended up doing just what your father did", although "it was a lot more complicated for you!" The father's experience-based authority over his son can never be annihilated. This is the reason why, when meeting Laerte – says Mendelsohn – Ulysses relinquishes his usual disguise, his cunning speech (Todorov, 1980: 324-326) that hides the truth under clever lies and declares his true identity.

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<sup>2</sup> All quotations are from Daniel Mendelsohn, *An Odyssey. A Father, a Son and an Epic*, New York, Alfred A. Knopf, 2017. Kindle edition.

### **A Father's complex and the refractions of the fatherly *imago***

Mendelsohn's biographic novel speaks about the failure to communicate with his father as early as his childhood. The son remembers a difficult, taciturn and incomprehensible father engrossed in his readings on various themes rather than involved in his family's life. Jay Mendelsohn is a positivist not only in his profession, but also in his everyday existence. He likes clarity and has an acute sense of responsibility and duty and he despises sentimentalism, subjectivity and nuances. He is a man of radical opinions, for whom vital matters have the value of axioms. For him, Ulysses cannot be a hero because he cheats on his wife, loses his comrades, always complains and only succeeds with help from the gods. His frequent outbursts will convince Dan to see in Ulysses a version deviated from the classic Achilles-type heroism – that of mature survival.

Having a completely different nature, the son will experience, according to a psychoanalytical model – ambivalent feelings for his father, vacillating between worship – “when I was a child I thought of my father of being all head” – and aversion to the inferiority complex his father's harshness gave him. “My resentment of my father's hardness, of his insistence that difficulty was a hallmark of quality, that pleasure was suspect and toil was worthy, strikes me as ironic now, since I suspect it was those very qualities that attracted me to the study of the Classics”, says Mendelsohn at the age of recollections. Is it just “irony” or the Oedipus complex with its double expression as assimilation and conflict, admiration and competition with his father, rendered in his desire to surpass him in a field in which he was just an amateur? The mathematician in Jay Mendelsohn regretted all his life that because he appreciated science and exactness – Latin grammar has the prestige of science for him – he had quit the study of Virgil and Ovid, which was a model of superior education.

The writer admits that by the age of thirty he was dominated by fear and an inferiority complex, that the shame of failing to be the kind of his father wanted “coloured my dealings with him through much of the early part of my life, making me want to hide from him”. He and his father will become close only later, due to their common passion for the classical languages and their conversations on the *Aeneid*, which the son studies in his first post-university year, and they will reconcile even later, after a quarter of a century, once they have shared the experience of the *Odyssey*. Meanwhile, for Dan, the failed relationship makes him seek adoptive, spiritual fathers such as mentor-professors or “candidates to father me”, his roommates' sport-loving, well-mannered dads. Dan sees his own psychoanalytic status in Telemachus, the “orphan” who, having no male models to follow (his father is missing and his

grandfather has retired to the country), turns to alternative figures like Eumaeus or Mentos/Mentor, which are Athena's representations. In his turn, Jay invests his fatherly feelings in substitute sons like Nino, his colleague from Grumman, which he takes under his protection in an act of self-sabotage. Although he has always been obsessed with education and titles, he gives up defending this doctoral thesis because he can't stand the idea of failing in front of his younger "disciple", for whom he was a model. Dan is intrigued to discover that although Jay has apparently failed in his role as his biological father, he has become a warm, honest and dedicated fatherly figure for his students. At the end of the seminars, Dan realises that his father has been the same all the time, but he has heard only what he wanted to hear and has seen only what he wanted to see, "Étudier *l'Odyssee* en présence de mon père a développé notre intelligence émotionnelle", says Mendelsohn in an interview, underlining the flaw in their communication that affected their relationships (Bloch-Lainé, 2017). The seminar occasioned a change in his motivational system. He has learnt that he must also listen to his father, not only to stand his ground due to *déformation professionnelle*; that he has to listen to the other side of the story and become aware of the vulnerabilities his own father faced in their relationship; that there is a war not only between sons and fathers, but also between fathers and sons, that the sons' success, which reveals the educative side of Jay's "hardness", "must have made him feel all the more poignantly the memory of his own failures, the roads he had not been able to take".

Highly relevant for paternal frustration is the analysis of the scene in which a disguised Ulysses witnesses the affectionate encounter between Telemachus, recently returned from his futile search of his father, and Eumaeus the swineherd. This is the only time Jay admires Ulysses for his strength to watch the sincere emotional encounter between Telemachus and Eumaeus, although he must have felt sick with jealousy. Dan realises the symbolic patricide he has committed, "It must have been very hard for him to have to sit there watching while his own son acted like the other guy was his real father".

The moment of recognition (*anagorisis*) is "novelistic", because, as Aristotle postulated and the *Odyssey* demonstrates, it involves a twist (*metabasis*) that causes the "plot" to continue with the cruise episode. It is the moment when Jay, usually a very reserved man, finds the strength to disclose his very personal feelings in front of the students, during the lecture about the husband-wife recognition scene in the *Odyssey*. It is the moment when it all clicks into place for Dan and suggests a climax in the dialectics of his relationship with his father or a crisis, according to Brendan's brilliant remark about Telemachus, "Which is the larger

crisis: living out your life without your father, or actually meeting him for the first time twenty years later and having to get to know him?" What does Jay say? That there are small things, little secrets that bring people closer, that couples know and that relate to spending time together, and that these details are more obvious when recognising the other than all the signs that may seem important to an outsider.

Unlike the seminar about the *Odyssey*, that revealed pragmatically unequal positions, the cruise applies the understanding of the archetypal father-son relationships under initiation contexts related to the *common road* both concretely and symbolically. It is a road during which the roles are renegotiated through successive revelations: the father softens, the two discover unexpected personality traits in each other, help each other, confront their fears and become accomplices. Their relationship grows to be flexible and two-sided. The father, who has never travelled before, allows his son to lead him into an unknown world, the son overcomes his claustrophobia in Calypso's cave because his father takes him by the hand and then declares publicly that he was the one who need to be helped. If before this episode Dan, like Telemachus, knew his father only by his exterior features ("If you never knew your father to begin with, then there's actually nothing to recognize"), now comes the true recognition, based on understanding. The Greek middle voice, "a mode in which the subject is also the object, a strange folding over or doubling, the way a person could be a father but also a son", can be the textual metaphor of these mutual doublings of the father and the son that Ulysses, in his double quality, represents in the Homeric text.

Dan's *Nostos* is his belated return to his father; however, it is not so belated, since Jay's last gesture on the hospital bed, in his last day of life, is to recognise their initiatic relationship by recalling the bed he built out of a door for Dan in his childhood and in which he himself slept during the whole duration of the Odyssean seminars. The bed is that symbolic *sêma* that functions as a means of the most difficult recognition in the *Odyssey*, that between Ulysses and Penelope. Practically speaking, building the bed out of a door is perfectly justified, yet the symbolism of this *sêma* is seducing through its suggestions of intimacy and openness at the same. In the concrete acceptation of the Greek word *sêma* – which Mendelsohn comments upon –, that of "grave", a sign that speaks about a man's life and turns his story visible, then the bed implies the idea that the son is the one who testifies about his father's life. He does it through literature, which is more eloquent than biological continuance, "In a way, admits Mendelsohn, *An Odyssey* is a memorial of my father who, in his own way, was a hero – maybe a hero of complexity." (Pătrășconiu, 2020).

Through successive frustrations and compensations, the odyssey of recuperating the Father has an archetypal solution, meaning the son assumes the paternal experience; he assimilates it and continues it. In an anti-mythical key, as Durand shows in his analysis of *Lucien Leuwen* (1997: 186), the return to the father takes the ironical form of “Oedipus’ abdication”, with the father’s victory and the son’s failure.

**The text – the mediation through which we understand ourselves**

Mendelsohn’s book is a plea for *mediation*: between father and son, between the professor and his students – because in the process of learning you never know “who will be listening and, in certain cases, who will be doing the teaching” – between literature and life. The mediation is owed to the Homeric text, the key term in the subtitle and the most important “character” of the autofiction, the one that stages the capacity of the story to influence the field of human action, as Paul Ricœur postulates in his pragmatic theory of the narrative. The post-Odyssean time of the father and the son is refigured (mimesis III) by the *emplotment*/the Homeric narrative configuration (mimesis II) that either of the two reads in their own way, balancing the suggestions of the *Odyssey* with the individual experience. «L’œuvre écrite est une esquisse pour la lecture», and the act of grasping its meaning is «l’opérateur qui conjoint mimésis III à mimésis II» (Ricœur, 1983: 17), the world configured by the poem and the practical field into which the poem is implemented. By understanding the *Odyssey*, the Homeric text returns to the world of experience, to shape it in the light of superior knowledge, of a transformation that the fictional narrative brings about in the live-time: «enjalonnant les confins d’éternité, les expériences-limites dépeintes par la fiction explorent en outre une autre frontière, celle de confins entre le fable et le mythe» (Ricœur, 1985: 388).

Nevertheless, Mendelsohn’s book is more than an illustration of the effect the story-text has on individual life; it is itself an illustration of how the story relates to its precedent, that «fond opaque du vivre, de l’agir et du souffrir» (Ricœur, 1983: 86) or mimesis I, the world of prefiguration. The odyssey of the reconciliation with the father in the seminar room, during the cruise or in the hospital ward is emplotted in Mendelsohn’s autofiction itself, in an articulated manner that follows the logic of the Homeric epic step by step. The heterogeneity, the atypical and uncategorisable elements, the ambiguity, the confusion, the son’s revelations during all these experiences link together, through Mendelsohn’s own narrative act, in an intelligible and significant whole that has a beginning, contents and an end, a whole reinforced by the myth. Therefore, mimesis III, the effect triggered by the Homeric text, is superimposed onto another mimesis I that will trigger, on a superior

level of the possibilities of the narrative, a different story, that of the impact of the Homeric story, which is precisely this autofiction. To rewrite it, Mendelsohn had to have his own Telemachy, to “collect” his own “data” about Jay, to put together and harmonise, like in a puzzle, the disparate fragments of the paternal destiny as they appear in the mirrors of various reflectors: to complete his experience with the testimonies of his close ones – his mother, his uncle Howard and uncle Nino –, to compare the different versions of the same event by consulting his brothers. This process, covering a large part of the end of the narrative, is the laboratory of the book included within the book itself. Through its reflective dimension, *An Odyssey* reproduces the self-reflexivity of Homer’s *Odyssey* that, being a chain of stories told by different characters, prophets, gods, bards, but especially by Ulysses, discloses, within its own discourse, how the *Odyssey* was built – the history of a hero and his posterity (Bodiştean, 2013: 55-69). Consequently, *An Odyssey* reveals itself as an intricate, multi-layered book of cycles triggered by the act of narrating, narcissistic and metatextual, a true masterpiece.

Is Mendelsohn’s book a rewriting of the *Odyssey*? Yes, it is, insofar as the variants of interpretation give the floor to “the non-canonical instances”, the three men’s inner voices that one does not hear in Homer’s epic. Yes, it, is, insofar as any rereading is a mental rewriting, especially a “rereading for the sake of the secret”, as Matei Călinescu says, starting from the premise that the text has both “a visible content and a hidden one – like a double-bottom suitcase” that will “guide the reader toward certain structural or strategic aspects of the work” (CĂLINESCU, 2003: 256). It is an atypical rewriting because it does not invest in the space of another fiction, but in that of confessional writing. A more inspired choice of words would be *rewriting–reliving* or *rereading–self-reading*. This time, the theme of identity, which also preoccupied Mendelsohn in his previous books – the gay identity (*The Elusive Embrace: Desire and the Riddle of Identity* - 1999) or the Jewish identity (*The Lost: A Search for Six of Six Million* - 2006) – is developed from the perspective of spiritual and biological lineage.

“Well, I need the story [...]. I am trying to make sense of this”, snaps the writer’s mother at the doctor who doesn’t have the patience to listen to the whole story about Jay’s accident. We need the story, – this is what Daniel Mendelsohn’s entire book says, because “the text is the mediation through which we understand ourselves” (Ricoeur, 1995: 106). To add to this line of successive effects, we can ask ourselves how many readers of *An Odyssey* have reconsidered their relationship with their fathers after reading it.

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