

Hearths, Embers and Braziers: on the Role of Domestic Fire in the *Odyssey**

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Abstract. Despite the relatively limited presence of fire in the *Odyssey*, especially in comparison to the *Iliad*, the poem contains a conspicuous number of images related to the fireplace. I argue that, since the hearth embodies the ideas of ‘fire’ and ‘home’ and appears to highlight the most important moments of Odysseus’ homecoming, it serves to establish an emblematic connection with the returning hero, whose *telos*, like his fireplace, lies within the household sphere. The largely domestic setting of fire in the *Odyssey* reflects the nature of its hero: human, controlled, persistent, and thus the opposite of the bright but volatile flames of Iliadic warriors.

Keywords: *Odyssey*; fire; hearth; *nostos*.

[es] Hogares, tizones y braseros: sobre el papel del fuego doméstico en la *Odisea*

Resumen. A pesar de la presencia relativamente limitada del fuego en la *Odisea*, especialmente en comparación con la *Iliada*, el poema contiene un número notable de imágenes relacionadas con el hogar. En el presente artículo se argumenta que, dado que el hogar encarna a la vez las ideas de ‘fuego’ y ‘casa’ y además parece resaltar los momentos más importantes del regreso a casa de Ulises, este elemento sirve para establecer una conexión emblemática con la imagen del héroe que regresa, cuyo *telos*, como su hogar, se encuentra dentro del ámbito doméstico. El fuego primariamente doméstico en la *Odisea* refleja la naturaleza de su héroe: humano, controlado, persistente y, por lo tanto, lo opuesto a las llamas brillantes pero volátiles de los guerreros de la *Iliada*.

Palabras clave: *Odisea*; fuego; hogar; *nostos*.

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1. Introduction

In his 1958 article, provocatively titled «No flames in the *Odyssey*», Brian Hainsworth seeks to provide reasons for the absence of the term φλόξ, ‘flame’ in the poem, with the only exception at *Od.* 24.71, when Agamemnon describes Achilles’ funeral pyre. By making a comparison to the *Iliad* with regard to the use of terminology related to the semantics of fire, he underlines the fact that, especially in the second part, «the *Iliad* has far more to say about fires and displays a greater width of vocabulary in which to say it» (Hainsworth 1958: 56)².

In this article I will focus on the fire of the hearth, which is entirely absent from the *Iliad* but occurs in a variety of ways in the *Odyssey*. I will thus examine the “images of the hearth” in this poem as a means of determining whether or not they can be seen as taking on a specific meaning, assuming that their notable presence cannot be explained wholly in terms of the importance of domestic scenes in Odysseus’ story. I will try to show how the abundance of such images are used to underscore the link between the protagonist and this highly symbolic place. By marking the most important moments of Odysseus’ return, the hearth seems to take on particular relevance within the events and the hero’s recovery of identity and power over the course of the poem. In fact, the image unites the idea of ‘fire’ and ‘home’, and it hence appears to be an appropriate means of representing the reality of Odysseus, whose heroic dimension is fully achieved upon his return home and in the reappropriation of his role. His most heroic accomplishment, then, is a domestic one, at his own fireside, and could hardly be further removed from the blazing but volatile flames of Iliadic warriors and battles. That is, the fire of the *Odyssey* is Odysseus’ fire: human, controlled, persistent.

For analytical purposes, the focus will be primarily on the terms ἐσχάρη (Ionic for ἐσχάρα)³, which appears ten times in the *Odyssey* but only once in the *Iliad*, in the latter to describe the Trojan ‘guard fires’ (*Il.* 10.418)⁴, and ἱστίη (Ionic for ἑστία)⁵, which only appears in the *Iliad*, in the compound adjectives ἐφέστιος (*Il.* 2.125) and ἀνέστιος (*Il.* 9.63). Also, a small group of lexemes belonging to the same semantic field will be considered, and also the general term πῦρ, when used in a domestic setting.

2. The Hearth as the Core of the οἶκος and the Destination of the νόστος

Although Odysseus does not appear as an active character until book 5, Athena’s words in book 1 offer an early glimpse of the *pathos* of a man who is depicted as «straining to get sight of the very smoke uprising / from his own country, longs to

² From the 1960s onwards, some studies began to focus on the presence of the semantic field of fire in the *Odyssey* (cf. Clarke 1962, Graz 1965, Bradley 1976).

³ The term means ‘hearth, house, sacrificing hearth’ (Beekes 2010: 472). Chantraine (1968: 379) points out that ἐσχάρα is «employé notamment pour des foyers de sacrifice distingués des βῶμοι, plus élevés».

⁴ It is significant that the word only appears in the *Doloneia*, which critics have been keen to see as belonging neither to the *Iliad* nor even to Homer.

⁵ According to Chantraine (1968: 379) and Beekes (2010: 471) this term indicates primarily the hearth of the house or an ‘altar’ with fire (a sense similar to that of ἐσχάρα) but also, in a figurative sense, the house. Moreover, Chantraine (1968: 379) points out that in Homer «le mot semble chargé de valeur religieuse» and mentions the use of this noun to designate a household divinity, still not personified.

die» (*Od.* 1.58-59)⁶. It is the first, albeit indirect, reference to domestic fire in his home of Ithaca, and leads Dobbs (1987: 507) to observe «a new concern for hearth and home» in the protagonist. After all, the long overdue return of the Achaean heroes surely meant a return to their own palace, where the hearth positioned in the μέγαρον represented a central element⁷. Even lacking concrete information regarding its structure, is it clear that the hearth represented «a symbolic focus of the space» (Taskirgis 2007: 225), with its almost sacral dimensions⁸. It is therefore not surprising that it marks the ultimate destination of the νόστος from Troy, not only for Odysseus but also for the rest of the heroes, as evidenced by Athena's words to Telemachus on the sad fate of Agamemnon (*Od.* 3.232-235):

βουλοίμην δ' ἂν ἐγὼ γε καὶ ἄλγεα πολλὰ μογήσας
οἴκαδ' εἴ ἐλθέμεναι καὶ νόστιμον ἦμαρ ἰδέσθαι,
ἢ ἐλθὼν ἀπολέσθαι ἐφέστιος, ὡς Ἀγαμέμνων
ᾤλεθ' ὑπ' Αἰγίσθοιο δόλῳ καὶ ἦς ἀλόχοιο.

I myself would rather first have gone through many hardships
And then come home, and look upon my day of returning
than come home and be killed at my hearth, as Agamemnon
was killed, by the treacherous plot of his wife, and by Aegisthus.

In these lines, which anticipate the fundamental contrast of Odysseus' return to his homeland with that of Agamemnon⁹, various key concepts of the poem are brought together. The position of the adverb of motion to place οἴκαδε at the beginning signals the importance of the οἶκος as the final destination of the return (*cf.* νόστιμον ἦμαρ, 234). The sequence of two forms of the verb ἔρχομαι (ἐλθέμεναι and ἐλθὼν) establishes a correlation between οἴκαδε and the adjective ἐφέστιος, which is here given some idea of movement in addition to the locative dimension present in the preposition ἐπί. The hearth, ἐστία, is thus placed in direct relation to the οἶκος¹⁰, which constitutes the most intimate and, therefore, the safest place. It is precisely the juxtaposition of the terms ἀπολέσθαι and ἐφέστιος that proves to be particularly discordant, thus encapsulating all the drama of Agamemnon's return¹¹.

Even before the appearance of Odysseus in the poem, the hearth is presented as a central element of the οἶκος and the physical destination of the return journey of the heroes, while at the same time its symbolic value of safety, hospitality and stability

⁶ Here and throughout the article, the Homeric text is cited after West 2017. The translations are, with slight modifications, from Lattimore (1965), except at several points, where I give my own reasons for staying yet even closer to the Greek.

⁷ For an in-depth analysis on the theme of the hearth and its uses in the Greek world, see Taskirgis 2007. On the hearth as a symbolic center, see Deroy 1950, Gernet 1951, Wright 1994, González García 2010.

⁸ *Cf.* Porter (2019: 68): «the conception of the hearth as a sacred place is early, since Hestia is already a personified goddess in Hesiod's *Theogony*». *Cf.* Kajava (2004: 2).

⁹ Critics have generally read Agamemnon's *nostos* as a straightforward foil for Odysseus' that emphasizes the contrast between their fates, *cf.* Macknail 1936, D'Arms & Hulley 1946, Clarke (1967: 10). On the role of the story of Agamemnon within the *Odyssey*, *cf.* Olson 1990, Porter 2019: 61-100.

¹⁰ ἐστία and οἶκος are used synonymously by several classical authors: *cf.* E. *Andr.* 593, S. *Ajax* 860, E. *Alk.* 162 (Taskirgis 2007: 225).

¹¹ I share the position taken here by Porter (2019: 69) who, in contrast to those who consider that ἐφέστιος is being used «a little loosely, since Agamemnon is said to have been killed in Aegisthus' house», argues that «there exists really nothing untraditional or idiosyncratic about Homer's use of 'hearth' here to reference the hearth of another».

is also evoked. Nevertheless, whereas Agamemnon's story ends abruptly when he reaches Aegisthus' ἑστία, that of Odysseus is extended by the wearying length of his ever diverging νόστος. Throughout his journey, and prior to reaching the ἑστία of Ithaca, Odysseus comes into contact with other hearths, which appear to represent "intermediary destinations" or "false arrivals", as well as new starting points that he ultimately leaves behind. In this sense, these various hearths appear to be key milestones of his journey, which, beyond the ultimate reunion with his homeland, correspond to the gradual recovery of his own role and identity¹².

With all this in mind, the presence of domestic fire seems to mark three important moments of the hero's return: the departure from Ogygia, the arrival at Scheria and the encounter with the Phaeacians, and finally the preparation and fulfillment of his revenge on Ithaca.

3. Refusal of Calypso's Hearth and Preservation of the σπέρμα πυρός

Odysseus first appears in the poem on Calypso's island. The poet describes the goddess' cave on Hermes' arrival (*Od.* 5.59-62):

πῦρ μὲν ἐπ' ἐσχαρόφιν μέγα καίετο, τηλόσε δ' ὀδμή
κέδρου τ' εὐκεάτοιο θύου τ' ἀνά νῆσον ὀρώρει
δαιομένων· ἦ δ' ἔνδον ἀοιδιάουσ' ὀπί καλῆ
ἰστὸν ἐπιχομένη χρυσεῖη κερκίδ' ὕφαινεν.

A great fire blazing on the hearth, and far away the smell of cedar
split in billets, and the sweet wood burning, spread all over
the island. She was singing inside the cave with a sweet voice
as she went up and down the loom and wove with a golden shuttle.

Calypso wanders around in the warm light of the ἐσχάρα, 'hearth', located at the center of the domestic scene. The presence of the πῦρ and the scent of wood (*cf.* 5.60-61) evoke an image of a "warm" nature (*cf.* καίετο, 59; δαιομένων, 63)¹³, a comfortable setting that contrasts starkly with Odysseus as he looks toward the sea in tears (πόντον ἐπ' ἀτρύγετον δερκέσκετο δάκρυα λείβων, 5.84). He desperately wishes to return home (οἴκαδ' ἐλθέμεναι καὶ νόστιμον ἡμᾶρ ἰδέσθαι, 5.220, *cf.* 3.234) and his decision to leave is even more surprising against the backdrop of the enchanting safety of Calypso's hearth, in that this would bring about a comfortable end to his journey¹⁴.

Upon his departure, the warming rays of the ἐσχάρα in Calypso's cave are immediately contrasted to the devastating force of water during a terrible storm provoked by Poseidon. At the end of this book, Odysseus arrives almost exhausted in a new land and seeks refuge under a heap of leaves for the night. There, thanks to Athena,

¹² Hartog (1996: 23-58) sees the *Odyssey* as a "poetic anthropology", representing the world through the hero's adventures, in order to establish the new image of a human world, intended as a Greek one.

¹³ On these verbs referring to πῦρ, see Graz (1965: 161-169).

¹⁴ While I agree with Bradley (1976: 144), who considers the presence of the hearth before the end of book five as «not especially remarkable», I do believe that the reference to the large fire in the nymph's cave is relevant, as it represents a potential final destination (*cf.* Schelmerdine 1986: 56).

he falls into a deep sleep. The book ends with a well-known simile that refers to the semantics of fire (*Od.* 5.488-491):

ὡς δ' ὅτε τις δαλὸν σποδιῇ ἐνέκρυψε μελαίνῃ
ἀγροῦ ἐπ' ἐσχατιῆς, ᾧ μὴ πάρα γείτονες ἄλλοι,
σπέρμα πυρὸς σῶζων, ἵνα μὴ ποθεν ἄλλοθεν αὔῃ,
ὡς Ὀδυσσεὺς φύλλοισι καλύψατο· κτλ.

As when someone hides a firebrand in a black ash heap,
in a remote place in the country, where none live near as neighbors,
and saves the seed of fire, having no other place to get a light from,
so Odysseus buried himself in the leaves.

The hero, hidden under the leaves, is likened to a firebrand placed under ashes to keep a fire alive during the night. This is the only occurrence of δαλός, 'firebrand', in a Homeric simile and one of the few occurrences within the *Odyssey*¹⁵. In order to understand the term, it is important to compare it with the most typical manifestation of fire, the flame; we have already noted the absence of φλόξ in the *Odyssey* and, by contrast, its presence in the *Iliad*, where it is traditionally used to describe the destructive force of warriors in battle. Beyond the evident external differences, there is also a more intrinsic one: when properly protected, the burning embers generate a more constant heat, which lasts longer. Just like the heroes in the war of Troy, the drive and impetus of fire is also found within Odysseus, but he is not the flaming warrior who terrorizes his enemies: «he is that small seed of fire which can only glow to reveal its weakened power. The destructive potential is there but ebbs for the moment» (Scott 1974: 68).

From this perspective, it is worth noting that precisely because of its ability to suddenly ignite fire, the ember is often associated with damage and punishment¹⁶. In this sense, the δαλός appears to take on a polytropic nature, being close to dying out in the closing of book 5 but also being potentially dangerous as a small but effective bearer of light and fire¹⁷. Indeed, even if Odysseus is in his most vulnerable state here, he is always potentially threatening and destructive, as he will prove to be in the paradigmatic episode of the blinding of Polyphemus, which he himself will report to the Phaeacians (*Od.* 9.375-376):

καὶ τότε ἔγὼ τὸν μοχλὸν ὑπὸ σποδοῦ ἤλασα πολλῆς,
εἴως θερμαίνοιτο· κτλ.

Then I stoved the beam underneath a deep bed of cinders
waiting for it to heat.

¹⁵ The term δαλός (or the variant δαός) is found five more times in the *Odyssey* (4.300; 7.339; 19.69; 22.497; 23.294), where it indicates a torch by metonymy, almost always in the context of the same formulaic expression δαός μετὰ χερσὶν ἔχουσαι, «holding a torch», usually in reference to the maids.

¹⁶ Especially in its metonymic meaning of 'torch'. Cf. *Od.* 19.69, *Il.* 13.320; 15.421. It also appears as an instrument of comic violence in various of Aristophanes' comedies. On the other hand, the δαλός had already appeared as a destructive element in the Aesopian fable of the fox and the eagle, in which the ember (φέψαλος), hidden in the flesh, ignites the eagle's nest (cf. Archil. Fr. 180 W.). See Bossi (1990: 187-188).

¹⁷ Interpreting the hidden δαλός in this simile both as a resource and a dangerous element, critics (cf. Detienne & Vernant 1992; Pace 2004; Thomas 2020: 10, 279) have proposed an association of this Homeric simile with *h.Merc.* 238-240, where Hermes, covered by his swaddling cloth, is compared to the ἀνθρακιά, 'hot embers', covered by the ashes (σποδὸς ἀμφικαλύπτει, v. 239).

The expression ὑπὸ σποδοῦ recalls the σποδιῆ μελαίνῃ under which the firebrand is covered (*Od.* 5.488)¹⁸, and the burning tip of the beam that will blind Polyphemus seems to allude to the δαλός itself. In other words, even before being compared to the burning piece of wood, Odysseus had already used it to defend himself by blinding the Cyclops. The burning brand has thus become the instrument through which the protagonist springs into action (his active role as the subject of the action is marked by the pronoun ἐγώ, 9.375), putting his plan into action and saving himself. In fact, that Odysseus is able to protect himself thanks to his own μῆτις had been already revealed by the simile of the firebrand: while the simile links the hero to the δαλός, Odysseus is most immediately compared to τις, someone who performs the action of hiding the firebrand (δαλὸν ... ἐνέκρυψε) under the ashes. The action, which takes place at the edge of a field (ἀγροῦ ἐπ' ἐσχατιῆς, v. 489) where there are no other neighbors (ἢ μὴ πάρα γείτονες ἄλλοι, v. 489), suggests a situation of limitation and solitude. In this context, the ἐσχατιή (Ionic for ἐσχατιά), 'extremity, edge', is an image of a physical and human isolation that reflects Odysseus' condition, alone and exhausted on the shores of Scheria. However, if on the one hand the poet describes here a situation of loneliness, on the other hand he highlights the ability to control fire and the degree of Odysseus' "recovery" of his humanity, despite his apparent marginality. Similarly, Odysseus, to whom ten years of travel and the shipwreck have given the appearance of a savage (*cf.* *Od.* 6.136-137), actually comes from a cultured and technologically advanced civilization; indeed he preserves the skills from his background, as will become clear in the scenes at the palace of Ithaca when, disguised as a beggar, he is able to skillfully master fire. In this sense, the foresight of the one who hides the δαλός seems to directly recall the hero's ἐπιφροσύνη, 'thoughtfulness' (*Od.* 5.437), that will allow him to survive. After all, the action of covering himself, that is, of hiding his real identity, will characterize Odysseus' adventures and allow him to survive all the way to Ithaca and hence recover his role¹⁹. Thus, while the simile in book 5 introduces us to the idea that the destructive power of the hero, despite his weakness, is still there, just as the πῦρ is concentrated in a firebrand, it also establishes a clear connection to the actions of hiding and concealing. Indeed, the hero's destructive force will be revealed in its most splendid and violent form only at the end of the poem. In this regard, Van Nortwick (2009: 22) interprets Odysseus' hiding as a sign of the hero's restored autonomy, which allows him to develop his own strategy to take back his life in Ithaca: «the gesture, in fact, is proleptic: Odysseus [...] will from now on be able to choose to be "covered" by disguise if it suits his purposes». Odysseus appears to be the hero who hides himself and is not what he seems: he had already assumed a fake identity previously, in the episode of Polyphemus, and will be keeping hiding it at the beginning of his encounter with the Phaeacians and once he arrives in Ithaca²⁰.

¹⁸ It is worth noting that these are the only occurrences in the Homeric poems of the terms σποδός and σποδιή.

¹⁹ Odysseus reveals his identity to Polyphemus only once he has left the cave and saved himself (*Od.* 9.502-5). However, the hazardous disclosure removes the "protective veil" that he himself had, with great skill, created for himself and for his men: the Cyclops will ask his father Poseidon for revenge, demanding a troubled and painful return for Odysseus (*Od.* 9.528-35). In fact, the actual homecoming of the hero starts from Ogygia, where he first shows «new concern» (Dobbs 1987: 507) for his home (1.59-60: *ιέμενος καὶ καπνὸν ἀποθρόσκοντα νοῆσαι / ἧς γαίης*).

²⁰ Once in Ithaca, Odysseus is very cautious in openly declaring who he is: he will progressively reveal himself, first to his son Telemachus (*Od.* 16.186-91), to Euryclea (*Od.* 19.474-86), to the swineherd Eumaeus and the

Although he is still alive, Odysseus has never come so close to “dying out”: ἄπνευστος, ‘breathless’, ἄναυδος, ‘voiceless’, ὀλιγηπελέων, ‘exhausted’ (*Od.* 5.456-67)²¹. While it is true that the strength of the hero is nearly lost, much like that of the fire that represents him, it is merely a reduction «in size – though not in potential» (Scott 2009: 124). All of the uncertainty of Odysseus’ situation, as well as the strength to be unleashed in the future, is concentrated in this simile: the hero’s strength rests on the preservation of a single σπέρμα, a ‘seed’ capable of reactivating the “combustion”. The δαλός can give rise to πῦρ and its constant and intense heat best represents Odysseus, who is described multiple times throughout the poem, especially in book 5, as πολύτλας, ‘patient’, ‘much-enduring’ (*Od.* 5.171, 354, 486). Even the verb σώζω, ‘rescue’, which typically refers to people or things in dangerous or threatening situations, is indicative of this resistance: Odysseus truly rescues himself, considering that if Athena had not provoked his slumber he would have remained “alert”, just like the δαλός under the ash. Furthermore, the image is also suitable for describing the duality, or rather the “versatility”, of Odysseus, who is careful and reflective, far from passive, and equipped with a μεγαλήτωρ θυμός, an ‘intrepid soul’, ready to act at the right moment.

In addition, the idea of a fire that is generated, the σπέρμα (from σπείρω, ‘sow’)²², can be linked metaphorically to the theme of the hero’s “rebirth” when he finally leaves behind what Scott (2009: 124) refers to as «a living death». The act of leaving the «cozy womblike security» (Rose 1995: 125) of life at Ogygia, in fact, allows Odysseus to finally experience the new beginning of a full and real existence. In this sense, hiding under the leaves implies a «second womblike enclosure» aimed at preserving his vital energy for his final “rebirth” (Rose 1995: 125). Through the simile of the ember, the poet projects the protagonist, who himself appears to be concerned with his own survival, into the broadest dimension of the process of his reintegration into human society, which will accompany him until the end of the poem, when «he will once again be the inspiring force that will effectively ignite his people to re-establish a community on Ithaca» (Scott 2009: 124). The audience thus receives the first sign that Odysseus “is returning to life”.

4. The Hearth of the Phaeacians: Hospitality and “Rebirth”

At the end of book 5, Odysseus-δαλός gives in to his exhaustion on the shores of Scheria. The following day, after receiving instructions from Nausicaa, he meets Alcinous and Arete beside the fire of the great hall of the palace. In this fundamental scene (*Od.* 7.139-347), the hearth appears to take on a more allusive importance, not only in terms of Odysseus being welcomed into the οἶκος by the Phaeacians, but also in terms of the recovery of his status as a hero. In this sense, the presence of domestic fire, characterizing the most important moments of the meeting, seems to be connected to the representation

cowherd Philoetius (*Od.* 21.205-20), Penelope (*Od.* 23.183-204) and finally to his father Laertes (*Od.* 24.320-44).

²¹ Graz (1965: 320) highlights the uniqueness of the image in which emphasis is placed on the fragility of the fire, unlike other passages in Homeric poems in which fire is often described as intense, lively, and inextinguishable.

²² Graz (1965: 319) reflects on the morphology of the Homeric *hapax* σπέρμα, whose suffix –μα is indicative of a «réalité possédant un pouvoir propre». Cf. Porzig (1924: 226) «la semence ainsi désignée est une chose vivante, dans laquelle sommeillent des forces qui produisent leur effet sans intervention de l’homme».

of his “rebirth”. The significance of the theme of the hearth is also confirmed by the fact that, from a total of ten occurrences of the term ἐσχάρα in the *Odyssey*, five are found in the story of the Phaeacians. In addition to those in the meeting scene in book 6, a further three appear in less than twenty lines (*Od.* 7.153, 160, 169).

Nausicaa instructs Odysseus on how to reach the palace and encourages him to contact her mother, who «sits at the hearth in the firelight» (ἦσται ἐπ’ ἐσχάρῃ ἐν πυρὸς ἀύγῃ, *Od.* 6.305)²³. The girl’s words anticipate for the audience an image of what to expect of the encounter, even before Odysseus arrives at the palace: the μέγαρον (*cf.* 6.304) lit up by the fire of the ἐσχάρα. Following Nausicaa’s directions, and suddenly finding himself in the hall and throwing his arms around Arete’s knees, Odysseus directs his short plea to her and steps away from the sovereign (*Od.* 7.153-154)²⁴:

ὡς εἰπὼν κατ’ ἄρ’ ἔζετ’ ἐπ’ ἐσχάρῃ ἐν κονίησι
πᾶρ πυρί· κτλ.

So he spoke, and sat down beside the hearth, in the ashes
next to the fire.

These verses recall the expression used in book 6 to describe Arete’s position (*Od.* 6.52, 305), although certain lexical aspects highlight the difference in *status* between the two characters (Garvie 1994: 196). Despite the fact that there is an explicit reference to fire of the ἐσχάρα in both cases (πυρὸς / πυρί), what stands out is the contrast between the two datives governed by the same preposition ἐν: ἀύγῃ, ‘bright light’, and κονίησι, ‘dust, ash’, two profoundly distinct elements that establish a dichotomy between Arete’s splendor and Odysseus’ humble condition²⁵.

As Newton notes (1984: 7-9), what is particularly unusual in this context is not the fact that Odysseus finds himself by the brazier, often a place where suppliants wait, but rather that he lays on the ground for a long time. After embracing Arete’s knees, Odysseus sits directly in the ash and does not stand up until the elder Eche-neus, a few moments later, urges Alcinous to invite the guest to stand, using the same expression as at 7.153-154 (*Od.* 7.159-160):

Ἀλκίνο’, οὐ μὲν τοι τόδε κάλλιον οὐδὲ ἔοικεν,
ξείνον μὲν χαμαὶ ἦσθαι ἐπ’ ἐσχάρῃ ἐν κονίησιν·

Alcinous, this is not the better way, nor is it fitting,
that the stranger should sit on the ground beside the hearth, in the ashes.

²³ Note that this is the second time Arete’s proximity to the hearth is mentioned in this book (*cf.* *Od.* 6.52, ἡ μὲν ἐπ’ ἐσχάρῃ ἦστο σὺν ἀμριπόλοισι γυναιξίν, «she sat at the hearth with her handmaid women»).

²⁴ As Knox points out (1973: 5), this is the only information provided on the nature of the Homeric hearth, which suggests that Odysseus is sitting on the edge of the brazier, while Arete would be next to it. Sgarbi (2013: 132) defines ἐσχάρα as «a low raised hearth with respect to the ground in the style of a well with a central cavity for the fire with the ash around it». In this sense, Odysseus would be able to sit on top of it.

²⁵ This contrast is made yet starker if one considers that the term ἀύγῃ refers primarily to sunlight (*cf.* *Od.* 6.98), whereas κόνις, ‘dust’, is closely linked to the earth. For a more detailed analysis of the term ἀύγῃ, see Constantinidou 1993. As regards Odysseus’ position, reference to *Od.* 11.191-92, has often been noted, when Odysseus’ mother, Anticlea, describes Laertes’ humble conditions after the suitors have taken control of Ithaca: ἀλλ’ ὁ γε χεῖμα μὲν εὐδαι ὄθι δμῶδες ἐνὶ οἴκῳ, / ἐν κόνι ἄγχι πυρὸς, κακὰ δὲ χροῖ εἴματα εἶται, «but sleeps in winter where the slaves do in the house, / in the dust near the fire, and wears foul clothing on his flesh».

The repetition of ἐν κονίησι (*cf.* 7.153) and the presence of the adverb χαμαὶ underline the fact that Odysseus is still on the ground and convey a semantic link to the “terrestrial” dimension of ash and dust (*cf.* κόνις, 154). As Giordano has pointed out (1999: 85), the earth is the symbol of non-identity, or not belonging to the group: as long as Odysseus sits on the ground, he is a suppliant²⁶. From this perspective, the hearth, in its role as «source and symbol of the house’s existence», constitutes an «emblem of solidarity of the group with other forms of ritual to incorporate outsiders into the οἶκος» (Gould 1973: 97). By emphasizing Odysseus’ position, Echeneus points out his status as a ξένος (significantly, the term is placed at the beginning of the line, *cf.* *Od.* 7.160, 162) and therefore he must be treated with due respect according to the ritual of hospitality that characterized relationships in the Greek world²⁷. Consequently, Alcinous decides not to allow the foreigner to sit on the ground (*Od.* 7.169):

ᾧρσεν ἅπ’ ἐσχάρῳφιν καὶ ἐπὶ θρόνου εἶσε φαεινοῦ

and raised him up from the fireside, and set him in a shining chair.

In Echeneus’ admonition, the verb form referring to Arete ἦσθαι, ‘sits’, ‘is seated’, at 160, is used again to describe Odysseus’ position, who still finds himself ἐν κονίησιν, ‘in the dust’. Alcinous’ action (7.169) signals Odysseus’ change in *status*²⁸: the verse opens with the form ᾧρσεν, the aorist of ὀρνυμι, which takes on the causative meaning of ‘raise’, just like εἶσε, the aorist of ἕζω. This marks an opposition to the verbs in previous passages that indicated a reflexive action, such as ἔζομαι (used for Odysseus’ decision to sit in the ash, 7.153), or the state of a subject, like ἦμαι. The second element that establishes the difference is ἅπ’ ἐσχάρῳφιν: the term ἐσχάρα, used here with a usual Homeric suffix²⁹, is preceded by the preposition ἀπό, to mark the motion away from the hearth. However, the preposition ἐπί that accompanies the other instances of ἐσχάρα here introduces the θρόνος on which Alcinous asks Odysseus to sit. The adjective φαεινός at the end of the verse seems to refer, almost as in a *Ringkomposition*, to the αὐγή of the fire where Arete was seated. Its shine and bright light, which until this moment had accompanied the Phaeacian kings, is somehow transferred to Odysseus who, seated on a θρόνος φαεινός, is no longer a suppliant nor a foreigner, but rather an honorary guest³⁰: the ascent (*cf.* ᾧρσεν) is both physical and symbolic.

Line	Verb(s)	ἐπί	ἐν	Other element(s)
6.305	ἦσθαι	+ dat. ἐσχάρῳφιν	ἐν αὐγῇ	πυρός
7.153	ἔζεσθε	+ dat. ἐσχάρῳφιν	ἐν κονίησιν	πᾶρ πυρί
7.160	ἦσθαι	+ dat. ἐσχάρῳφιν	ἐν κονίησιν	χαμαὶ
7.169	ᾧρσεν / εἶσε	+ gen. θρόνου	//	ἅπ’ ἐσχάρῳφιν

²⁶ For the role of the hearth in the context of supplications, see Gould (1973: 6-10).

²⁷ There is extensive bibliography on hospitality in ancient Greece. For a detailed discussion of *xenia*, see Herman 1987. On hospitality in Homer, see Finley 1954, Kakridis 1963, and especially Reece 1993.

²⁸ *Cf.* Austin (1975: 159): «Echeneos’ advice not only reassures Odysseus that he is among people who share his moral code but it sets the dominant tone for the rest of Odysseus’ stay on the island».

²⁹ The suffix -φιν has a locative value; this is an almost adverbial form.

³⁰ Just as Giordano notes (1999: 85), Odysseus as a suppliant asks to be treated like a guest. As a matter of fact, unlike the foreign guest waiting in the hall, Odysseus reaches the hearth, the heart of the μέγαρον, as a ἱκετής.

Fire thus begins to take on an allusive nature in its domestic manifestation in the scene at Scheria, in close connection to the sacred bonds of hospitality. After the meeting with Arete and Alcinoos, the hearth symbolizes the opening of the family circle to those like Odysseus who do not belong to the community: «c'est au foyer que s'accroupit le suppliant quand, chassé de chez lui, errant à l'étranger, il cherche à s'inclure dans un nouveau groupe afin de retrouver l'enracinement social et religieux qu'il a perdu» (Vernant 1963: 27). This very act of inclusion is made yet more explicit when the Phaeacian queen asks her own son to stand in order to allow Odysseus to sit, thus almost welcoming him as a member of the family (7.171). Shortly afterward, Alcinoos offers Nausicaa in marriage to him (*cf. Od.* 7.313).

The relevance of domestic fire in the scene also affects how Odysseus' "recovery" of himself. As noted above, the immediacy and duration of his contact with the ground in the supplication scene is an unusual feature when compared to other similar representations. In this regard, Newton (1984: 8) is both evocative and daring in his suggestion that «within this scene of supplication, the poet is inserting allusions to a ritual of rebirth»³¹. According to him, the scene presents some sort of ritual for the beginning of a new existential phase for Odysseus. In fact, his meeting with the Phaeacians marks his first contact within a social context and the end of the "phantasy world" (Segal 1962: 32) of the adventures he has experienced throughout his journey. In the simile of the firebrand at the end of book 5, Odysseus demonstrates his ability to "save the seed of the fire", and to guard the spark of his own inner strength. Once he reaches Scheria, he slowly recovers his own hitherto "buried" humanity³². Through the overarching theme of the hearth, the meeting with the Phaeacians represents a transitional moment in a process that will lead Odysseus-δαλός, still too fragile to come to the fore (ἐνέκρυσσε 5.488, καλύψατο, 5.490), to be the "bright" and tenacious hero capable of re-establishing his role in Ithaca. All this due to the hero's careful and shrewd alternation of revealing and concealing, that will match the progressive intensification of his affinity and assimilation to light and flames. The scene at Scheria is thus a phase of transition, a gradual physical rise as well as a rise in *status*, as evidenced by the *variatio* of the prepositions: from the firebrand beneath the ashes, to the ashes of the hearth, to the guest seated on a chair in the light of the fire³³.

From now on, Odysseus is no longer left to his own devices: it is precisely by virtue of this change in *status* that he can narrate, as the only survivor of Zeus' destruction of his ship (οἶον, 7.249), landing at Ogygia and arriving as the ἐφέστιος, 'by the hearth', at Calypso's cave (*Od.* 7.248). In this sense, just like the goddess' ἐσχάρα, the Phaeacian hearth could have functioned as a possible "central" catalyst,

³¹ Newton's suggestion is based on the identification of a few common traits between Odysseus' situation and that of protagonists of some rebirth rituals. In particular, Newton correlates his plea to Arete with the scene of Hera's adoption of Heracles, told by Diodorus Siculus (4.39) and the "rebirth" of a certain Aristinus told by Plutarch (*Mor.* 264-265). According to this interpretation, the apparently unwarranted speed with which Odysseus is called to come to the palace, just like his sudden appearance and equally rapid plea and subsequent retreat to the ashes, seem to constitute proof of an established ritual process (*cf. Newton* 1984: 14-16).

³² Just as Austin (1975: 158) has pointed out, in the midst of the Phaeacians, «Odysseus is truly in the world where the ideals of human society operate, and he must behave accordingly».

³³ The close relationship between the hearth and the ικετεία is even more evident if we recall that the term ἐφέστιος can indicate the suppliant, in the specific sense of 'he who is at the hearth', as witnessed by Hdt. 1.35, Aesch. *Eum.* 577, *Supp.* 365, Soph. *OT* 32 (*cf. Giordano* 1999: 26).

an eventual final destination for the protagonist's centrifugal movement³⁴. Instead, the hero ultimately decides to continue his νόστος to return to his one true hearth: that in Ithaca.

5. In Ithaca: Relighting the δαλός and the Final πῦρ

The meeting with the sovereigns of the Phaeacians, who help him to finally reach Ithaca, thus constitutes a turning point, and also signals the beginning of Odysseus' gradual regaining of his own identity. In the second half of the poem, the theme of fire «is suddenly cast into unmistakable prominence» (Bradley 1976: 145), assuming added layers of meaning. In fact, from Odysseus' very first moments inside the palace of Ithaca, the hearth becomes an important location for the protagonist's actions, and simultaneously maintains its particular value as the element that accompanies the hero's progressive recovery of his role. In the final books of the poem, we become increasingly familiar with a more and more shining representation of Odysseus, one that, as Bierl (2004) has shown, contributes to highlighting the close relation between Odysseus and light (which began explicitly once he sits on the φαεινός throne), as one of the main signs of the progressive "epiphany" of the hero as a splendid god-like figure.

After meeting Eumaeus³⁵, Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, is invited to the palace by Penelope, in the hope of news regarding her husband (*Od.* 17.553-55). Fearful of violence from the suitors, the beggar asks the shepherd to tell Penelope to wait until sunset (*Od.* 17.571-72):

καὶ τότε μ' εἰρέσθω πόσιος πέρι νόστιμον ἦμαρ,
ἄσσοτέρω καθίσασα παρὰ πυρί· κτλ.

Then question me about her husband's day of homecoming,
giving me a seat closer to the fire.

In this passage, reference to Athenas' words about Agamemnon's return home is almost impossible to ignore, due to both the presence of the domestic hearth (*cf.* ἐφέστιος, *Od.* 3.234) and the expression νόστιμον ἦμαρ (*cf.* *Od.* 3.234). However, while the latter has «let his guard down», Odysseus' awareness of how to plan and control his strategy is demonstrated, first and foremost through his adoption of a fake identity, as well as through his request. His desire to be seated παρὰ πυρί is evidence of the protagonist's attraction to fire³⁶, which subsequently seems to be confirmed shortly after nightfall. Indeed, after Penelope retreats to her bedroom and the servants bring three braziers into

³⁴ *Cf.* Race (2014: 47): «the land of the Phaeacians serves as a kind of idealized halfway house where Odysseus is prepared to reenter the society from which he has been absent for so many years as a warrior and a wanderer».

³⁵ At *Od.* 14.420 the term ἐσχάρα appears at the moment in which a pig is sacrificed by the swineherd. This is the only instance in the *Odyssey* where the term is used in direct relation to a sacrifice.

³⁶ It has been noted that, in comparison with the beggar Irus (*Od.* 18.1-33), the latter affirms that Odysseus is like an old woman who tends to the hearth, using the rare expression γῆνὴ καμνοῖ ἴσος (Lattimore translates it as «woman at the oven», *Od.* 18.27). This comparison is difficult to interpret, since the dative καμνοῖ from the unattested καμνώ constitutes a *hapax* in the Greek language. Nonetheless, considering that both beggars find themselves at the palace gates rather than near a hearth, the possibility arises that this is a proverbial expression, perhaps used as a foreshadowing of the position Odysseus will take later on.

the great hall³⁷ (αὐτίκα λαμπτήρας τρεῖς ἴστασαν ἐν μεγάροισιν, / ὄφρα φαείνοιεν, «accordingly the set up three cressets about the palace / to give them light», *Od.* 18.307-8), Odysseus offers to tend them (αὐτὰρ ἐγὼ τοῦτοισι φάος πάντεσσι παρέξω, «but I myself will provide the light for all of these people», *Od.* 18.317), encouraging the maids to go upstairs to keep their mistress company. This expressed desire to stay close to the fire is confirmed when Odysseus, despite being scolded by the servant Melanthe, refuses to abandon the warmth of the embers (*Od.* 18.343-45):

αὐτὰρ ὁ πὰρ λαμπτήρσι φαείνων αἰθομένοισιν
 ἐστήκειν ἐς πάντα ὀρώμενος· ἄλλα δέ οἱ κῆρ
 ὄρμαινε³⁸ φρεσὶν ἦσιν, ἃ ῥ' οὐκ ἀτέλεστα γένοντο.

He then took his place by the burning cressets, and kept them lighted,
 looking after them all himself, but the heart within him
 was pondering other thoughts, which were not to go unaccomplished.

From the moment he arrives at the palace, the hearth becomes of central importance for Odysseus, representing a safe place from where he can observe things, reflect on his own vengeance, and which also allows him to “restore” his energy. In the above passage, the participle φαείνων seems particularly meaningful (*cf.* Bradley 1976: 145): despite finding himself near the λαμπτήρσι αἰθομένοισιν, ‘burning braziers’, it is the protagonist himself who seems to emit light (*cf.* φάος παρέξω, see 317). The words of the suitor Eurymachus, who mocks the elderly beggar, seem to further highlight the radiance of the scene: the light is not coming from the torches, but rather from his hairless head (*Od.* 18.353-355):

οὐκ ἄθειε ὄδ' ἀνήρ Ὀδυσῆϊον ἐς δόμον ἵκει
 ἔμπης μοι δοκέει δαΐδων σέλας ἔμμεναι αὐτοῦ
 κὰκ κεφαλῆς, ἐπεὶ οὐ οἱ ἔνι τρίχες οὐδ' ἠβαιαί.

This man comes to Odysseus' home, not without the god's aid.
 Nonetheless, it seems to me that there is a blaze of torches
 from his head, which has no hair, not even a little.

Therefore, in less than forty lines there are three references to light associated with Odysseus (φάος, 18.317, φαείνων, 18.344, σέλας 18.354). In particular, the image of the beggar in an emanating glow (σέλας, *Od.* 18.354) may remind the audience of a similar moment at the end of book 5 when he was compared to the δαλός, appearing fragile and almost lifeless: the firebrand that previously laid under the ashes now shines openly, ever closer to unleashing the πῦρ. The cross-references to the simile at 5.488-490 seem to be confirmed in the subsequent verses when Eurymachus, following the

³⁷ The term λαμπτήρ only appears three times in the poem, and in three relatively proximate verses (*Od.* 18.307, 18.343, 19.63). Di Benedetto (2010: 962) notes that these braziers were composed of a metal basin and a support structure, within which small pieces of dry wood were burned along with the δαΐδας (from δαΐς, ‘ember’, ‘torch’). The three braziers prove to be particularly useful in that, since the *mégaron* is entirely occupied by the suitors, a single fire, however big, would not be enough to give light to the whole room (Di Benedetto 2010: 981).

³⁸ The verb also appears in the simile at *Od.* 20.25, in which Odysseus' anxiety is expressed, as he tosses and turns while lying in the atrium.

joke, proposes that Odysseus become his slave and, more specifically, that he work for him in the furthest part of the field, ἀγροῦ ἐπ' ἐσχατιῆς (18.357), the exact place where the δαλός in the simile is hidden. Through Eurymachus' sarcastic comment, the poet seems to make an explicit connection between the beggar and the light, and how this element constitutes the auspicious presence of the divinity.

In fact, at the beginning of the following book, when Telemachus and Odysseus are about to carry the weapons out of the hall, the son turns to his father, claiming that he too sees a light, which he immediately associates with that of the gods (*Od.* 19.39-40)³⁹:

φαίνοντ' ὀφθαλμοῖσ' ὡς εἰ πυρὸς αἰθομένοιο⁴⁰.
ἢ μάλα τις θεὸς ἔνδον, οἷ οὐρανὸν εὐρὺν ἔχουσι.

Shine in my eyes as if a fire were blazing.

There must be surely a god here, one of those who hold the high heaven.

Immediately after Telemachus goes to bed, Penelope enters the room (δαΐδων ὑπολαμπομενάων, «under torches giving light», 19.48), accompanied by maids who prepare her seat near the fire (*Od.* 19.55), and they tend to it, in a scene which the poet describes with particular care. The servants take from the brazier pieces of wood that have not yet been completely burnt by the flames and throw them onto the hearth and the embers (πῦρ δ' ἀπὸ λαμπτήρων χαμάδις βάλλον, «they threw fire from the lampstands onto the ground», 19.63): the three braziers are removed (or left to burn out) in order to make space for a large fire in the hearth (ἄλλα δ' ἐπ' αὐτῶν / νήησαν ξύλα πολλά, φῶος ἔμην ἠδὲ θέρεσθαι, «then piled them / again with pieces of wood, to give them light, and to warm them», 19.63-64)⁴¹.

Just as with the meeting between Odysseus and Arete, the poet “sets the scene” for the dialogue between Penelope and her husband (Segal 1994: 81 n.19), using the presence of the unwavering fire to characterize it (*cf.* 20.123: ἐπ' ἐσχάρῃ ἀκάματον πῦρ) and revealing the contrast between light and shadows that will later play an important role when Euryclea recognizes Odysseus (*cf.* Di Benedetto 2010: 981 n. 61). In fact, the scenes appear to be “nestled” between two references to sitting near the hearth, to which the protagonist moves closer to or further away from according to necessity: *Od.* 19.388-89 (αὐτὰρ Ὀδυσσεὺς / ἴζεν ἐπ' ἐσχαρόφιν, ποτὶ δὲ σκότον ἐτράπετ' αἶψα, «now Odysseus / was sitting close to the hearth, but suddenly turned toward darkness») and *Od.* 19.506-7 (αὐτίς ἄρ' ἀσσοτέρω πυρὸς ἔλκετο δίφρον Ὀδυσσεὺς, «Odysseus drew his chair closer to the fire»).

At the beginning of the exchange, when Penelope asks the guest to introduce himself (*Od.* 19.104-5), following a long preamble, the foreigner says his name is Αἴθων

³⁹ In fact, shortly before, it is stated that Athena φῶος περικαλλὲς ἐποίει, «made a beautiful light» (*Od.* 19.34), in front of the two characters. The comparison with *Il.* 18.202-27 is also worth considering: Achilles appears before the Trojans with a blazing head at Hera and Athena's will. It was the latter who decided on Eurymachus' mockery.

⁴⁰ The same expression is used again in the simile at *Od.* 20.25, as well as in various Iliadic similes.

⁴¹ In this context, the servant Melanthe once again scolds Odysseus by threatening to burn him with the ember, most likely one of those used to ignite the braziers, if he does not move away (ἢ τάχα καὶ δαλῶ βεβλημένος εἶσθα θύραζε, «or you may be forced to get out, struck by a firebrand!», *Od.* 19.69). Here, the reference to the firebrand as a potentially dangerous weapon could have remind the audience of the destructive power inherent in the δαλός of the simile in book 5.

(ἐμοὶ δ' ὄνομα κλυτὸν Αἴθων, «my glorious name is Aithon», 19.183), using a *nomen loquens* derived from the root of αἴθομα/αἴθω, which has been translated to English as ‘burning’ or ‘fiery’. Beyond the various interpretations of the term⁴², it is clear that the poet chooses to tie Odysseus, or rather, to tie his assumed identity, to the idea of combustion. Such an association is not surprising in a context in which common aspects of fire are used to refer to the protagonist, both directly and indirectly. Moreover, it is worth noting that this constitutes another case where Odysseus appears to be the hero who hides himself and is not what he seems: not only he had concealed his identity in the episode of Polyphemus and at the beginning of his encounter with the Phaeacians, but he still does not want to reveal himself once he has arrived in Ithaca. From this perspective, the simile of the firebrand under the ashes in book 5 appears even more allusive, as the δαλός is itself a “hidden” fire, comparable in its destructive potential to a blaze, but having the deceptive appearance of a small piece of wood. In particular, this last identity appears to be connected to divine justice, since the name Aithon «has a strong association with vengeance, and when vengeance is supported by a divine sanction, the fire implicit in *aithon* can become associated with the fiery power of Zeus himself as defender of the deprived», as Levaniouk (2011: 36) has noted⁴³. This would imply that Odysseus’ adoption of this name is linked to his desire to reinvent himself as the “avenger”, with the help of gods⁴⁴.

It is no coincidence that once the “mission” is complete (*cf. Od. 22.479: τετέλεστο δὲ ἔργον*), the hero’s first request is to be brought sulfur and fire (22.481-82):

οἷσε θέειον, γρηῖϋ, κακῶν ἄκος, οἷσε δέ μοι πῦρ,
ὄφρα θειώσω μέγαρον· κτλ.

Bring me sulfur, old woman, the cure of evils, and bring me fire
So I can fumigate the hall.

The repetition of the verb in the imperative stresses the urgency and importance of the request in which the term πῦρ is highlighted at the end of the verse. Although fire in the Homeric poems is usually a non-sacral element without a purifying purpose in and of itself nor has a clear religious value, the protagonist’s compelling need to light up the palace is significant, nonetheless. This is presented as the final act of the hero’s vengeance. Euryclea will directly refer to it when, in explaining to Penelope what has happened, describes the great fire set by Odysseus (πῦρ μέγα κηάμενος, *Od. 23.51*) as a concrete sign of the unequivocal return of the hero, who will «finally bring light into the house and the polis» (Bierl 2004: 56).

In the verses that immediately follow there appear the final two instances of a nuanced meaning of the hearth. In the face of Penelope’s suspicion, the wet nurse reaffirms Odysseus’s return home (*Od. 23.55-57*):

⁴² On its possible meaning here, see Levaniouk (2000 and 2011). Nagy (1985: 79-80) links this passage to a text in which Theognis of Megara defines himself Αἴθων, underlining the fact that both characters are «destitute wanderers».

⁴³ The connection between the idea of divine justice, especially sanctioned by Zeus, and Αἴθων, seems to be confirmed by the fact that the adjective is used as an «epithet of lightning» (Levaniouk 2011: 36). On the connection between fire and justice in the *Odyssey*, see Bradley (1976: 140-144).

⁴⁴ As noted by Eurimachos, Odysseus-Aithon had arrived at the palace οὐκ ἄθεεϊ, «not without the gods» (*Od. 18.353*).

ἦλθε μὲν αὐτὸς ζῶος ἐφέστιος, εὗρε δὲ καὶ σέ
καὶ παῖδ' ἐν μεγάροισι· κακῶς δ' οἷ πέρ μιν ἔρεζον
μνηστῆρες, τοὺς πάντας ἐτείσατο ᾧ ἐνὶ οἴκῳ.

He himself has come back, and is here at his hearth, alive, and has found you
and his son in the palace, and has taken revenge of the suitors,
here in his house, for all the evil's that they have done him.

The use of the adjective ἐφέστιος in connection to the scene of the return (ἦλθε) and reunion with his loved ones cannot but recall the passage in which Athena refers to Agamemnon's return (*cf. Od. 3.234*). The significant contrast between the terms ζῶος (*Od. 23.55*) and ἀπολέσθαι (*Od. 3.234*) that precede the adjective ἐφέστιος in each passage signals the stark contrast between the outcomes of return home of the two heroes⁴⁵. Within this context, the occurrence of the term ἐφέστιος at the end of the poem seems to be brought together with the central theme in a *Ringkomposition*: a return to the hearth, a symbol and central point of the home⁴⁶. Euryclea's words appear to cover the domestic space from the inside outward, from the hearth (23.55), to the room (23.56), to the οἶκος (23.57): the wet nurse confirms that Odysseus' return home is fulfilled and complete, expanding like a flame until it reaches every corner of the palace.

The same elements, the hearth and the οἶκος, are associated again at vv. 23.71-72:

ἦ πόσιν ἔνδον ἔόντα παρ' ἐσχάρη οὐ ποτε φῆσθα
οἴκαδ' ἐλεύσεσθαι· θυμὸς δέ τοι αἰὲν ἄπιστος.

Though your husband is beside the hearth, you would never
say he would come home. Your heart was always mistrustful.

Once more, Odysseus finds himself παρ' ἐσχάρη, the precise place where Penelope finally recognizes him (*Od. 23.89*):

ἔζετ'⁴⁷ ἔπειτ' Ὀδυσῆος ἐναντίον, ἐν πυρὸς ἀύγῃ

She sat across from Odysseus, in the firelight

Just as when Arete encounters Odysseus (*cf. 6.305*), Penelope finds herself ἐν πυρὸς ἀύγῃ. With this, the lighting effects, which characterize the setting of Odysseus' action from the moment he enters the palace in Ithaca and constitute the background of the gradual disclosure of his identity and his revelation as a splendid god-like figure, come to a close. In fact, he radiates light with his own luminous strength that is preserved and maintained throughout his years in Ogygia, protected and recovered in Scheria and then blazed in Ithaca.

⁴⁵ Note that during the meeting with Athena when the goddess (*Od. 13.375-86*) reveals the particulars of the future encounter with the Suitors, Odysseus reacts with astonishment exclaiming that he was expecting the evil fate (κακὸν οἶτον, *Od. 13.384*) of Agamemnon: to die in the palace (φθείσεσθαι ... ἐνὶ μεγάροισιν ἔμελλον, *Od. 13.384*).

⁴⁶ Borthwick (1988, 20): «Note too the irony in Eur. *H.F.* of Heracles' return to the domestic hearth at 523 to save his family, only to kill them subsequently by the very *eschara* (922ff.)».

⁴⁷ The verb form ἔζετο is the same one used at 7.153 when Odysseus was seated in the ashes of the fire.

6. The ἰστίη Ὀδυσῆος

Thus far we have deliberately omitted a further term for the hearth: ἰστίη. It does not appear in the *Iliad*, whereas it is used on four occasions in the *Odyssey* (*Od.* 14.159, 17.156, 19.304, 20.231) to formulate an oath. The fact that ἔστια, which at first glance might seem to be a synonym for ἐσχάρα, only appears in these specific contexts (*cf. LSJ*: «only in solemn appeals»), led González García (2010: 379) to suggest that the two lexemes in the Homeric text are not exactly interchangeable, as is the case with ἐσχάρα and πῦρ, which are used interchangeably, according to metric needs. In contrast, González García observes that ἔστια is not in fact a synonym of other Homeric terms to indicate the fire of a hearth. Borrowing from this perspective on the deliberate choice of ἔστια compared to other words or expressions, below is a brief analysis of the four Homeric instances of the term appearing in the same formulaic expression, three of which are spoken by Odysseus under the guise of a beggar and one by the prophet Theoclymenus, who fled from Argo.

The first instance occurs during an encounter between the shepherd Eumaeus and Odysseus, who, disguised as a foreigner, anticipates the sovereign's return to Ithaca (*Od.* 14.158-159):

ἴστω νῦν Ζεὺς πρῶτα θεῶν ξενίη τε τράπεζα
{ἰστίη τ' Ὀδυσῆος ἀμύμονος⁴⁸, ἦν ἀφικάνω}

Zeus be my witness, first of the gods, and the table of friendship,
and the hearth of blameless Odysseus, to which I come.

The exact same formula is used by both Theoclymenus, who informs Penelope that Odysseus has already set foot on his native land and is preparing his revenge against the suitors (*Od.* 17.156-157), and by Odysseus, who repeats the same prophecy to the cowherd Philoetius (19.304). The only small variation appears at 19.304, where the formulaic expression ἰστίη ... ἀφικάνω is preceded by the verse: ἴστω νῦν Ζεὺς πρῶτα, θεῶν ὑπάτος καὶ ἄριστος, «let Zeus witness it first, supreme and best of gods». As Xian (2020: 12) points out, the repetition of this group of verses, in which the term ἔστια is placed at the beginning, «is suggestive of the audience's familiarity with, or at least awareness of it». While it may be difficult, if not impossible, to imagine the exact meaning that such an expression may have carried for the audience in the archaic period, it is nevertheless possible to consider the use of ἰστίη. The first characteristic of the hearth expressed in these verses is that of being Ὀδυσῆος, «of Odysseus». The genitive case seems to emphasize the indissoluble link between him and this formula. On the other hand, ἰστίη is also the object of the verb ἀφικάνω, the epic form of ἀφικνέομαι, or 'arrive, reach', indicating a movement that, for Odysseus, implies his return home. Once again, the concepts of the hearth and οἶκος seem to overlap. However, the element that suggests most convincingly the "symbolic" character of the hearth-ἔστια in contrast to other instances, such as ἐσχάρα or do-

⁴⁸ On the connection between the adjective ἀμύμων in this context and the definition of Aegisthus as ἀμύμων in *Od.* 1.29, see Xian (2020), which builds on the suggestion by Elmer (2015: 181), according to whom Aegisthus' description like ἀμύμων establishes an association with Odysseus and, therefore, a cross-comparison with Agamemnon's return.

mestic πῦρ, is the explicit link between the divinity, Ζεύς⁴⁹, and customs surrounding hospitality represented by the ξενίη τράπεζα, the ‘guest table’.

On these lines, the solemnity and the formulaic nature of the expression, as well as the association with fundamental elements of the Greek world, just as the house and the divinity, has led to the idea that Homer uses the term ἐστία in a very specific way, unlike the other Homeric terms that designate the hearth (González García 2010: 380). The ἐστία appears to carry a symbolic meaning, or at least a «numinous quality» (Heubeck 1988: 133) that goes beyond a simple and concrete hearth, to represent, along with the divinity and the concept of hospitality, pillar of the Homeric world⁵⁰. From this point of view, the compound word ἐφέστιος, and especially the mentions at 3.234 and 23.55, seem to “frame” the poem in the very different returns of Agamemnon and Odysseus to the ἐστία, the symbolic core of the home which are, as in these particular oaths, endowed with an almost sacred value.

7. Conclusions

Over the course of this analysis, two lines of inquiry have been followed. On the one hand, domestic fire has been considered primarily as a concrete element and the physical center of the οἶκος, and therefore an almost superimposed idea of home. With this perspective in mind, which could be defined as “objective”, I have examined the role of the “intermediary ἐσχάρα” of Calypso and the Phaeacians as the simulacrum of Ithaca as the final destination. Each represents a gradual geographical advancement toward Ithaca, as well as the end and the beginning of new stages in Odysseus’ νόστος. His conduct in regard to these hearths indicates the varying degrees of links to each οἶκος in which he finds himself. In Ogygia, he chooses to keep a distance from the blaze of Calypso’s ἐσχάρα. With the Phaeacians, he becomes more and more accepted and is raised up close to the fire, whereas in Ithaca the hearth almost appears as a cornerstone of the hero’s actions and as the place where he seeks refuge, while he also seemingly tries to protect it. Even in Ithaca, despite the central role of domestic fire in the scenes with Odysseus the beggar, he is not properly defined as ἐφέστιος until the penultimate book (*Od.* 23.55), when he takes his revenge.

On the other hand, besides being connected to the οἶκος, the hearth is also inextricably linked to πῦρ, though also different from it. In fact, they share the characteristics of light and heat, yet differ from the wild and indomitable character of fire, substituting these qualities by being “domestic” and controllable. Whereas fire in the *Iliad* provides a vivid comparison with the momentum of the attacking heroes and the consequences of their fury⁵¹, in the *Odyssey* the metaphor of embers demonstrates the weaker side of the element: the risk of being suffocated and put out. From this perspective, the image of Odysseus-δαλός, capable of preserving the σπέρμα πυρός, proves to be exemplary in its uniqueness, and serves here to outline the second element in the analysis of the role of the hearth in the poem. Upon “safeguarding” his inner fire under the ashes in Scheria, Odysseus-ember is able to regain strength,

⁴⁹ Cf. Dowden (2006: 81): «Zeus is the ultimate father of the family and head of the household, reflecting the key person in the home, the oikos, in Greece». Cf. Nilsson (1949: 123-125) on the relationship between the cult of Zeus and the house, and *LfgreE* 13, 1250, s.v. ἰστίν (H.W. Nordheider), on Zeus *xenios*.

⁵⁰ For a focus on hospitality in the *Odyssey*, cf. Belmont 1962, Thornton (2014: 37-39).

⁵¹ Cf. Scott (1974: 66-68, 190-191), Mackie 2008.

thanks to the hospitality of the Phaeacians who bring him out of the ash and welcome him to the bright light of the fire. Once in Ithaca, the hero chooses to conceal his own identity, light, and his vital πῦρ, until he takes his revenge. From an interpretive perspective, domestic fire seen as an external object is also reflected in the internal journey that the protagonist undertakes in order to reestablish his own humanity.

That is, the image of the σπέρμα πυρός guarded by the hero overlaps with that of the hearth as a symbol of home. Odysseus' character, along with his strategies and adventures, only finds fulfillment in the ultimate goal of returning to his homeland: his heroic dimension is wholly achieved in his domestic one. The four formulaic references to the ἰστίη Ὀδυσῆος illustrate the close relationship between the protagonist and his ἐστία. Unlike the individual ἐσχάραι that the hero meets along his journey, his own ἐστία lends itself to an almost unchanging and uncompromising disposition, a sacred aspect that even renders it the object of a solemn oath.

For its protagonist, the *Odyssey* constitutes a journey back to his homeland in order to take back control of his own οἶκος. In this context, the representation of fire in the poem cannot but take on the more tame, domestic, and human aspect of the hearth. Throughout Odysseus' story and actions, there is no room for sudden eruptions, or for the "fiery" and blazing fury that attracts all. Once finally departed from Ogygia, the revelation of the strength and the splendor of the hero is progressive and controlled, just like his actions, which, even when destructive, are the result of a prior strategy and hardly ever left to chance or driven by the heat of the moment. Prudent and careful, just like he who hides the embers beneath the ash, Odysseus never stops thinking about or striving toward his ultimate goal.

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