MORE ON NOLAN’S ODYSSEY (2) – THE TRICKSTER AND THE CIVICS CLASS

On Ezra Klein's review of Nolan's Odyssey, New York Times July 31

A second wave of response to Nolan's movie has begun to arrive, and with it a piece worth pausing over: Ezra Klein in the New York Times. I want to take it seriously — more seriously than it takes itself — because it confirms the central argument of

my earlier review in the very moment it inverts the evaluation of the film.

Here’s a quick summary of what I am arguing:

Nolan’s Odyssey is a faithful adaptation — but not of Homer. What it faithfully restages is a nineteenth-century grand narrative, a metanarrative: civilization is stability, secured by a universal ethics, held in trust by a fellowship of men, threatened by mobile others arriving by sea, and lost when the men who should know better abandon the values that bind. This is Gibbon’s arc for Rome — civility against barbarism, the moral equipment of a colonial-imperial imagination — mapped onto the end of the Bronze Age and transcribed into IMAX spectacle. The critical reception of the movie has identified this scaffold again and again, and endorsed it, deplored it, weaponized it — but never examined it. For the trope rests on an assumption the archaeology no longer supports: that stability is the norm and collapse the thing needing explanation. The unasked question runs the other way. Not why civilizations fall — but how any world, ever, holds together at all: what that holding costs, who pays, and how it is repaired.

Ezra Klein offers commentary on literary topics and characters associated with a traditional, literature-oriented Classics — Odysseus the complicated man (in Emily Wilson’s flawed translation — see below), the archetypes, the moral of the tale. Its message — that the movie offers a Judaeo-Christian commentary on civilized values — is in keeping with most of the reviews I have already covered: it accepts the grand universal narrative, the metanarrative of the end of civilization that the movie itself pushes, and works entirely within it. This framing (the shape of the end of civilization) is never the question. Virtue is simply relocated inside it.

What Klein concedes — this is not the world of Homer

I start with what the piece gives away, because it is the philological core of Klein’s review, with appropriate citation attached. Klein writes about hospitality: “as a horde of classicists have pointed out, that is not the law of Zeus, which is narrower: It demands hospitality toward the guest or the stranger, recognizing that anyone could be a god in disguise. It is not an ethic of compassion or even reciprocity.” Quite so. Homeric xenia is prudential, particular, enchanted — the stranger might be a god. It is not the Golden Rule of civilized behavior. And Klein then names what Nolan put in its place, chapter and verse: “Nolan has smuggled the

core of Judeo-Christian ethics into ‘The Odyssey.’” Leviticus 19:34. Rabbi Hillel. Matthew 7:12. He calls this smuggling Nolan’s “finest trick,” and applauds. This is not ancient Greece — this is a message for our time, and yes, about the end of civilization.

This is my argument about adaptation, backed by this prominent admirer. I argued that the movie re-imports a later (mainly nineteenth-century) ideology and dresses it up as antiquity; Klein documents the import of a Judaeo-Christian ethic of hospitality, and celebrates it. His argument repeats Sean Woods’s line on collapse that he took in Rolling Stone: Klein acknowledges the grand narrative of threat to civilization and then endorses exactly what I critique. Celebrants like Klein are witnesses to my critique. Even those who love the movie agree — the ethic is neither ancient nor Greek.

No one is asking questions about this narrative frame — the rise and fall of civilization, and the assumptions made of it — Is this even a valid historical frame? Is it not more of a mythological trope?

And the layering goes deeper than Klein allows. “Judaeo-Christian” is itself a modern construction — substantially a twentieth-century American coinage, a composite forged in the wartime and Cold War moment to give “western civilization” a shared moral pedigree. So the full sequence runs: a twentieth-century composite, retro-projected as the timeless Golden Rule of civility, retro-projected as Zeus’s law, retro-projected onto the Bronze Age. Rehash layered on rehash. Klein performs the stacking in the very act of describing it. This is again, in my terms, reenactment, not creative replay. The same old message.

The method of the piece is to find “keys” that unlock understanding. Key — the sack of Troy = the rage of October 7 and Gaza. Key — the suitors = the modern right. Carney quoting Thucydides on the strong and the weak; Netanyahu’s “Athens and super-Sparta”; Musk replying “I have wised up” to a correspondent urging the abandonment of universal suffrage. Some of the keys turn. But this is allegorical reading in its oldest form — the film is treated as cipher for the present — and it leaves the frame, the narrative structure wholly intact. Stable civilization — moral failure — barbarians — fall. This is the narrative frame that is not being questioned. This metanarrative is accepted; only the casting of villains changes.

One aside worth keeping: Klein notes that Helen in this movie is “just an excuse for a war launched to dominate routes of trade.” Note what this observation entails. The woman blamed for the war is now not even its cause. Cherchez la femme becomes cherchez l’économie. The demythologizing is complete — and Helen’s agency, already compromised in the tradition, is reduced to a pretext. (Is this something to do with that facial scar she carries in the film?)

The trickster mistake — the significance of power and agency

The best thing in Klein’s piece is the observation that Damon’s Odysseus is no trickster. This is on target. The first line of Homer’s poem promises a man described as *polytropos* — a man of many ways, many wiles, many turns, a trickster. Klein sees that Nolan has straightened him into “a man of a single way,” burdened and weary with guilt and the trauma of war. There is a neat transference here, nevertheless: the movie is polytropic in *form* — Nolan’s disordered, non-linear timeline — and monotropic in soul. The many turns survive as editing technique. The many-wayed man does not.

Klein talks of his fascination with the figure of the trickster — polytropos, polymetis. But, I have to ask, does he actually understand the character at all? Klein identifies Musk, Trump, Carlson, Tate as contemporary tricksters. This is naive and journalistic at best and it fails on the terms of Klein’s own authority on the figure of the trickster, Lewis Hyde, as Klein half-knows (“I am not saying these men are only tricksters”). The deeper and crucial error is structural and conceptual. The trickster is the figure of the *weaker* party. Mētis — the cunning intelligence that Detienne and Vernant traced across Greek culture — is the modus operandi of those who cannot win by force: the intelligence of the octopus and the fox, of traps and nets and timing, of the opponent’s strength turned against him. Odysseus tricks Polyphemos because one does not out-muscle a Cyclops. Men who command the state, the platform, and the treasury are not tricksters. They are princes or sovereigns indulging transgression from above — dominance with a grin. Klein himself quotes Stephen Miller: the world “is governed by strength… by force… by power,” the old iron laws of dominance and subordination . That is not polytropic mētis. That is precisely what mētis exists to circumvent. Klein’s examples refute his category.

Polytropic Marine Style octopus flask from Palaikastro (LM IB, c. 1500 BCE, Heraklion Archaeological Museum): the octopus sprawled asymmetrically across the whole vessel, tentacles curling to fit whatever surface it meets. It is Detienne and Vernant's mētis made visible — the many-coiled, shape-shifting intelligence of the weaker party — and it sidesteps personification entirely — my argument that the trickster is not a character but a mode of agency. It's also Bronze Age Aegean: the very world Nolan monumentalizes, here producing an image of exactly the polytropic intelligence out of which his Odysseus has been straightened. And there's a reflexive bonus — the potter's own mētis, the octopus's turns negotiated with the turning of the pot.

What is missing is an understanding of power and agency — in antiquity and today. The trickster is heterarchical agency personified: getting things done against hierarchy and institutionalized authority, through networks, improvisation, timing, adaptive capacity in the navigation of complexity. For most people in antiquity this was no literary curiosity; it was the only available mode of efficacy. The gods capricious, the palace distant, the harvest uncertain — one navigated, improvised, made do. Mētis names that navigation. A movie that deletes the trickster and a review that demonizes the character (as Trump and Musk) are making the same move: agency is yet again identified with hierarchy and class, efficacy reserved for the sovereign and the saint. And note where the deletion of mētis meets the deletion of the gods: both remove distributed, negotiated, improvisatory agency in favor of a single moral will. One operation. The movie performs it twice.

A comment here about that description of trickster Odysseus — polytropos. Emily Wilson, controversially, translates this as "complicated". This certainly resonates with the navigation of complexity and uncertainty, but reductively. The issue is not the character of Odysseus (a complicated man, difficult to assess and understand), but competency, and yes, agency, efficacy — the ways that Odysseus opens up. OK, translation is always challenging, always flawed, but here the costs of word-for-word translation are too high — a longer epithet is essential to understanding. Wilson reports that she is composing another, longer translation that will do justice to Homer's Greek — let's see what she comes up with.

Klein announces that "the age of the trickster is ending," and then closes by calling to "those who would remake this world." But remaking worlds is the trickster's job description. Coyote brings fire; Raven brings the sun; Hermes binds

the severed worlds so that Persephone, and spring, can return – Klein's own example. The muddle is complete.

Monotropic pottery. Mētis and its afterlife. Here is the octopus of the Marine Style potter, two centuries on, stiffened into ornament – style Mycenaean LH IIIc

c1200 BCE. The many tentacular “polytropic” turns survive only as pattern; Mētis, trickster intelligence, has left the tentacles.

The civics class — rescuing the Classics?

Credit where due. The discussion of big-historian Yuval Harari is the most interesting thing in Klein’s review — two thousand years of study, and what have we/you learned? If the Jews and Israeli state simply become the Romans and Rome, what was the point? That is a real question about the ironies of inheritance, and it cuts close to concerns of my own. And Klein’s closing remark — “seeing old values in new ways,” a moral inheritance “collapsed into cliché” that holds power again in an age that has debased it — gropes toward what I have called replay. But it gropes within a fidelity frame: renewal as restoration of the same archive, wielded again. Reenactment again, only this time with feeling.

For me, this reads like the kind of justification one now expects from the new wave of “civics” courses finding popularity in universities on the claim that they teach undergraduates the values of democratic (western) civilization. Such a program is now a requirement at Stanford, my own university. For me, this is the old justification for studying Classics, dressed up in a not-so-new rhetoric of ethical education. And here is the critical symmetry. Klein, with many others, treats antiquity as a mine of values for “our civilization”. But this is precisely the premise of the Bronze Age Pervert crowd, the Yarvins and Antons, the would-be American Caesars it opposes. Klein and the Caesarists are fighting over the same conceit: that the classical is where the civilized world audits its soul. One side finds dominance and sovereignty in the mine of values; the other finds compassion. Neither can imagine antiquity as anything other than an ethics delivery machine. Neither asks how those worlds actually held together, how efficacy was distributed, what the remains might do besides moralize. The quarrel over the inheritance leaves the conceit of inheritance untouched.

So the review confirms more than it knows. The smuggling of values across the borders of past and present is conceded — and by a horde of classicists, no less. The frame of civilization’s survival is embraced. The trickster is noticed, and then mischaracterized. A replay worthy of Homer would run the other way: keep mētis in motion; follow the heterarchical ways of getting things done, then and now; treat the trickster not as the villain of civilization’s fall but as the oldest

name for adaptive capacity — the intelligence by which worlds are held together, and remade. The age of the trickster is not ending. It never does. That is the point of the archetype — and the reason the story was worth retelling in the first place.

Reference: Ezra Klein, "The Odyssey" column, New York Times (August 2026); Lewis Hyde, Trickster Makes This World (1998); Marcel Detienne and Jean-Pierre Vernant, Cunning Intelligence in Greek Culture and Society (1978).

Original review by Ezra Klein in NYT —

I'll admit I'm a little late weighing in on "The Odyssey." Chalk it up to having young kids. I don't make it to the movies much. But what a trick its director, Christopher Nolan, has pulled off. Elon Musk did not understand what this movie was. But this movie understands what Musk is. It understands who we are becoming and who we have become, and it points a way out.

Tricks are central to "The Odyssey." In myth, Odysseus is a trickster. He is described, in the first line of the story, as the man of many ways or of many wiles or of many turns. He is, depending on the translator, an ingenious man, a cunning man, a complicated man. He is a man of appetites and contradictions, a man who wants nothing more than to go home but keeps choosing to stay abroad, a man who yearns for his wife but cannot stop bedding goddesses. Odysseus is never one thing; he is always many things.

Matt Damon is no trickster. I thought he was going to be the problem with Nolan's "Odyssey." Amid the right-wing outcry over the casting of Lupita Nyong'o and Elliott Page, it was Damon's casting as Odysseus that I couldn't reconcile with "The Odyssey." Damon often seems to me like a man of a single way, a man who wakes up early and keeps to a clean diet and rarely has more than one glass of wine before bed. That's not Odysseus.

But Nolan wasn't looking for a trickster. His Odysseus is something else. That, you can say, was Nolan's first trick.

I want to stop here and say a bit about tricksters, because I have spent the past

few years quietly obsessed with the archetype. The trickster is Loki in Norse mythology, Eshu in Yoruban stories, Coyote or Raven in Native American tales, Maui in Polynesia and Hermes and Odysseus among the ancient Greeks.

The function of the trickster, writes Lewis Hyde in his wonderful book “Trickster Makes This World” is “to uncover and disrupt the very things that a culture depends on.” The trickster dances across customs and taboos, says what may not be said, does what should not be done. The trickster injects disorder into order, renders visible what is ordinarily hidden. The trickster causes the damage that makes growth possible. But a happy ending is never guaranteed. The trickster can be regenerative or ruinous. Coyote brings fire; Raven brings the sun; Loki brings Ragnarok.

Hyde’s argument is that tricksters are both necessary and dangerous. They represent a tension every society must grapple with. A culture that cannot meet disruption with creativity cannot survive change. A culture that cannot protect its core values will be consumed by corruption. Too much order leads to paralysis; too much chaos invites collapse.

We are living in an age of chaos. We have been living in an age of tricksters. Musk, President Trump, Tucker Carlson, Andrew Tate, Nick Fuentes — the grammar of the modern right is tricksy. What is serious, and what is not? What is a provocation, and what is a promise? Why did they say that, and how did they get away with it? I am not saying these men are only tricksters. They are not the culture makers Hyde prefers to focus on. But I am saying that the dominant personalities of the age have gathered power by bulldozing customs and taboos, by saying what may not be said, by doing what should not be done.

Hyde said that Americans love a trickster “because he embodies things that are actually true about America but cannot be openly declared.” That might have been true in 1998, when Hyde published his book. And I can see the argument that American institutions and mores ossified in the years since — that our society had become too rulebound and bureaucratized, that too much had become unsayable, that there was too little openness to transgression and invention.

But today there is little that may no longer be said. The ideas and morals upon which the best of our culture was built have been disrupted and desecrated. The

question now is whether that disruption can be met with creativity and renewal.

This is the central question of Nolan's "Odyssey." This "Odyssey" ostensibly hinges on Zeus' law: Treat the beggar and the stranger as you would want to be treated. But as a horde of classicists have pointed out, that is not the law of Zeus, which is narrower: It demands hospitality toward the guest or the stranger, recognizing that anyone could be a god in disguise. It is not an ethic of compassion or even reciprocity.

And here we find Nolan's central trick: Nolan has smuggled the core of Judeo-Christian ethics into "The Odyssey." Zeus' law, in Nolan's "Odyssey," echoes Leviticus 19:34: "The foreigner residing among you must be treated as your native born. Love them as yourself, for you were foreigners in Egypt." It echoes Rabbi Hillel, who said: "What is hateful to you, do not do to your fellow. That is the whole Torah; the rest is commentary." It echoes Matthew 7:12, when Jesus says, "In everything, do to others what you would have them do to you, for this sums up the law and the prophets."

Such an ethic is demanding. Few of us live up to it. But the problem with adherents of the modern right is not just that they don't live up to it; the issue is that they detest it. To treat the foreigner residing among us as well as we treat our native born is derided as suicidal empathy. The Trump administration glorifies cruelty toward the immigrant, the stranger, the weak and the poor. It takes money from Medicaid to cut taxes for the rich. It threatens the destruction of whole civilizations.

The modern right is built on the logic of tribute and dominance. "We live in a world, in the real world, Jake, that is governed by strength, that is governed by force, that is governed by power," Stephen Miller, a top White House adviser, told CNN's Jake Tapper. "These are the iron laws of the world since the beginning of time."

But weren't those iron laws replaced by the Golden Rule? When Odysseus concocts the trick of the Trojan Horse, taking advantage of Troy's veneration of the same gods he worships to sack the city and make its streets run red with blood, is he a hero or a villain? Is it a trick or a crime? To Homer, he was a hero. To Nolan, he is a soul in need of redemption. Between Homer's time and ours came a revolution in

civilizational values, an upending of what civilization even means. Which side of that divide are we on?

The modern right believes that Western civilization has lost the appetite for strength and dominance and hierarchy that built it. There is a reason a theorist like Bronze Age Pervert has become required reading for young Trumpists. There is a reason right-wing intellectuals like Curtis Yarvin and Michael Anton have mused about the need for an American Caesar. There is a reason the Trump administration is obsessed with Roman-style architecture. It is not an accident that they keep circling this era, both intellectually and aesthetically.

A recent exchange Musk had on X reveals how far this thinking has gone. A user told Musk it was time to “wise up” and abandon classical liberalism, because “universal suffrage leads to universal suffering.” His reply: “I have wised up.”

Helen of Troy, in Nolan’s “Odyssey,” is just an excuse for a war launched to dominate routes of trade. It’s a telling choice during an administration that is crashing into the global order in pursuit of more dominance over trade flows.

In the cry of protest by the Canadian prime minister, Mark Carney, against this regime, he also reached back to Greece to describe what he saw happening: “The strong can do what they can, and the weak must suffer what they must. And this aphorism of Thucydides is presented as inevitable, as the natural logic of international relations reasserting itself.”

When Nolan’s Odysseus recalls the sacking of Troy, he blanches at the memory of 10 years of rage pouring into a city in a single night. It was hard for me not to think, then, of the pent-up rage that Hamas poured into Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, and that Israel has poured into Gaza a hundredfold in the years since. The Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, now describes Israel’s future as “Athens and super-Sparta.”

Yuval Noah Harari, the Israeli-born historian who wrote “Sapiens,” sees the diminishment this foretells clearly. “A lot of the thinking, and also the practice, about what it means to have freedom of thought, what it means to be a powerless minority, was done by Jewish thinkers,” he told me. He added:

For 2,000 years, Jews all over the world saw studying and learning as the highest

spiritual activity. After 2,000 years, you ask them: What have you learned? You have studied for 2,000 years. What have you learned?

And then people like Netanyahu tell you: Oh, we have learned that you need to be a Roman, that you need to be strong, that you need to build legions, that you need to destroy cities. This is the only thing that matters in life.

It's a legitimate value system. Rome had its usefulness. But if after 2,000 years, the Jews simply become the Romans, what was the point? Why did you waste 2,000 years, then? You could have just become Roman back then.

This is Nolan's finest trick: to make one of our oldest moral rules sound new again. To turn the best of Judeo-Christianity into the law of Zeus, so we can see why it might matter and what it might still have to say to us.

What Odysseus sees, eventually, is that his violations of the moral order have brought ruin to all around him. Agamemnon, the king who launched the war against Troy, is dead, his throat slit by his wife, who never forgave him for sacrificing their daughter for fair winds. Troy is destroyed. Ithaca, Odysseus' home, is overrun by suitors who seek his wife and land and think nothing of murdering his son in their pursuit. Odysseus and his men were not fighting the barbarians; they were the barbarians. And their actions led to more barbarity.

So, too, has the political movement that rose promising to make Western civilization great again betrayed its inheritance. The world now looks at America and sees us as the barbarians: the country obliterating the global order, the country that takes what it wants and demands tribute from those who cannot resist.

And what the political opposition has to do now is recognize what Nolan recognized: That it is an affirmation of our civilizational values to say that cruelty is a weakness. That only compassion and reciprocity build a durable and decent society. That order is necessary but order without ethics and restraint is perversion or authoritarianism. That there is both beauty and wisdom in the injunction to avoid inflicting on others what we would not see turned against us and in remembering that we were strangers in the land of Egypt, too.

At the end of his book, Hyde considers when the trickster's tale ends in ruin and when it ends in regeneration. His answer is that devastation comes when you cannot

rejoin the worlds. Loki is bound beneath the earth, with poison dripped on him for eternity, and the end of the world is the result. Hermes becomes a connector between our world and the underworld, allowing Persephone, and spring, to return each year. In other words, it is only when severed worlds can be bonded that cultures can rediscover their strength.

I do not want to make this too didactic, so I will just end here: Justice in America has come, repeatedly, when those seeking progress realize that the language of the Torah, of the New Testament and of the Declaration of Independence can be wielded on behalf of a new world. It has been some time since religion, liberalism and patriotism had a comfortable relationship in this country.

But the shape of the modern right has created space to do that work again. Regeneration is hard. It requires seeing old values in new ways. It requires recognizing that a moral inheritance that has collapsed into cliché holds power in an age when it has been debased and forgotten. But it can be done. It needs to be done.

Nolan’s Odysseus is not a trickster. He is a man living in the ruins brought about by tricksters. So, too, are we. This movie, and the reaction to it, is a sign that the age of the trickster is ending.

Now we need those who would remake this world.