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Frazier Polymêtis:  
Cold Mountain and the Odyssey

Ever since its appearance in 1997, Charles Frazier's novel, Cold Mountain, has been billed as a latter-day Odyssey. Separate unattributed book notes on the world wide web speak of its protagonist's "dangerous odyssey" and his "odyssey through the devastated landscape of the soon-to-be-defeated South." One reviewer styles the novel "a Confederate deserter's homeward odyssey"; another characterizes it as having "reset much of the 'Odyssey' in 19<sup>th</sup>-century America." While such assertion of parallelism between the novel and Homer's epic is widespread, it also tends to remain general and relatively unadorned. It evidently rests on such typically odyssean plot elements as a homeward journey (nostos) and geographically-challenging and picaresque adventures. A more detailed comparison of Cold Mountain to its Greek archetype, however, reveals a richer, subtler and more systematic dialogue with the Odyssey that invites the reader to attend first to plot parallels, both broad and specific, then to similarities and contrasts in the protagonists' characterizations, and finally to ways that the resultant intertextuality helps to advance the novel's themes.

As early as the third page, a hint is dropped that Greek classics may play a role in the book. It is there that we are introduced to the transitory character Balis, a gangrenous amputee who will have died fifteen pages later. Before the war, Balis "had been to school at Chapel Hill, where he had attempted to master Greek. All his waking time was now spent trying to render ancient scribble from a fat little book into plain writing anyone could read" (3). Since this doomed character is introduced immediately following narration of an incident in which the protagonist has rebelliously "walked away" from school, "never to return" (2), an initial expectation is raised that Balis may prove a character foil to Inman: one who wastes his time in escapist porings over the past (a common stereotype of the classicist), in contrast with a man of

action but little learning. This tentative assessment seems affirmed when Inman leafs through the dead Balis's papers and discovers a translated Heraclitean fragment (106 Diels [paraphrased]) that makes him "sad to think that Balis had spent his last days studying on the words of a fool" (18). It is softened, however, by his response to a second fragment (124 Diels): "'The comeliest order on earth is but a heap of random sweepings.'" That, Inman decided, he could consent to" (18).

By the end of the novel, the Balis scene will have proved thematically significant in two ways. The early reference to a philosopher whose "challenge to mankind is to learn to understand...the discourse of nature" provides the first foreshadowing of a theme that will be prominent at the end of the novel – that war's ravages can only be undone when people reattune themselves to nature's "endless arc of the sun, wheel of seasons" (218). We are also compelled to reevaluate the seeming opposition of an escapist Balis to an action-minded Inman when we later find Inman himself "[aspiring] to learn Greek. That would be quite a thing to know" (344). Through this framing reference, "learning Greek" is metamorphosed into an emblem for stubborn individuality. Just as Balis's persistence in translating Greek figures his refusal to surrender his personal identity to the leveling buzz-saw of the war, so the deserter Inman's late aspiration to learn the language emblemizes his desire to live by the light of individual conscience, rather than collective will. Thus, Inman's flight from the individuality-crushing grammar school (2) (which itself prefigures his imminent defection from the soldiers' hospital) actually signals identity, rather than opposition, between him and the scholarly Balis.

Study of the Greek language next appears in the novel in reference to Ada, the Penelope of the story. Ada has been educated by her minister father "beyond the point considered wise for females" (22). As a result, she was a misfit in Charleston society, a woman who did not understand that "rejection of a marriage proposal made by any man of means who was not

defective in a clear and demonstrable way was, if not inconceivable, at least inexcusable” (50). In a different sense, she is equally unfitted to the tasks that face her after her father’s death. Choosing to stay on and eke a living independently in her new mountain community rather than return “as some desperate predatory spinster” (49) to Charleston, she faces the daunting task of learning from scratch every survival technique passed from father to son and mother to daughter in a less aristocratic segment of society. As she assesses her competence for this endeavor, she ponders: “But what actual talents could she claim? What gifts? A fair command of French and Latin. A hint of Greek. A passable hand at fine needlework...” (22). Again the note is sounded of the irrelevance to “real life” of classical knowledge.

A third significant reference to Greek occurs when the “well-read” (22) Ada meets up with Ruby, a servant who isn’t a servant, who joins forces with Ada on an “order of equality” under which “everybody empties their own night jar” (52). Ruby instructs Ada in the practical ways of farm and mountains; reciprocating this mentoring in converse, Ada takes advantage of the quiet time between chores and bed to read aloud to Ruby from Homer:

Books and their contents were a great novelty to Ruby, and so Ada had reckoned that the place to begin was near the beginning. After filling Ruby in on who the Greeks were, she had begun reading from Homer.

(81)

A little later, we learn that it is specifically the Odyssey that Ada has undertaken to read: “Ruby had grown impatient with Penelope, but she would sit of a long evening and laugh and laugh at the tribulations of Odysseus, of the stones the gods threw in his passway” (108). The take-charge Ruby’s impatience with Penelope marks an extra-dramatic comment by the author on his own post-feminist refinement of the Odyssean nostos motif: Penelope is the classic

typology of a woman whose life is on hold while she awaits her man's return; the introduction of Ruby – a character who will help her Penelope achieve self-sufficiency at home, independently of her man – is a delicate “improvement” in the traditional motif. As a result of Ruby's intercession, Ada will welcome Inman back for the “right” reason (love), rather than the “wrong” one (female helplessness):

You don't need him, Ruby said.

I know I don't need him, Ada said. But I think I want him.

Well that's a whole different thing.

(325)

Ruby's summary response to classical literature (“that, all in all, not much had altered in the way of things despite the passage of a great volume of time” [108]) points to a second extra-dramatic comment. Her assessment invites us to connect not just character types (Odysseus and Stobrod, Ruby's reprobate father), but also the literary vehicles in which they appear, as purveyors of universal human experience.

A less direct, but nonetheless inescapable, reference to Homer occurs when Inman dreams of Ada:

He rose from where he lay on the ground, and though  
perplexed as to how she came to be there he longed to hold  
her and went to do it, but three times as he reached his arms  
to her she fogged through them, vague and flickery and grey.

(102)

The passage is a clearly intentional reworking of the lines in the nekyia of the Odyssey where Odysseus encounters the shade of his mother: “I bit my lip, rising perplexed, with longing to embrace her, and tried three times, putting my arms around her, but she went sifting through

my hands, impalpable as shadows are, and wavering like a dream." The closeness of the diction between the two passages constitutes, essentially, a whack with an intertextual hammer. If we had paid no attention to the handful of references to Greek literature before this, we would be compelled to sit up and take notice now, for this is essentially quotation without quotation marks.

Frazier continues on after the lines quoted above: "The fourth time, though, she stood firm and substantial and he held her tight. He said, I've been coming for you on a hard road. I'm never letting you go. Never" (102). This correction of the classical motif – by which an untraditional fourth try is rewarded by success – is allowed by the transfer of the object of longing from one already dead (Odysseus's mother) to one alive and sought after (Ada, the Penelope-figure). The result is to emphasize the emotional urgency of Inman's nostos and to predict (only partially truly) its success.

This series of references to Greek and specifically to Homer has the cumulative effect of establishing a context of intertextuality between Cold Mountain and its ancient forebear. The series is capped by a prosodic joke:

An owl hooted from the trees beyond the creek. Ada counted  
off the rhythm of the five-beat phrase as if scanning a line of  
poetry: a long, two shorts, two longs.

(113)

The "five-beat phrase" (a dactyl plus a spondee) is the "signature" rhythm that closes the dactylic hexameter line. Thus, in the world of Frazier's novel, owls hoot in the meter of epic. What better way to acknowledge the indebtedness of the author's muse to the Homeric tradition?

Once a context of referentiality is established, it is hard not to read other passages in

the novel in the same vein. When Inman emerges from a long dunking in a swollen river and “[kicks] together a bed of duff deep enough to keep him off the damp ground and [stretches] out and [sleeps] for three hours” (70), we may or may not be justified in hearing an echo of the leaf-bed that protects Odysseus after the capsizing of his raft has left him adrift for two days and two nights (Od. 5.482-486). We can more confidently identify deliberate Homeric allusion at the point when Inman finds himself “nearing home: he could feel it in the touch of thin air on skin, in his longing to see the leap of hearth smoke from the houses of people he had known all his life” (281). At mention of the “leap of hearth smoke,” even casual readers of the Odyssey should recall the striking image of Odysseus, the first time we meet him in the Odyssey, stranded on Calypso’s island: “But such desire is in him merely to see the hearthsmoke leaping upward / from his own island, that he longs to die” (Od. 1.57-59, Fitzgerald, 3).

While the overall “feel” of Inman’s adventures is distinctly post-classical (an anonymous reviewer’s characterization of this journey as “emphatically picaresque, a progression of grotesque and fantastic encounters reminiscent of Fielding or Richardson” is right on the mark), specific elements within them do recall Homer. When Inman comes across “a group of women at a river doing laundry” (115), the parallel with Odysseus in Phaeacia has to jump to mind, even though Inman will not beg clothes of them (as Odysseus does of Nausicaa in Book 6), but steal their picnic lunches without revealing himself. The kindly goat-woman (207-223) and the wistful young widow (238-254) who shelter Inman during his wanderings are cast as helper-maidens in the tradition of Ino, Nausicaa, Athena; conversely, there is something Circean about Lila, the seductress who behexes Inman (it is his bad luck that no Hermes is available to forearm him with moly), then hands him over to the Home Guard to be killed (167-176).

Is there a glance at the pseudo-Homeric aetion of the lyre (Hymn to Hermes, 39-62) in Stobrod's elaborate story of the "creation" of his wondrous fiddle (228-230), the former involving sacrifice of a tortoise, the latter of a rattlesnake? Perhaps, or perhaps not, but, when the goat-woman slaughters and cooks a kid for Inman's dinner, the ceremony indisputably mimics the standard feast-preparation formulae of Homer. A formulary feast-scene (e.g., at Iliad 2.421-431) details in serial parataxis the throat-cutting (esphaxan), flaying (edeiran), cutting up (exetamon, mistyllon), spitting (epeiran) on leafless sticks (schizesin aphyloisin) or spits (obeloin), roasting (katekaion, ôptêsan) and eating (dainunto) of the hams (mêra), entrails (splangchna) and other cuts (talla) of the victim. Allowing for a lowering of diction, a switch to boiling instead of broiling for the tripes, and the modern age's taste for herb cookery, Frazier's account of the roasting of a goat is remarkably similar. After cutting the little goat's throat (esphaxan), the goat-woman proceeds to her own paratactic set of chores:

She split the little goat from breastbone to asshole and let the bowels (splangchna) fall in the basin with the blood. Then she shucked the goat out of its skin (edeiran), and it looked strange and long-necked and goggle-eyed. She cut it into parts (exetamon, mistyllon). The tenderest pieces (mêra) she coated with a dry rub of herbs, ground peppers, salt, a little sugar. These she skewered (epeiran) on green twigs (cf. schizêisin aphyloisin) and set to roast (katekaion). The other pieces (talla) she put into an iron pot with water, onions, an entire bulb of garlic, five dried red peppers, leaves of sage, and summer savory scrubbed between her palms.

Both passages may properly be said to evince the savoring of detail that led Havelock to describe epic as playing a role as “tribal encyclopedia.” The parallel is more than coincidence. The characteristically detailed recording of cultural detail in the Homeric text arose integrally from the orality of the epic tradition:

Formula and list served as the vehicles of history. Old customs became embedded in standard descriptions and were remembered as part of the fabric of the narrative.

Frazier’s novel too derives from an oral tradition. In his “Acknowledgements,” the author thanks his father for having “preserved the family stories” on which the novel is built. Indeed, the novel moves from one “tale” to another, weaving various characters’ stories together in ways reminiscent of Homer (and even more so of the interlocking episodes of Ovid’s Metamorphoses). In these tales, Frazier habitually evinces an encyclopedic attention to detail. Critics have spoken of his “scholar’s feel for the period’s idioms, costumes, and mores” and his “[absorption] with processes like getting dressed, cooking, eating, sleeping.” An otherwise negative reviewer concedes that “when he tells how to kill a hog or make a fiddle, or refers to ambrotype, calotype and daguerreotype portraits, you know that he knows what he is writing about.” The author’s replication of a standard formula of Homer’s tribal encyclopedia is, I submit, a deliberate assertion of similarity not only between the two texts, but between two artistic impulses (the one oral, the other literary but emulating the oral) that embed culture into narrative.

A summary comment on the episode in the caravan of the goat-woman cleverly glosses the novel’s impulse to cultural encyclopedia, when inspection of the manuscripts and journals the reclusive goat-woman has painstakingly gathered on the daily behavior of goats leads

Inman to conclude “that the woman’s aim was to list in every detail the habits of their culture” (222). The scholarly goat-woman is thus cast as a double for the author.

The most extensive, systematic and thematically significant intertextuality between Cold Mountain and the Odyssey occurs in the characterization of Inman, in the portrayal of his relationship to Ada and in the reunion of the two at the end of the novel. Inman shares many characteristics with his epic prototype, but one trait that they definitely do not have in common is Odysseus’s way with words. Of Odysseus’s characterizing epithets, we could say that Inman would easily merit being called polytlas or polytlêmon: “much-enduring”; he proves himself distinctly polymêchanos: “resourceful” and polymêtis: “strategic” on several occasions, notably in his ability to elude capture and survive battle at poor odds. His generosity and unfailing humanity further qualify him as megalêtor: “great-hearted.” But, if the perfect Greek hero is at once a “doer of deeds and speaker of words” (that is, one who has talents for both logos: “speech” and ergon: “action”) – and if Odysseus is brotôn och’ aristos hapantôn boulêi kai mythoisin: “of all men now alive... the best in plots and story telling” (Od. 13.297-298, Fitzgerald, 239) – we have to admit that this is an area of significant contrast between the Greek hero and Inman.

At the heart of the epic lies “the idea of heroic action,” and Inman is, by innate disposition, a man of ergon. By the time we meet him, of course, he is disillusioned by the war and sated with killing, but the fact that he has no taste for fighting does not mean that he is not good at it: “Before the war he had never been much of a one for strife. But once enlisted, fighting had come easy to him. He had decided it was like any other thing, a gift” (96). Jones is wrong when he says Inman “is not a warrior but a wanderer.” Inman, like Odysseus, is a warrior and a wanderer. Several times in the course of the novel, he is forced into battle – a lone combatant facing multiple foes, like Odysseus against the suitors – and emerges

victorious. In Kazin's words, he is a "damned good killer."

Everyone in Cold Mountain has a story. There is perhaps intentional irony in the fact that among the most tongue-tied of the book's characters are its two protagonists. This situation is, in terms of dramatic convenience, natural. Minor characters, casually met, have to tell their stories promptly or risk their not being told at all. Put another way, it is to tell their stories that they are inserted into the book at all. Odell, the peddler who shares a room at an inn with Inman, disappears from the novel after reciting his tale of passion for the octoroon, Lucinda (131-135). We never hear the final fate of the captive deserter who narrates atrocities by the Home Guard "from out the barred window of his cell" (142). We come to expect a tale of pathos or adventure at every turn, and we are not disappointed.

Inman, on the other hand, is by nature interior. Styled by one critic as "stoic, reticent and lonely," likened by two others to Clint Eastwood ("curt, grave, and resourceful"; "brave, intelligent, taciturn, and unillusioned"), he has none of Odysseus's glibness or persuasive power. His tendency to wordlessness is presented by Frazier partly as a function of his provenance from the Southern Blue Ridge Mountain region. When Ada and her father Monroe leave Charleston for this new area, they find themselves among a strange people who meet all Monroe's loquacious ministries with relative silence:

For all you could tell by their bearing, they might have been alone. They looked at the fire and said not a word and moved not one muscle in their faces as response to anything Monroe said. When he pressed them with a direct question they sat and thought about it for a long time, and sometimes they answered in brief vague phrases and more often they just looked sharply at him as if that in itself conveyed all the

message they cared to pass.

(43)

A second part of Inman's silence is a function of the secretiveness forced upon him by his outlier status; a third arises from the psychic trauma and self-doubt brought on by his war experiences.

Right from the beginning of Inman's nostos, we are presented with an overly laconic protagonist. At the first store he visits for provisions, Inman is set upon in a seemingly motivationless attack (did the men recognize him as a deserter? – not that we are told). One challenges him, “Where are you going, son-of-a-bitch?” (57). In return, “Inman [says] nothing” (57), but mows all three down with a scythe, “until they all [lie] prone and quiet, faces down” (58) in the street. With his own silent ferocity, he silences their rude overconfidence. The incident testifies to the hero's high qualifications in the area of ergon and technê: fighting “skill.” At the same time it calls his capacity for logos into question. The sole word he speaks during the encounter, when the smith revives and threatens him with a gun, is “Shitfire” (58).

Similarly, when tales are told, Inman is presented as a listener rather than a talker. Early in the novel he recalls an idyllic two weeks spent on Balsam Mountain, playing a “vicious ball game” (13) and sitting up late at night “drinking and telling tales at fireside” (14). It was there that he met the Cherokee, Swimmer, who “would talk seamlessly in a low voice” (14).

Swimmer fills Inman's ears with tales of cosmogony and cosmology – aetia that explain the possum's bare tail or the buck's antlers, and “how the world came about and where it is heading” (14). Inman finds Swimmer's voice “a rush of sound, soothing as creek noise” (14), but does not himself join in. Rather, he “[sits] through the tales and spells, watching the rill in the water where current fell against his dipped line” (14). He is spellbound -- unlike Odysseus, the spell-binder.

Somewhat later, Inman is hosted for dinner around a campfire by a troupe of show folk who “passed a bottle around and sat telling Inman stories of their endless travels” (99); as far as we can tell, Inman reciprocates not a word. A little further into his journey, he falls in step with a reprobate preacher named Veasey, whom Inman has prevented from dropping his pregnant mistress over a cliff, only to find himself somehow the man’s travel companion and protector. Like Swimmer, Veasey has the gift of “talking seamlessly” (118) – though his effect on Inman is anything but soothing:

His ambition seemed to be to disburden himself of every feature of his prior life by passing it along to Inman. Every misstep he had made – and it was clear he’d made plenty – he sought to share. He was a sorry preacher; that much was apparent even to him.

(118)

By contrast, Inman is not the type to disburden himself of his past. When Veasey and he seek shelter at “a kind of grim roadside inn and stable” (125), his first act is to save Veasey from a gun-battle over a “black whore as big as a man” (126). Trying to avert trouble, Inman advises Veasey, “Time to shut up” (128). When the loquacious preacher declines his advice, again “Inman [says] nothing” (128), but gets the drop on Veasey’s antagonist and sends him away muttering. Again his forte is revealed as ergon, rather than logos.

As Veasey goes off with the gargantuan Tildy, the rest of the “assorted wanderers... ganged up and talked and drank together at a long table,” and “Every man had tales to tell” (129). The case with our hero, however, is different. He sits aside, “perched alone...at the dry end of the room” (129), separated from the others not only by space but by ethos: “The others glanced at him frequently, a certain amount of worry in their looks. Their faces were

mirrors in which Inman could see himself as they evidently did, as a man that might just shoot you” (129).

Retiring to bed, though, Inman strikes up a brief friendship with his accidental roommate, Odell. The two stay up most of the night “telling tales of exile and brute wandering” (131). Notably, though, it is Odell who actually speaks, detailing for five pages the grim consequences of his “unseemly love” for a slave (131). While the topic of “exile and brute wandering” would surely be appropriate to Inman’s own present condition, the only words attributed to him in the whole night of tale-telling are his summary remark at the end of Odell’s tale: “It’s a feverish world, Inman said, for lack of better comment” (135).

It is not that Inman does not respect words. Rather, he deeply believes that “all words had some issue” (58). So much does he respect them that, in reading a botanical text of Bartram’s that has become like a Bible to him, he rests with pleasure on each individual word: “First he read it until each word rested in his head with a specific weight peculiar to itself, for if he did not, his attention just skittered over phrases so they left no mark” (100). The story of Inman and Ada’s first awkward conversation is also marked by his impressing her with his unexpected possession of an abstract vocabulary:

--It’s just that you’ve been the subject of considerable speculation, Inman said.

--Like a novelty, is it, speaking to me?

--No.

--A challenge, then. Perhaps from that circle of dullards there.

--Not at all.

--Well, then, you supply the simile.

--Like grabbing up a chestnut burr, at least thus far.

Ada smiled and nodded. She had not figured him to know  
the word.

(64)

Rather, his inexpressiveness, born of native taciturnity, has been aggravated to pathology by his need to deny his identity as outlier and by his depressed belief that “it was his lot to bear the penalty of the unredeemed, that tenderness be forevermore denied him and that his life be marked down as a dark mistake” (311). Inman as a “doer of deeds” does not hesitate to kill when he has to, as his elimination of the little party of Federals that plays Suitor to his hospitable hostess Sara’s scanty stores demonstrates: stalking and outflanking them like a true tactician, he falls on them from ambush and kills all three. He does so, however, at great toll to himself:

Inman decided to view what was before him in this context:  
next to the field in front of the sunken road at Fredericksburg  
or the accumulated mess at the bottom of the crater [at  
Petersburg], this was near nothing. At either place he had  
probably killed any number of men more satisfactory in all  
their attributes than this Eben. Nevertheless, he figured this  
might be a story he would never tell.

(250, emphasis mine)

The war, and his own moral revulsion from the acts it demands, combine to rob Inman of his ability to tell his personal story.

Odysseus, Inman’s prototype, faces both battle and his subsequent trials with ever-undiminished confidence and is exempt from guilt even when many of post-Christian

sensibility might wish some on him. Inman, by contrast, is driven into silence and self-loathing by war trauma and anguish over his own role in its horror. Odysseus's adventures prove him a master story-teller and liar. Inman – a character drawn in an age deeply mistrustful of war and its consequences – is unable to tell anything but the truth, yet finds the truth so painful he succumbs to tortured and psychologically destructive inexpressiveness. The Greeks' respect for the Odyssean character type is made clear by Athena's admiring response to one of Odysseus's false tales:

Whoever gets around you must be sharp  
and guileful as a snake; even a god  
might bow to you in ways of dissimulation.

You! You chameleon!

Bottomless bag of tricks...Two of a kind we are,  
Contrivers, both.

(Od. 13.291-299, Fitzgerald, 239)

Guile, however, is a character trait less normally associated with heroes (or their gods) in modern times. The still-waters-run-deep typology is perhaps especially congenial to a twentieth century sensibility conditioned to empathize with sub-surface emotional vulnerability in men and particularly attuned to inexpressivity as symptomology of post-traumatic stress disorder.

Despite his general silence, there are two occasions on which Inman does narrate a part of his story: Fredericksburg, which tortures his mind with memories of the sight of corpses “heaped up...to make shelter” (8), the sound of “the slap of balls into meat” (7) and the sight *and* sound of a fellow Confederate whistling “Cora Ellen” while methodically finishing off a line of wounded Federals with one hammer blow to the head each (9); Petersburg, where “there was no room for firing and loading muskets, so they mainly used them as clubs,” and “so

many men had come apart in the blowup and the shelling that the ground was slick and threw up a terrible stink” (124). McCarron and Knoke aptly label the Fredericksburg tale as Inman’s “literary ‘primal scene,’ a survivor’s recollection of a specific battle experience so ‘undeniably horrible’ that it becomes the focal point of recurring nightmare and psychological trauma.” The Petersburg variation on the theme might justly share the label.

These are the only pieces of direct self-revelation Inman yields in the first 217 pages of the novel. They are not surrendered easily or freely. The Fredericksburg narrative is his answer to an ironic challenge by a blind peddler outside his hospital room: “Come on, cite me one instance where you wished you were blind” (6). The response it evokes from the peddler, “You need to put that away from you” (9), illustrates Inman’s problem: his narration of the story in no way serves him as therapeutic speech; it is, rather, a sign of unhealthy perseverance. The account of the second battle is extorted from him by Veasey only after his first several attempts “to draw out Inman’s story” have elicited “hardly a word in answer” (123). Inman’s tale-telling partakes of none of Odysseus’s glib expansiveness; his stories issue from him blistered and angry, betraying psychic damage as raw as the wound at his neck.

Inman's wounds, both physical and psychological, undergo some healing in his visit to the goat-woman, a "root doctor" (215) whom Gifford has described as "a profoundly symbolic figure of landscape-based healing qualities." She invites Inman into her home, slaughters the little goat to feed him, then -- when he has finished eating -- the two turn to their personal tale-telling. The steps follow a standard pattern for Homeric xenia: provide the hospitality first, then proceed to the introductions. As has happened with all Inman's previous encounters, the goat-woman tells her story first (214-215). The surprise is that here, for the first time, Inman will reciprocate with his: "he looked her in the eyes and was surprised to find that they were wells

of kindness despite all her hard talk. Not a soul he had met in some time drew him out as this goatwoman did, and *so he told her what was in his heart*" (218, emphasis mine).

For Inman, the very release of words is therapeutic. He speaks of shame at his original eagerness to go off to war and of the renewal he had felt that very morning at the perception that, whatever men do, the world of nature moves on in its own endless, redundant rhythms. In this speech, he signals his readiness for return to oneness with the natural world:

War took a man out of that circle of regular life and made a season of its own, not much dependent on anything else. He had not been immune to its pull. But sooner or later you get awful tired and just plain sick of watching people killing one another for every kind of reason at all, using whatever implements fall to hand. So that morning he had looked at the berries and the birds and had felt cheered by them, happy they had waited for him to come to his senses, even though he feared himself deeply at variance with such elements of the harmonious.

(218)

Perhaps picking up his cue that he is now ready for healing, the goat-woman ministers to his wounds with salves and herbal lozenges. The effect goes beyond the physical, as Inman prolongs his tale-telling, for the first time in the novel speaking aloud the concerns that have been his internal obsession: "To Inman's surprise, he found himself telling about Ada" (220). The scene is thus set for his spiritual healing.

Beyond Inman's narrations of his two primal scenes and this moment of genuine communication with the goat-woman, there is only one other passage before the climax of the

book where the hero attempts to express his inner feelings. It is that moment between him and Ada, told in flashback, when he tries to convey to her his sense of the importance of a Cherokee story of paradise almost gained, but then lost, in the interior of Cold Mountain. Inman and Ada, whose touchy relationship is founded in “a confusedly felt and barely expressed love,” are taking an uncomfortable leave-taking, as Inman heads off to war. Inman resorts to symbolic speech out of social awkwardness; no matter how serious the emotions that impel him to tell the tale, though, the only reaction he elicits from Ada is an arch, “Well, that was certainly folkloric” (198).

In Homer, we never see Odysseus, ultimate tactician and master of lies, in a courtship situation, but we can hardly imagine him as anything less than eloquent if he were. Inman’s attempt at eloquence, by contrast, is most notable for its lack of success. As readers, we may readily imbue his story with symbolic significance; but the fact is that, as a narrative, it fails to forge the desired bond with the person to whom it is addressed. We are again reminded that, unlike Odysseus, Inman is not a spell-binder. Frazier has introduced a sea change into his adoption of the Penelope motif by casting the two lovers who await reunion not as husband and wife, not even as betrothed lovers, but as a couple with no clear understanding of their feelings for one another.

It is a byword of the Odyssey that Odysseus’s Penelope is his match in intelligence, prudence and polymêchania. Likewise, Ada is an “Inman double,” as illustrated by her ability, after her father’s death, to re-orient her life toward survival in a harsh world. In the two lovers’ leave-taking scene, we see that they are joined as well by their emotional reticence and their unwillingness or inability to reveal themselves through speech. Ada will, in fact, resist being cast as a Penelope: despite later regretting her flippant comment about his paradise myth (“she worried that she had rudely *dismissed Inman’s story*” [200, emphasis mine]), she still

consciously declines to regret “[leaving] unsaid the things many thousands of women, married and unmarried, said as men left, all of which boiled down to the sentiment that they would await the man’s return forever” (200). Further, as we shall see, although Ada has a very different relation to logoi from Inman's, hers is an equally problematic one: like him, she is slow to identify and express her inmost feelings.

Before Ruby’s appearance on the scene, Ada is characterized as a book-learned aesthete, helpless in the face of practical existence. The novel is full of references to the books or poems she has plucked out of Monroe’s library to read: Lawrence’s Sword and Gown, The Mill on the Floss and The Scarlet Letter (26), Little Dorrit (79), the Odyssey (81, 108), Bleak House (200), Adam Bede (271). She recognizes the strange vicariousness of her life (26, 259). Ruby takes it as a major victory in her education of Ada in the practical matters of life that Ada finally stops slipping a book into her pocket before going out to do chores (81). Ada is not tongue-tied in the same way as Inman. In fact, she can be quite rhetorical – but almost always in service of a book. When Ruby and she stay up “most of the night, talking nonstop of plans for the future and memories of the past,” Ada’s primary contribution is to “[retell] the entire thrilling plot of Little Dorrit” (79). Despite their different relationships with words, she is a perfect analogue for Inman here: rather than ever speaking directly of their own emotions, both deal in second-hand discourse – Inman retailing the aged Cherokee woman’s mythic vision, Ada relating classic plot summaries.

Like Swimmer or Veasey in relation to the wordless Inman, Ruby is Ada’s talkative counterpart: Ruby tours the grounds with Ada, “talking constantly” (71); her recommendations “never seemed to stop” (72). In all their time together, Ruby “*would talk seamlessly*” (80, emphasis mine), as Swimmer and Veasey do to Inman; her “monologues seemed composed mainly of verbs, all of them tiring” (80). When Ada talks back, by contrast, it is likely to be to

read from Homer or recite the myth of Narcissus (150).

Perhaps the most poignant example of the two lovers' failure in communication lies in their futile attempts at epistolary communication. Before Inman sets out on his homeward journey, he begins a letter to Ada but stops when he "[finds] himself telling things he did not want to tell"; he wads that letter up and "[starts] again on a fresh sheet" (17). Ada soon reciprocates by "[balling] up" her own promise "to communicate in a spirit of the utmost frankness" and "[tossing] it into a boxwood bush" (20). Letters that do get sent between the two are "impersonal as something one would write to a distant relation" (193). The one message Ada does write from the heart –which never reaches Inman – is a one-line missive quoting the refrain of one of Stobrod's love songs: "Come back to me is my request." This was a line that "Stobrod could not have uttered...with more conviction had it been one of the profounder lines of Endymion. Ada had to admit that, at least now and again, just saying what your heart felt, straight and simple and unguarded, could be more useful than four thousand lines of John Keats" (272). Despite Ada's touting of this letter as "straight and simple and unguarded" communication, however, it is worth noting that even here her self-expression is a kind of plagiarism. One simple line of song may be more direct than 4000 lines of Keats, but it is still not as direct as speaking to her lover in her own voice. That sort of unaffected communication will not be characteristic of her relationship with Inman until their ultimate reunion.

The single most defining element of Odysseus and Penelope's reunion in the Odyssey is undoubtedly the fact that, presented with her twenty-year-absent husband, the object of her longing, Penelope fails to recognize him. Homer's explanation for this failure is that Odysseus has returned disguised as a beggar, made artificially and temporarily decrepit by a prudent Athena to protect his identity. In more metaphorical terms, the topic suggests the ravages,

physical and psychological, that war and “brute wandering” have effected in a hero – an effect that can prove temporary once privations are reversed. Frazier’s enactment of the reunion of Inman and Ada is crafted in such a way as to make referentiality to the Odyssey patently clear: “She examined him and did not know him. He appeared to be a beggar in cast-off clothes, rags thrown over a rood of sticks” (320).

Gardner quarrels with this scene as a sign of an artificial desire on the author's part to “sound novelistic.” Interestingly, he is not bothered by Ada's non-recognition of Inman; that he deems explicable in naturalistic terms. In so doing, though, he fails to appreciate the necessary artificiality effected by such an obvious literary allusion: for clued-in readers, the scene essentially *cannot* be experienced on a purely naturalistic level; it must also be experienced intellectually, as an intertextual reference. What Gardner does find implausible is Inman's response to Ada's failure to recognize him, which is to say, “I believe I have made a mistake” (321) and turn to walk away. “Only people in novels act like that,” Gardner asserts; “in real life, a man in this situation would insistently identify himself, he and his wife would embrace, and drinks would follow.” Perhaps -- if it were really his wife who did not recognize him. But Ada is not Inman's wife. The pervasive influence of the Odyssean nostos archetype seems to have blinded Gardner to the insecurity that an unmarried, even unbetrothed, hero might have felt when presented with an object of obsession who did not even know who he was. “If I am shot to death, in five years you'll hardly remember my name” (196), Inman has already admonished Ada. When, four years later, this prediction seems to be proven true, what more natural response than for him to turn away in embarrassment at having maintained a one-sided belief in the import of an aborted relationship?

Fascinatingly, the same overwhelming effect of the Odyssean nostos parallel is apparent in another reviewer's reaction too: Mulrine refers point-blank to Inman's return home

to his "wife." The result is a striking paradox: although the particular critics cited give no explicit evidence that awareness of parallelism to Homer's Odyssey is in their minds, their experience of the nostos theme of Cold Mountain still seems to have been subconsciously pre-conditioned by awareness of the Odyssean trope (man returns, after many hardships, to faithful wife) -- to such an extent that they slip into the clear mistake of calling Ada wife to Inman.

Once Ada acknowledges Inman, piece by piece the dam of their logoi breaks. She looks at him and sees that "the depredations of the long war and the hard road home had left his mind scoured and his heart jailed within the bars of his ribs" (321). In her urge to reach out to him, she turns to soothing speech: "As they walked, Ada talked to Inman in the voice she had heard Ruby use to speak to the horse when it was nervous" (322). In doing so, she "[talks] on seamlessly" (322), joining the ranks of Swimmer, Veasey and Ruby in doing so. After the exhausted Inman sleeps for twelve hours, they begin a characteristically awkward social confrontation. First, "Inman ate without talking"; then "Neither of them could think of anything much to say." They are made shy by "all the old strictures against a young woman and man being left alone in a house," and finally Inman sets in "commenting favorably on the food, as if he were at a Sunday dinner" (329). In stages, though, they will move toward more genuine communication.

In a still repressed attempt at rapprochement, Inman tries to keep his "longing" from "spilling out in a frightening mess of words" (329) by reading to Ada from the Bartram's Travels that has been the Bible of his homeward journey -- an approach well-chosen for a lover who is herself a notorious plot-summarizer, and whose recent soothing "seamless" speech to him has consisted in large part of reciting parts of The Ancient Mariner and expounding on the virtues of Bruegel's painting, "Hunters in the Snow" (322). Gradually, hero and heroine inch toward self-revelation: Inman comes to the realization that "what he most wanted was to

disburden himself of solitude" (331). Still hiding behind a written text, Ada tells Inman of the letters she wrote him, but "in amended form," making them "more satisfactory to both of them than would have been the originals" (332). Continuing to shy away from direct speech, the two concoct a life-story of the people who used to live in the cabin they are holed up in (332) but then grow progressively more personal: she responds to his stated fear that he is "ruined beyond repair" by asserting that "people can be mended...I don't see why not you," and he touches her hair, kisses the hollow of her neck and pulls her to sit in his lap (333). Finally, then, "words spilled out of him without prior composition" (333), outpourings of his feelings for her. His verbosity is reciprocated the next morning: "after a time Ada began talking. She wanted to tell how she had come to be what she was" (336).

It has taken them this long since Ada's recognition of him to reach the point of being ready to consummate their reunion, by contrast with Odysseus and Penelope – already man and wife, sure of their feelings for each other and neither tongue-tied in the first place – who reach this same point as soon as she is assured of his identity:

Now from his breast into his eyes the ache  
of longing mounted, and he wept at last,  
his dear wife, clear and faithful, in his arms...

(Od. 23.1-232, Fitzgerald, 436)

Odysseus moves directly from "longing" to embrace; by contrast, Inman's first impulse is to stifle the "longing" that "welled up in him" (329), and it takes twelve pages of slow progression for the modern hero and heroine to move from recognition to a tentative embrace (lap-sitting), another eight before they will consummate their love.

In preparation for their lovemaking scene, we see Ruby implicitly playing the role of Odysseus's nurse Eurycleia, who "laid soft coverlets on the master's bed" (Od.

23.289-291, Fitzgerald, 438): Ruby, improvising in the hut on Cold Mountain where the group of four has sought shelter, "cut some boughs and made up a more proper bed than just a pallet of blankets" (334). It is further noteworthy that each of the heroic couples takes its rest in a tree-bed -- Inman and Ada "woven together on their bed of hemlock boughs" (342), Odysseus and Penelope in their famous olive bedstead that Odysseus "hewed and shaped...from the roots up" (Od. 23.196, Fitzgerald, 435).

The love scene itself -- decorously brief in the classical prototype, still relatively decorous but a bit more protracted in its modern rendition -- provides the most manifest piece of "quotation" between the two texts. When Odysseus and Penelope embrace, Homer tells us, "she too rejoiced, her gaze upon her husband, / *her white arms round him pressed as though forever*" (Od. 23.239-240, Fitzgerald, 436, emphasis mine). In the parallel embrace in the novel, Ada "put a hand to the back of his neck and pulled him harder, *and then she pressed her white arms around him as if forever*" (341, emphasis mine). Not only is this undeniable quotation from Homer; it also provides unmistakable proof that for Frazier the text of Homer is mediated through Fitzgerald's translation. A literal translation of line 240, with no pretensions to graceful expression, might read: "and she did not yet by any means let go her white arms from his neck" (*deirês d' ou pô pampan aphieto pêchee leukô*). Rouse renders the line in prose translation as, "she held her white arms close round his neck, and could not let him go." Lattimore, whose poetic translation nonetheless closely replicates the original Greek, echoes, "and she could not let him go from the embrace of her white arms." The phrase "white arms," which all translations keep, is a formulaic epic emblem for female beauty that sits a bit less naturally in the modern novel -- especially when Ada has so notably been acting as her own field hand, daily exposed to the sun that the white-armed women of Greece avoided. Beyond this phrase, Frazier's and Fitzgerald's passages share the verb "press" (a strong image, in an

affirmative and fully transitive use, unlike Homer's negative middle, "did not let go") and the striking "as if / as though forever," which arises from Homer's colorless particle chain ou pō pampān in a lovely flight of poeticism fully attributable to Fitzgerald. It is quite obvious that this is a piece of conscious imitation by Frazier -- of Homer, but more precisely of Fitzgerald.

After satisfying their physical longing, Odysseus and Penelope turn to speech:

The royal pair mingled in love again  
and afterward lay revelling in stories:  
hers of the siege her beauty stood at home  
from arrogant suitors...Odysseus told  
of what blows dealt out to others  
and of what blows he had taken -- all that story.

(Od. 23.300-303, 306-308, Fitzgerald 438-439)

Similarly Inman and Ada play catch-up in the aftermath of love:

...they did what lovers often do when they think the future  
stretches out endless before them...: they talked ceaselessly  
of the past, as if each must be caught up on the other's  
previous doings before they can move forward paired.

(342)

The author's remark on the habituality of the phenomenon ("they did what lovers often do") on one level is a naturalistic comment on certain universalities of human behavior but on another marks the referentiality of his own text with Homer's (*what lovers have done since Homer portrayed the first nostos*).

Once the tale of the past is finished, Inman and Ada turn to talk of their future. Their prognostications divide into two stages. After a series of whimsical plans that include Inman's

learning of Greek, hunting birds with English shotguns, and taking up competitive watercoloring (344), they become grimly realistic, determining that Inman, as deserter, must flee to the North till the War is over -- undoing his nostos by entering upon a second journey equally perilous to the first (345-346).

Even this plot element – the second nostos – has its roots in the Odyssey. The reunited Odysseus and Penelope also speak of future as well as past. At Penelope's insistence, Odysseus relates the woeful prophecy from Teiresias that (like Inman) he must go on yet another journey, trudging the mainland with an oar in his hands, till a stranger approaches and asks if what he is holding is a winnowing fan. At that point, he will be able to return home and die "in my well-tended weariness of age" (Od. 23.282-283, Fitzgerald, 438). We never learn whether Odysseus finds the man of the winnowing fan query: the epic ends before his new journey starts. We find out all too soon that Inman will not make good a second nostos.

The theme of wordlessness and therapeutic speech that has run through the novel culminates in the final "pastoral tableau" created when Inman lies dying in Ada's lap, victim of the Home Guard. The dying Inman, so newly released from his habitual pained silence, tries to express himself: "He tried to talk, but she hushed him" (353). Ada requires no further words from Inman; their communion has been complete: "both have been liberated through self-discovery and self-actualization." Still, as he slips into his final delirium, our last glimpse into his thoughts is this: "There was something he wanted to say" (353). How should we interpret this line? Does it suggest continued communicative failure and frustration? I think not.

The substance of the death "dream" attributed to Inman just before this final thought is a Golden Age adynaton, an impossibility come true, in which all the seasons come round at once: "apple trees hanging heavy with fruit but yet unaccountably blossoming" (353). In this context, it is not fanciful to assert that what Inman seeks to express here ("there was something he

wanted to say”) is not frustration, but his new-found sense of connection and oneness – not only with Ada, but with the cosmos.

The essence of an epic, in Hainsworth’s words, is that it puts before its audience “an image of itself that it likes to see, and in seeing it the community is encouraged”; that image, in the case of the readership of Cold Mountain, is of a world where hero and heroine, as individuals, may rise above their society's destructive impulses, to achieve Golden Age harmony both within and between themselves, and between themselves and their natural environs. From the moment that Inman makes his escape from the Confederate convalescent hospital rather than face return to active service – from the moment the orphaned Ada refuses to yield to her appointed role as Christianly-tolerated parasite on Charleston society – this epic novel speaks for prioritization of individual conscience and personal fulfillment over deference to collective will. Cold Mountain itself, as the geographic site where hero and heroine will meet and unite, takes on symbolic and indeed cosmic significance. It is not only the preeminent emblem of the home Inman is pressing towards; it not only has curative powers figured by the goat-woman’s salves; but the Cherokee tale of an idyllic country located inside the mountain (so unsuccessfully narrated by Inman to Ada) also makes it an emblem for life without fear, strife or war (196-198).

Indeed, Inman has been brought by his experiences in the novel to a point where we can imagine him, at the point of his death, no longer deprecating the first fragment of Heraclitus from Balis’s Greek notes: “We mark some days as fair, some as foul, because we do not see that the character of every day is identical” (18). In his newly won perceptivity, Inman has come to believe that it is “boredom with the repetition of daily rounds” (218) – a compulsion to differentiate between days – that leads to war in the first place. For one in harmony with the natural world, every day is the same, identically marked by “the endless arc of the sun, wheel

of seasons” (218). As Heraclitus has said elsewhere, “God is day-night, winter-summer [cf. Inman’s impossible dream], war-peace, satiety-famine” (fragment 67 Diels). We might add, life-death.

In the short time since Cold Mountain was published, it has prompted critical comparisons with multiple authors: Homer, Theocritus, Ovid, among classical authors; Keats, Shakespeare, Fielding, Richardson, Twain, Stephen Crane, Tolstoy, Stendahl, Cormac McCarthy and others, among modern. The lyrics of songs played or hummed in the course of the novel have been demonstrated to have intertextual significance, as have its consciously-drawn visual tableaux. The plethora of other literary and artistic works mentioned in the novel suggests that dozens more cases for intertextuality may be waiting to be made. Frazier has, after all, “[pled] guilty to a PhD” in English. In this study, I have sought to demonstrate that the debt Frazier owes to Homer’s Odyssey is far more systematic and pervasive than simple adoption of an Odyssean nostos motif implies.

Early signals of referentiality between the two are reinforced by continued allusiveness, even to the point of quotation, throughout the novel. The result is both consciously artful and thematically meaningful. The author sets up an Inman : Odysseus, Ada : Penelope parallel but modifies and modernizes it through vital shifts in plot and characterization. His insertion of Ruby into the mix of characters allows his Penelope to outgrow her traditional passivity. His adaptation of the return motif to a courtship context, characterized by the insecurity of a couple who do not fully understand their own emotions, is a clever stroke that caters to a modern predilection for romantic complication and psychological subtlety. While their parallel journeys make both Odysseus and Inman emblems for human endurance, resolution and survival, Frazier’s presentation of Inman as a deserter, disenchanted and plunged into wordlessness by the war’s grinding, depersonalizing effects – in sharp contrast to his eloquent archaic

counterpart – highlights the novel’s case for individual conscience over collective will, as well as for harmony between the human and natural worlds. Recognition of the complex relationship between Cold Mountain and its Homeric prototype is not necessary to appreciation of the novel's plot or themes, but, just as Inman, in tracking Ada and Ruby through the snow, “[studies] signs on the ground for the story they told” (310), we may inspect Frazier’s intertextual signs to enrich our appreciation of this multi-layered literary tale.