

Coming Across Home: Thomas Hürlimann's *Heimkehr* (Homecoming)

Thomas Hürlimann'nın *Heimkehr* adlı eserinde Eve-Dönüş

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Abstract

Surely, the archetype of all those who returned home, Homer's Odysseus, often thought of Ithaca while being away from his homeland. Dreaming of home from abroad can express a yearning for being there and for nostos (homecoming). Odysseus' return, however, does not constitute a happy reunion with home and family. Instead, it first sparks an act of ruthless violence when Odysseus massacres the usurpers who are trying to take possession of his wife and his throne. Homer's insight here suggests the recognition that home cannot be thought of or grasped as something that actually exists, because both "home" and the one thinking of it are subject to perpetual change. Twentieth-century thinkers seem to concur and describe "modern man" as incapable of 'dwelling' (Martin Heidegger) and as beings who are trapped in a backward-looking gaze (history, memory, home) while relentlessly being hurled to the (unknown) future (Walter Benjamin). In *Heimkehr* (Homecoming, 2018), renowned and prize-winning Swiss philosopher, dramatist, and writer Thomas Hürlimann introduces Heinrich Übel. This protagonist suffers a series of physical (and mental) displacements. The more he thinks of home and about going home, the more he recognizes that there is no such thing as "home" in the world of life experiences. Hürlimann's text is a picaresque quasi coming-of-age-novel (Bildungsroman) that is permeated with allusions to Homer, Gottfried Keller, E.T.A. Hoffmann, the Bible, and more. The intertextual elements of the novel serve to "deterritorialize" the concept of "home" in the homeless protagonist's mind and lead to his realizations that home is a location in the imagination and that literature is the guide to this place. Hürlimann's novel models a way of "dwelling" in the 21st-century world that can be of interest to all who are "displaced"—voluntarily or not.

Keywords: (post)modernity, novel, nostos, home, Hürlimann, *Heimkehr*.

Öz

Hiç kuşkusuz, eve dönen herkesin arketipi olan Homer'ın Odysseus'u, anavatanından uzaktayken Ithaca'yı düşündü. Uzaklardayken evi hayal etmek, orada olmak ve eve dönüş için olan özlemi ifade edebilir. Ancak Odysseus'un dönüşü, ev ve aile ile mutluluk dolu bir birleşme anlamına gelmez. Aksine Odysseus, karısına ve tahtına sahip olmak isteyen gaspçıları katlettiğinde acımasız bir şiddet eylemine yol açar. Homer'ın buradaki anlayışı, evin gerçekte var olan bir yer olarak düşünülemeyeceğini bizlere kabul ettirmektedir çünkü hem "ev" hem de onu düşünen kişi sürekli bir değişime tabidir. 20. yüzyıl düşünürleri, "modern insanı," "hane"den aciz olarak (Martin Heidegger) ve bilinmeyen bir geleceğe savrulan (Walter Benjamin), nostalji içerisine hapsolmuş varlıklar olarak tanımlıyor. *Heimkehr*'de (Homecoming, 2018), ünlü ve ödül sahibi İsviçreli filozof ve yazar olan Thomas Hürlimann, ana kahramanı

Heinrich Übel'i bizlerle buluşturmaktadır. Heinrich Übel, bir dizi fiziksel (ve zihinsel) değişimlere maruz kalır. Ev ve eve dönüş kavramları hakkında düşündükçe yaşam deneyimleri dünyasında "ev" kavramının olmadığını fark eder. Hürlimann'ın metni, Homer, Gottfried Keller, E.T.A Hoffmann, İncil ve daha fazlasına göndermelerde bulunan, pikaresk bir oluş romandır (Bildungsroman). Romanın metinlerarası unsurları yurtsuz olan kahramanı zihnindeki "ev" kavramından uzaklaştırmaya hizmet eder ve evin hayal gücünde bir yer olduğunu, edebiyatın ise bu yerin rehberi olduğunu anlamasına yol açar. Hürlimann'ın romanı, 21. Yüzyılın dünyasında isteyerek veya istemeyerek yerinden edilmiş herkesin ilgisini çekebilecek yeni bir "ev" kavramını modellemektedir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: (Post)modern, Anlatı, Ev, Eve Dönüş, Hürlimann, *Heimkehr*.

Robert Browning's poem, "Home Thoughts from Abroad," written in 1845 while its author was spending time in northern Italy, casts the poet in the role of a traveler who is yearning for his beloved home in England: "Oh, to be in England / [...] In England—now." At the same time, it seems clear that the poet celebrates his home precisely because he is not there. In other words, the poet's feelings about home become most acute away from home. The idea of home, as a particular place and, simultaneously, as a feeling of belonging, has occupied the imagination of uncounted novelists and poets, like Browning. Indeed, "the desire for [...] home," as Renee Mathis writes, "provides one of the strongest themes for authors, poets, and artists of all kind to weave throughout their works" 2). Possibly, the power and persistence of the perennial home topos stem from its antiquity—the idea seems to be as old as humankind. And, apparently, it has never been an 'easy', unambiguous, or thoroughly positive concept. The Biblical tradition, for example, describes humanity's first home to be the garden of Eden. Yet, as the story goes, humankind is not capable of dwelling in this home; human imperfection leads to permanent eviction from the 'original' home.¹ So, from the beginning, it seems, 'home' is a fragile concept that harbors no guarantees of permanence. Next comes Odysseus, whose *nostos*, or homecoming, famously takes ten years. When the Homeric hero finally returns to Ithaca, he finds a large group of men occupying his palace; they are aiming to win Penelope's affection and, especially, to replace the long absent king. To lay claim on his house again, Odysseus has to resort to violence and murders all impostors. Odysseus, in turn, is recognized only because of a scar whose origin the king's old nurse can confirm. In the archetypal homecoming situation, therefore, it is already clear that neither 'home' nor the one returning home are fixed entities; both are subject to change. Furthermore, the scar that triggers recognition is symbolic of the wandering and migrating Odysseus as an injured individual—and the state of homelessness is the impairment he has to suffer. Thus, a home can be lost; if one leaves home, it may be arduous to return, and a successful return may involve the need to fight for recognition and for what one thought was one's own.

¹ The account in "Genesis" has drawn a multitude of readings, interpretations, and critiques. A discussion of those is beyond the scope of the present article, and the only point I wish to make here is one about 'the loss of home'.

Some twentieth-century thinkers worked with the figure of Odysseus and came to assert that homelessness is humanity's natural state—as opposed to a sense of belonging or being home. Erich Auerbach, for instance, chooses Odysseus as the subject of the first chapter of his most impactful book, *Mimesis*, which is written during the author's exile from Nazi Germany in Istanbul. Significantly, he describes the whole world as a place of exile in a different essay. In "Philology and Weltliteratur," Auerbach quotes Hugo of St. Victor's "mundus totus exilium est" (the whole world is exile) and suggests that this viewpoint "is a good way [...] for one who wishes to earn a proper love for the world" (17). It appears that the one who can 'properly' learn to love the world has to be a wanderer. While Auerbach was writing his *Mimesis* in exile in Istanbul, Marx Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno also became fascinated by Odysseus. The fellow exiles (also from Nazi Germany, writing in the United States) interpret Odysseus as an allegory of their *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, a project whose goal is "to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of 'barbarism'" (*Dialectic of Enlightenment* xiv). For Horkheimer and Adorno, the decisive factor is that it is Odysseus' very homesickness that generates his adventures. Moreover, home is likened to a sense of having escaped (all dangers): "Speech itself, language in its contrast to mythical song, is the Homeric law of escape, for language permits to fix the past dangers in memory. Not for nothing is the remembering Odysseus time and again also the narrator" (Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung* 67).²

Odysseus' incessant movement dissolves any sense of home. Home becomes accessible again only through Odysseus remembering his repeated escapes. Importantly, this 'home' is not like a place of origin, not a place of provenance anymore. In Ottmar Ette's words, Odysseus "is a homecoming homeless person, a homeless homecoming person [and he is] the embodiment of an ultimately perpetual dialectic of homelessness [...] Out of his many escapes emerges a home that did not exist in this form before" (34). It is significant to note that "if home means to have escaped, this also means that escaping is one way, or many ways, to shape home, to capture home in a (movable) picture" (Ette 36). The twenty-first century, it seems, has created more Odysseus-like individuals than any other time. Put differently, the contemporary postmodern and globalized world is seeing a record number of people 'on the move', and indications are that the numbers will rise in years to come.³ The question about how one can create a home and a sense of belonging in this world, accordingly, becomes ever more urgent.

² Unless otherwise noted, translations are my own. Also, in the interest of economy, that is, word count, I am refraining from giving the original language text here and throughout the article.

³ The United Nations Economic Commission for Europe asserts that "[m]igration is a defining feature of the 21st century world" ("Migration Statistics"). According to the United Nations Report "Trends in International Migration" (from 17 September 2019), a comparison of the percentage of people living in a country other than their native place of birth has risen from 2.6% (in 1960) to 3.3% (in 2015). The same report states that "[t]he number of international migrants reaches 272 million, continuing an upward trend in all world regions [and marks] an increase of 51 million since 2010" ("Trends in International Migration"). The report

A very idiosyncratic example of a protagonist, a postmodern Odysseus, attempting to construct a sense of home is Heinrich Übel in Thomas Hürlimann's 2018 novel *Heimkehr* (*Homecoming*). Thomas Hürlimann was born in Switzerland—on 21 December 1950, which is also the exact date he assigns to the protagonist in his novel. His literary debut took place in 1981 with a collection of short stories. Since then, he has been a prolific writer of not just prose, but also of plays and scripts. He has received numerous awards in Switzerland and Germany and published *Homecoming*, his latest work, five years after he finished writing it. He spent the interim reworking the novel while he was overcoming a serious illness. Today, Hürlimann lives and works as a freelance writer in Switzerland and in Leipzig, Germany, where he has taught at the German Institute of Literature since 2000.

Homecoming is a dizzyingly wild and non-linear narrative whose protagonist is a contemporary Odysseus by the name of Heinrich Übel.⁴ Movement dominates the novel's plot and also its language/style, genre, and realms of reference. The language, at turns, is (regular) narrative, comical, cynical, satirical, ironic, or parodistic, for instance. One critic observes that the novel's language "is in a state of metamorphosis. It changes constantly, sometimes from one sentence to the next" (Kuhn, "Trügerische Heimkehr"). The novel contains elements of the picaresque, the coming-of-age-novel (*Bildungsroman*), the adventure novel, the mystery novel, and the romance novel. *Homecoming* includes references to popular culture, mythology, fairy tales, history, psychology, philosophy, and literature.⁵ Indeed, the incessant movement on all levels will lead Heinrich to the 'realm of references' (literature, in particular) as the place where a home can be built.

The novel begins on a bridge where Heinrich has just suffered an accident due to the road's icy condition:

... up high a point, a blink, a wink, as star, a satellite, or an airplane . . . The car is lying on its driver's side. A front wheel is still turning and swirls a few snowflakes into a thin flame. From beneath the smashed radiator creeps a pool of gasoline or oil, or both, shiny like a photographic negative.

stresses that "[m]igrants currently comprise 3.5 per cent of the global population" ("Trends in International Migration"). The report's figures suggest that rates of migration are not only rising, but that they do so at an accelerated pace. It appears that ever larger numbers of people will have to find novel ways 'to capture home in a (movable) picture'. For the rise in worldwide displacement and the rapid changes entailed by these displacements, see Pico Iyer's *The Global Soul: Jet Lag, Shopping Malls, and the Search for Home*. Furthermore, if it is challenging to create a sense of home, it becomes more so in the globalized world, which sees a proliferation of 'non-places'. This concept was introduced by Marc Augé in 1992; his 'non-places' are defined by "solitary contractuality" (as opposed to social exchange) that determine how individuals are 'processed' in airports, supermarkets, hotel chains, casinos, etc. (76).

⁴ The protagonist's name, however, keeps moving from language to language. His first name, Heinrich, becomes an English 'Henry' or an Italian 'Enrico' on many occasions. The last name, Übel, means 'evil', 'bad', 'ill', 'vicious', 'unpleasant', 'wicked', etc. In the novel, his name is rendered once in English: "Dr. Henry Malice" (Hürlimann 320).

⁵ In addition to indirect allusions to texts by various authors, among those that are mentioned by name throughout the novel are, for example: Freud, Plato, Thomas of Aquinas, C. G. Jung, Goethe, Böll, Wilhelm Reich, Empedocles, Buddha, Pirandello, Marx, Kierkegaard, et al.

In the splintered, milky windshield gapes a hole; black, jagged by fragments, and how beautiful, how deep, how sublime is the silence! The wind is blowing, but without sound; the loud crash has affected my ears; I am completely deaf. Dead silence throughout the universe. But on the shore of the lake they must have heard the sound, and the factory's fire brigade will shortly leave, pick up the wreck from the bridge, eliminate all traces, and take me to the sanitary facility of our rubber factory. (Hürlimann 7; ellipses in the original)⁶

The circumstances that lead to this moment on the bridge become clear in increments: after an almost twenty year hiatus, Heinrich is urgently summoned to return to his father's rubber factory in the (fictional) Fräcktal in Switzerland. To make this trip late at night from Zurich, he borrows an acquaintance's old Chevy that is, unfortunately, not equipped with appropriate winter tires. The accident prevents Heinrich's return home while he is, literally, within walking distance. Heinrich's feelings about home are as troubled and ambivalent as his memories of home, it turns out, are false and misleading—deceiving both the protagonist and the reader. Heinrich, for example, mourns the loss of his mother. It appears that she left one day when Heinrich was a young child: "In my memory, Mimi [the mother] was a being without flesh and consisted only of the few things that she had left behind beside the factory's swimming pool: the white headscarf, the black Hollywood sunglasses, the handbag made of crocodile leather, and the high heels" (Hürlimann 64-65). Remarkably, what remains strongest in Heinrich's memory is the most transitory of a body's properties: "Mimi's voice, which time and again read *Robinson* [*Crusoe*] to me" (65). It is likely that the repeated readings from Daniel Defoe's novel carved the reader's (mother's) voice into Heinrich's memory; the recitals are also evidence of literature coming to play a significant role in young Heinrich's life.

Several decades later, Heinrich meets the wife of Pablo Feuz in Zurich; she is an American artist and also, shockingly, Heinrich's mother Mimi. According to her version of events, it was Heinrich's jealousy (Mimi had been pregnant and Heinrich resented the prospect of a sibling) and profound hatred of his mother that led to her being evicted from home. Mimi recalls how Heinrich pulled her hair, kicked her in the stomach, and almost strangled her with a necklace. But "the

⁶ The end of the novel returns to the same scene or moment. A change in perspective has Heinrich moving "from death to life," and the final lines, an almost verbatim repetition of the beginning of the novel, reflect the changed viewpoint: "and far below a point, a blink, a wink, as star, a satellite, or an airplane" (Hürlimann 522). Some critics see the novel's initial and final scenes as a frame that captures not only Heinrich's accident, but Heinrich's fatal accident. Combined with the knowledge that the author spent five years rewriting his novel while he was fighting cancer, such critics read the text as a novel about dying. Witness, for example, Wiebke Porombka, who notes that "*Homecoming* is a deeply sad and comforting book about dying" ("Jetzt nur nicht einschlafen"). While there is evidence that one can read the novel in this way, Hürlimann's ellipses—at the beginning and the end of the initial and final passages—create a sense of ambiguity and inspire alternative readings of the text. In this article, I am interested in exploring Heinrich's search for home throughout the roughly five hundred pages that come between the beginning and the end of the novel.

worst,” she says, was when “one day, I swam far into the lake [...] When I returned to shore, all my things were gone, and I heard you yelling triumphantly: ‘She is dead! Mimi is dead! The lake has taken her!’” (Hürlimann 460-61). Mimi remembers running half-naked to Heinrich’s father who chooses his son over his wife: “‘Heinrich’, he said, ‘is my flesh, my blood. If he does not want to see you anymore, you have to go’” (461). Love for his son takes precedence over any relationship with his wife, and Übel senior offers Mimi alimony payments on the condition that she never come back or attempt to make any contact.

Mimi’s revelations about Übel senior’s love for his son unsettle Heinrich. Heinrich does not recall any affection; instead, he remembers his father as a domineering and demanding monster. In fact, he calls his father ‘the minotaur’ early on in the text, who “lurks in his office like the minotaur in his dungeon” (Hürlimann 9).⁷ When Heinrich grows older, he starts working in his father’s rubber factory and becomes a writer in the company’s advertisement department. One day, the father abruptly sends his son away and demands that he not return home until he has completed a doctoral program and acquired the appropriate title.⁸ The father’s words of farewell are: “My dear trash, you have fallen far from the tree” (82).⁹ Clearly, Heinrich has complicated relationships with both his mother and his father, and he lacks a sense of home or belonging on the emotional level with his parents who are, typically, a person’s most immediate and important caregivers (and thus in a position to create a sense of home and belonging). Heinrich seems destined not ‘to fit’ into the world or even into his own life. As Nicole Henneberg notes, Heinrich “[s]uffers most from the unsafe, inconsistent, and hostile world that surrounds him; a kind of nightmare realm in which he feels guilty and alien.” After he is forced to leave home, Heinrich strives to prove that he is not his father’s “most failed product” (Hürlimann 323) and attempts to create a sense of home and belonging throughout his journey(s). In Zurich, he does not enroll in the university (because he did not complete high school), but he audits classes for forty semesters and immerses himself in reading as much as he can. Heinrich’s only friend in Zurich is a male cat whom he finds one day sitting between trash cans. He learns that the cat had escaped from *Cabaret Voltaire*—whose founder,

⁷ This passage also is one of many references to mythology throughout the novel. Significantly, this particular myth begins with the abduction of Europa by Zeus (indicating that an entire continent, Europa, has its roots in the fate of an ‘involuntary migrant’). Zeus whisks Europa to Crete, where she, as a result of Zeus’ rape, gives birth to Minos. Minos later becomes king of Crete and marries Pasiphae. Pasiphae, in turn, becomes mother of the minotaur (a monster with the body of a man and the head of a bull) following the union with a white bull.

⁸ Dr. Übel senior, it seems, is making unfair demands. He did not study and earn his doctoral title but appears to have bought it (Hürlimann 97).

⁹ This is a play on words that cannot be rendered in English and thus must be explained. The original expression is: ‘der Apfel fällt nicht weit vom Stamm’ (‘the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree’). The saying is generally used (in both English and German) to indicate that children have qualities or characteristics that are similar to those of their parents. Heinrich’s father questions the close familial bond by saying that Heinrich ‘has fallen far from the tree’. He also seems to distance himself from his own offspring by changing ‘Apfel’ (‘apple’) to ‘Abfall’ (‘trash’, ‘waste’, ‘garbage’, etc.)—while the two German nouns are not homophonic, the closeness in pronunciation is unmistakable. The father’s subversion of the saying is thus an ironic take on common or popular wisdom and suggests that he rejects his own son.

Hugo Ball, called out Dadaism in 1916—, and thus decides to name him Dada.¹⁰ He feeds him and lets him live in his attic. Heinrich does not yet realize that Dada will have a significant role—one that, again, is linked to and fueled by a literary source.

In the scene that follows the accident, Heinrich wakes up in a place he does not recognize as he is being carried on a stretcher. He does not know much, but he remembers who he is: “Wherever I am, whatever has happened [...] I know my name. I did not become anonymous to myself” (Hürlimann 17). His wounds are tended while Heinrich moves in and out of consciousness. After several days, he begins to inquire about where he is and learns that he is in a room in Villa Vittoria (a hotel), in Pollazzu—Sicily. When he looks into a mirror, Heinrich does not recognize himself. Not only has his hair been shaved off completely, but he also has an enormous scar on his left temple that looks “as if a black caterpillar was crawling out of my brain” (22). His appearance, however, elicits deferential behavior from those around him. One staff member of the hotel, for instance, calls his scar “an honorary mark, [...] a testimony of courage and bravery” (45). While Heinrich suffers from retrograde amnesia (he has no recollection of how he came to be in Sicily), the hotel staff (mis)interpret his (actual) inability to answer any of their questions as adherence to *omertà*, the mafia code of silence, and they stare at him as if he were “a higher being” (52). Inevitably, the stranger with the “bella cicatrice, [...] the beautiful scar” (80) comes to the attention of the local godfather, the old and dying Don Pasquale.¹¹ Don Pasquale decides that a man has to wear appropriate clothes to signal his status and manliness and orders his tailor to take measurements and create a suit for Heinrich. The latter learns that is his prominent scar that Don Pasquale identifies with and considers as evidence that Heinrich is a man: “I, too, [Don Pasquale says] have dared to face death head-on. Men like us carry our marks in our faces” (83). Heinrich, however, feels like an impostor and fears that he will be ‘unmasked’ once people learn that the source of his impressive scar is a ‘mere’ car accident. He feels thoroughly alien(ated) in Pollazzu, “because [the behavior of those around him] simply did not befit the Heinrich Übel junior whom I had been all my life” (53).

In Dorothy Wong’s words, “[t]he construction of ‘home’ involves not only a spatial arrangement, but also a transformation of the space into a meaningful place where the occupant inscribes his or her values” (148). When Heinrich turns to the written word, he discovers that Sicily may well be the place that can become ‘meaningful’ to anybody—and thus to him, too. From a travel guide, he gleans that Sicily’s hospitality and respect for outsiders is unique because there cannot be any

¹⁰ Dadaism is a European avant-garde movement that begins in Zurich. Its aesthetic, according to The Art Story Foundation, is “marked by mockery of materialistic and nationalistic attitudes,” and its goal is to “upend bourgeois sensibilities.” Dadaism dissipates with the arrival of Surrealism.

¹¹ The nature of the events which Heinrich lives through in Sicily echo Francis Ford Coppola’s *The Godfather* films (from 1972, 1974, 1990, respectively) that are based on Mario Puzo’s eponymous 1969 novel. The films chronicle the Corleones, originally from Sicily, and their career as a crime family in the United States. Many of the films’ stereotypes (such as honor, *omertà*, manliness, and fearlessness in the face of death) regarding a mafia family are present in what Heinrich experiences in Pollazzu.

strangers on the island: people here, “since prehistoric times, have believed in the transmigration of souls [metempsychosis, reincarnation] and [...] consider it possible that the stranger is not a foreigner at all, but a local who has returned from the afterlife” (Hürlimann 51). However, Heinrich is not ‘reincarnated’; he is newly ‘incarnated’: the Sicilian Heinrich does not know how he came to be on the island and is aware that the character that people around him ascribe to him is completely different from the Heinrich he had been before.

Significantly, he also (re)reads the eighth book of Homer’s *Odyssey* and immediately identifies with the protagonist: “All of a sudden, you are Odysseus [...] and are wading, exhausted from a long journey, onto the eastern shore of Sicily” (Hürlimann 67). In the eighth book, Odysseus is a guest of king Alcinous who invites him to a gathering. Nobody recognizes Odysseus. As the festivities unfold, a bard comes to sing about the deeds of “famous fighting heroes” (Homer 193). When Odysseus hears about his own feats during the Trojan War, he “buried his handsome face, / ashamed his hosts might see him shedding tears” (194). Odysseus, unrecognized, is a stranger among his hosts and fellow guests and remains an ‘other’, and, at the same time, he becomes the fictionalized hero of the bard’s song. Heinrich can identify with Odysseus; he, too, is a fiction that the Sicilians have created. And this fiction, moreover, does not correspond to the Heinrich that he has felt to be his entire life. He feels kinship with Odysseus and he finds a sense of belonging in and with the ancient text. Sicily, on the other hand, cannot become home: “[b]etween my earlier life and the island, there is a wide gap” (Hürlimann 51).

On the day he plans to leave Sicily, Heinrich is struck by love while he takes a walk on the beach. He sees a woman—Bo-Derek-like, in the film *10*—coming out of the sea. As she approaches the shore, he knows that “[s]he is it” (Hürlimann 134): “First, she was [...] a reddish button in the blue sea. Then the swimmer neared the shore and emerged [...] naked from the foamy waves” (103). Instead of ‘real’ life (or the popular notion of ‘love at first sight’), Heinrich’s knowledge that he has found the love of his life comes from literature. Heinrich thinks of Plato and his idea that “the soul is eternal and knows everything—including its anima, its most beloved [...] And if one experiences the enormous luck to encounter a being that is the anima’s incarnation, it becomes clear with lightning speed” (134). Heinrich’s ‘anima’ is an unlikely candidate: she is a communist (from the former East Germany, the GDR) and part of a special delegation from a communications company in Berlin.¹² She is a socialist activist, Heinrich is the son of a capitalist. In addition, the status quo of the two Germanys needs to be considered as a concrete obstacle to their relationship (West Germans had limited access to East Germany,

¹² While there is no room here to elaborate in detail, it is interesting to note that the delegation, the woman and two men (comrades Kress and Kupferschmidt) is a source of irony and ridicule regarding the former German Democratic Republic. They are attempting to sell a wireless telephone that is built into the armrest of a wingback chair. The men carry the unwieldy item across the beach (and, later, on the roof of a car). While the telephone works, it is obvious that this type of phone is thoroughly unpractical. Furthermore, it had not been planned as such. In truth, the design of the wingback chair was faulty; the chairs were too wide to fit through any door, and a new function had to be found. The entire episode (beginning in Sicily and continuing in Berlin) is a sarcastic comment targeted at the five-year economic plan of socialist countries in general, and the GDR, in particular.

and East Germans were generally not allowed to travel to the West—exceptions were made for those who were judged to be completely loyal to the party). Notwithstanding, Heinrich remains convinced that he has found his soul mate. While the East Germans do their business in Sicily, Heinrich travels first to North Africa and then to Berlin, where he hopes to find Montag, his 'anima', again.¹³

When he arrives in Berlin, he acquires a visa to cross to East Berlin and wanders the streets, but does not find Montag. Instead of returning to West Berlin at the end of the day (as the visa would have required him to do by eleven p.m.), he stays in the East. When he thinks about the difference between Sicily and (East) Berlin, the German city does not compare favorably. In Sicily, the prevailing conviction was that "a newcomer could have been one of their own in a previous life" (Hürlimann 360), but the situation in Berlin is starkly dissimilar: "Here, [...] divergence from any norm [was] reported immediately (and anonymously, of course) to the state and party organs. Here, [...] it smelled of denunciation" (360). Heinrich, however, is only interested in finding Montag, declare his feelings, and, possibly, create a home in a new relationship (and, perhaps, a new city).

The following day, he sees Montag as she is leaving her house, together with her young daughter, Paula. Montag makes it clear to Heinrich that she does not reciprocate his romantic interest and thus shatters his ideas about building a home with her. However, she lets Heinrich stay in her apartment. For several days, he hides inside and does not dare to go out—if someone were to ask for his papers, his expired visa would create instant problems for him (as well as for Montag and Paula). Conversations with Montag lead Heinrich to realize that important things are about to happen in the GDR. On the one hand, people are demonstrating in the streets, an indicator that the GDR's "downfall" may be imminent (Hürlimann 327). On the other hand, Montag fears that neighbors may know about Heinrich's (illegal) presence and could denounce them at any time. They decide that they must flee to the West. To this end, Heinrich sheds his Sicilian suit and disguises himself as a woman by donning an ancient coat (that had belonged to Montag's aunt and dates back to World War II; sewn into the coat are gold coins that Heinrich uses during his escape). He finds a large Gatsby-like hat that "could be pulled across the skull like a condom" to conceal both his baldness and his scar (Hürlimann 377). Agreeing to meet Montag later, Heinrich leaves with Paula. They reconnect at an amusement park, and Montag hurries Paula toward the West. She had heard a rumor that the Berlin Wall was open. Heinrich loses Montag and Paula among the throng of people, searches for them, but eventually gives up. The opening of the wall puts a precise date to the situation in the novel: 9 November 1989. This date underlines Heinrich's failure to find a home. Not only has Montag rejected his love, but the very city that could have become a home ceases to exist—along with an entire country and ideology (East Germany was officially reunited with West Germany on 3 October 1990). Put

¹³ The English translation of 'Montag' is 'Monday'. The 'anima's name, which marks the beginning of a new week, can be read symbolically (via Heinrich's state of mind) as an indicator that he may be embarking on a new start, a new attempt to create a home and a sense of belonging.

differently, an entire people became 'homeless' in one day; were he to stay in Berlin, he would be one homeless person among millions.

Heinrich travels back to Switzerland—with false papers and by avoiding official border controls. During his journey, he falls ill, becomes feverish and delirious, and wakes up in hospital in Zurich. He later relives the summons to his father's factory, travels from Zurich to Fräcktal, and has the very accident that the text starts with. In this instance, however, Heinrich discovers that he is not alone. The cat Dada, Heinrich's only friend, has been a blind passenger and fellow accident victim. At the end of the text, Dada is behind the wheel of the car, wears leather boots, and is talking with Heinrich. Dada drives so fast that Heinrich has the impression the car has left the road, and he asks: "Where are we flying to?" (Hürlimann 522). Dada's response is: "To the other side, [...] from death to life" (522). The moment, together with their brief exchange, suggests that Heinrich is finding his home and his place, namely in life. It also hints that Heinrich's life, his home, is with and in literature, because Dada represents yet another literary reference. In this instance, the inspiration is "Puss in Boots," the famous (or infamous) fairy tale's protagonist who helps a miller's youngest (and therefore poorest) son to gain great wealth and the hand of a princess. The story is not usually considered to be a suitable tale for children: the 'helper cat' is not a typical figure in fairy tales and, especially, Puss achieves his objectives through deception, trickery, and violence, all of which are not desirable for a child's moral development.¹⁴ While some critics suggest that Heinrich actually dies in the accident (and that the novel is a text about dying; see footnote six), I contend that Heinrich leaves behind his 'real' life. His actual life experiences and attempts to find home have failed in both Sicily and Berlin. He replaces 'real' life with a home in literature—home is in the texts that he can identify with (like *The Odyssey*) and that reveal meanings that make sense to him. Such reading is supported by the nonlinear character of the narrative. Time, in the text, is as pliable as the rubber products of Übel senior's factory. The elasticity of time underscores the chaotic nature of (real) life, which is a (random and mysterious) series of events that defies the construction of meaning (and home). As Heinrich has it, "I understand cat language, and I know: Everything is the other way round. We are on the other side" (Hürlimann 376).

According to Horkheimer and Adorno, Odysseus transgresses the law of myth in all his adventures. Odysseus, an individual and unique character, "represents the general validity of rationality against the inevitability of fate" (*Dialektik* 66). Odysseus acknowledges the law of myth and, simultaneously, finds a way around it. Horkheimer and Adorno cite the example of the Sirens. The 'contract' of the myth specifies that nobody who hears their song can escape falling prey to the Sirens. However, Odysseus finds a loophole: nowhere does the myth prescribe

¹⁴ Folklorists Iona and Peter Opie critique the tale and note that it is "unusual in that the hero little deserves his good fortune [...], and his unquestioning acceptance of the cat's [...] instructions [is] not nowadays looked upon as [a] virtue" (110). Bruno Bettelheim observes that "the more simple and straightforward a good character in a fairy tale, the easier it is for a child to identify with it and reject the bad other" (10). The implication is that Puss is neither 'simple' nor 'good' (because he uses deception) and that the tale thus does not provide a moral compass.

that he who listens cannot do so while being restrained. The law of the Sirens, mythical figures that are stronger than human beings, feeds off and is upheld by the (human) inability to fulfill its rules. Odysseus' cunning shows how he "cling[s] to the word in order to change matter" (*Dialektik* 67). In other words, Odysseus defies the very fate that the myth(s) held in store. His defiance, in turn, is an escape (from fate) and the beginning of a new reality in which Odysseus is the author of his own life's text—the account and recall of his adventures. Odysseus is at home in himself, and his change is both profound and essential, turning him, eventually, into "a homecoming homeless person, a homeless homecoming person," to recall Ette's words (34).

Hürlimann's Heinrich, a postmodern and globalized Odysseus, is on the opposite trajectory. He experiences life to be chaotic, uncontrollable, unpredictable, and homeless. His 'fate', it seems is to be blown from one event to the next, and all of them prevent him to feel at home. Heinrich escapes the 'law' of an unruly life in favor of a permanent abode in the written tradition; the end of the novel indicates that he does so literally. Heinrich's way to build a home is in the literary tradition; he leaves 'matter' (actual life) behind and focuses on the word (and meaning) transmitted in texts. Heinrich's solution to a homeless world is exemplary and an invitation to fellow nomads, that is, his readers, to consider following this kind of route. These readers could be anyone and anywhere (and may know very different literary traditions that go beyond Heinrich's Europe, or even lay completely outside it). The important lesson is that the path that takes Heinrich Übel to a home in and with literature is one of many possible ways to find a home in a homeless world; his is a soothing model suited for copying.

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