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Οὖτις – Noman

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The Greek pronoun "οὔτις, neuter οὔτι ... *no one* or *nobody*, neuter *nothing*" as per the lexicographical explanation *sub verbo* in the *Greek-English Lexicon* compiled by the two British scholars George Liddell (1811-1898) and Robert Scott (1811-1887) first published in 1843, several times reedited, revised and augmented since, and still used nowadays as the major reference in the lexicology of ancient Greek, might perfectly epitomize the history of pain and pain treatment through the centuries in a metaphorical reading.

Beyond its lexicographical life, the pronoun had an extraordinary literary *fortuna* in the ancient world that started with the *Odyssey*. As the οὔτις entry in the Liddell-Scott lexicon adds, indeed,

" ... Homer uses it almost exclusively for οὐδεις [nobody] ... As a personal name Οὖτις ... *Nobody*, *Noman*, [was] a fallacious name assumed by Odysseus ... to deceive Polyphemus, *Odyssey* 9.366, 408".

In a time when the *Odyssey* formed the backbone of traditional education just like the *Iliad*, and both were known from memory, if not textually verse by verse, at least in their substance by any schooled child, οὔτις unavoidably recalled the episode of the *Odyssey* in which the *polutropos Odysseus—Odysseus the infinite trickster*—blinded the terrible one-eyed giant Polyphemus threatening him and his sailor companions during their journey back from Troy to their Greek motherland. As Odysseus' own report in the *Odyssey* goes (*Odyssey*, IX, 360-412):

- Cyclops, you asked my name ... My name is “Nobody”. “Nobody”, my father, mother, and friends call me.

...

We took the red-hot stake and twisted it round and round like that in his eye, and the blood poured out ... Then he (= Polyphemus) screamed, terribly, and the rock echoed ... He called to the Cyclopes, his neighbours who lived in caves on the windy heights. They heard his cry, and crowding in from every side they stood by the cave mouth and asked what was wrong:

- Polyphemus, what terrible pain is this that makes you call through deathless night, and wake us? Is a mortal stealing your flocks, or trying to kill you by violence or treachery?

Out of the cave came mighty Polyphemus’ voice:

- Nobody, my friends, is trying to kill me by violence or treachery.

To this the Cyclops replied with winged words:

- “If you are alone, and nobody does your violence, it is an inescapable sickness that comes from Zeus: pray to the Lord Poseidon, our father.”

An *escapable sickness*. These words resounded powerfully to the hears of the audience of Odysseus’ recount of Polyphemus blinding. They recalled the sad opening of the *Iliad*, with which Homer the aede started recounting a funest episode of the war that opposed Greek and Trojans (*Iliad*, I, 1-6):

Sing, Goddess, Achilles’ rage,
Black and murderous, that cost the Greeks
Incalculable pain, pitched countless souls
Of heroes into Hades’ dark,
And left their bodies to rot as feasts
For dogs and birds, as Zeus’ will was done.

A rage that did cost innumerable deaths, coming from both the world of the Olympians with a *loimos* that decimated the Greek warriors as does a contagious disease, and the battles against the Trojans in which Achilles refused to participate and fight, voluntarily secluded in his tent. An emotive rage that transformed into physical pain and physical losses. Among the many lost lives, Patroclus’, Achilles’ closest friend and confident, whose death pushed Achilles to return to combat to avenge his *alter ego*, in a repeated transition from emotional to physical pain.

Going beyond this descent deep into the history of Greek literature, to the origins and foundations of the Greek World, of its identity and its memory, these two moments of the long history recounted by the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* that all Greek children learned early in their schooling years, act as two poles between which the whole universe of pain and its treatment is comprised in a metaphoric reading. In a figurative language, they encompass the whole spectrum of components that make up pain from the connection between emotional and physical pain and the fluidity of this connection to the universality, imperscrutability and nefarious consequences of pain, as well as its unavoidability. And, at the opposite side of the spectrum, the necessity to deploy strategies to fend off its blows or repeated attacks.

The narrative with its personages and adventures is a constant prosopopea that gives to the components of pain the life of personages and puts them into action. Emotional states of consciousness lead to despair, physical pain and ravage in a quick and fluid exchange that cannot be reversed. Pain also strikes unexpectedly from no apparent cause, without leaving anybody unaffected and leading to dramatic losses and possible ruin of society. Opposing it is a hard-fought battle that might be vain and provoke abandonment or, instead, require subtle astuces or well-thought and articulated stratagems. There is no better visual translation of the two poles of the world of pain as expressed in the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* than the ancient statue of Laocoön trying to escape the constriction and venom of two great sea-serpents which have wrapped their coils around him. Although the statue is traditionally interpreted as a visualization of human agony, it might also be read as the fight against the polarity of pain staged as early as the time of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* with ineluctability, powerlessness, and tentatives to resist in an almost dishuman effort.

Already in Antiquity, this conception did not prevent inquiring into pain in all its forms, from social to physical and emotive, in a search for origins and causes, or searching for ways to alleviate pain burden. Contemporary scholarly literature is increasingly bringing to light these efforts to understand pain and its treatment in a new interest in the subjective experience of life, sufferance, and pain in Antiquity. Nevertheless, if these new analyses show that many physicians from the Hippocratics to Galen and later did manage to put in place strategies to analyze and counteract pain, they have not identified a specific term to designate the possible antalgic action of the natural substances used to prepare medicine, and even less to define a class of agents with such property, not even in the most comprehensive collection of material on pharmacotherapeutics compiled in Antiquity, *De materia medica* by Dioscorides, whereas there are such terms for classes of therapeutic agents with other properties.

Most recent research further illustrates this imperscurtability of pain already expressed in the early years of the Greek World, and the necessity to put in place multifold and unconventional strategies to unlock pain mysteries or outsmart its master plan, sometimes with an unexpected turn. Over the past decades the French scientist Jean-Marie Besson (1938-2014) and his American colleague John Loeser (b. 1935) investigated the depth of pain in a way that might be best expressed by the title of the very recent biography of the latter (2024): *reimagining pain*. And more recently, just last month (January 2025), the American Food and Drug Administration approved a non-opioid drug acting through a possibly surprising “brand-new mechanism” as per a report of the approval in *Nature* in which all terms are significant:

> *The Food and Drug Administration approved suzetrigine for short-term pain management, making it the first pain drug given a regulatory nod in more than 20 years that works through a brand-new mechanism.*

Between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, on the one hand, and the approval of Suzetrigine, on the other, many paths were explored in the past to understand pain and mitigate its effects, some of which are identified and reconstructed in the contributions to this monographic issue of *Medicina nei Secoli*, illustrating the necessity of a *polutropos* research—multi-facetted, creative, resourceful, and with infinite strategies and patience —, together with its achievements, however ephemeral they might have been, at the image of the constant inventions of Odysseus on his long way from Troy to his native Ithaca, from pain, sufferance, and physical loss to the solace of home, enjoyment of a serene life, and physical well-being.

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