The Longest *Nostos*: Apollo 13, NASA, and the Classics

Apollo 13, the third, and only failed, American attempt to land on the moon successfully splashed down in the Pacific Ocean on April 17th, 1970. The following morning, the *Chicago Tribune* ran an editorial expressing the "humble thanksgiving" of "countless millions" around the world for the safe return of the astronauts. In the words of the editorial staff of the *Tribune*: "The travels of Ulysses, for whose exploits the astronauts named their ship Odyssey, were never like this."

The role that the Classics and the mythology of the ancient world played in the American space program during the 1960s and 1970s has received no scholarly attention to date from classicists, historians of science, or NASA. In my presentation, I explore the classical references in the iconographic program of Apollo 13 and the uses to which the media put this imagery as it reported the mission's successful return. As I will show, the *nostos* of Odysseus became a natural mode of encoding the story of the failed mission's successful return home. I conclude my presentation with a brief overview of future directions which related research can now pursue. I highlight in particular the important role the mythological naming scheme chosen by NASA, in contrast to its Soviet analogue, played in the rhetorical goals of the narrative behind the American space program.

James Lovell, the commander of Apollo 13 in charge of all iconographical choices for the mission, claims in a quotation in the *Boston Globe* (March 15, 1970) that "the theme we tried to go by is one of mythology." A large segment of the American public would have been aware of these words: the article ran in the *Chicago Tribune*, *New York Times*, and many other U.S. newspapers. In accordance with this iconographic goal, the imagery of Apollo 13 features the myths and languages of the ancient world. The mission patch, for example, is one of only two

from the first three manned American rocket programs to reference a god (in this case, the eponymous Apollo) by portraying the chariot and horses of the sun. Furthermore, as reported by Martin Waldron in the *New York Times* (April 18th, 1970), large screens at the front of mission control during Apollo 13's voyage portrayed a drawing of a Greek trireme with the word "Odyssey" written underneath. Furthermore, the crew module, named the Odyssey, references Homeric epic while the lunar module used the Zodiacal Latin name *Aquarius*. These and other iconographical choices assured that when the public read or heard stories about Apollo 13, the ancient world was readily summoned to their minds.

The theme of returning home, and the dangers therein, regularly recommend the *Odyssey* as a model text for modern narratives (Gardner and Murnaghan, 2014). Reflecting on the plight of the astronauts, Joseph Lelyveld wrote in the *New York Times* on the day after the return of the mission (April 18th, 1970) that, when their advanced technology failed the crewmembers, the imagination was compelled to give further credit to the "hardly inspired" name Odyssey: "It was Odysseus facing an unforeseen menace like the Cyclops and Odysseus struggling to return to Penelope." Such a narrative was not confined to American voices: in a letter to the editor published April 23rd, 1970, in the *Irish Times*, Ewart Milne confesses that he has been "utterly absorbed in, and with, the supreme spectacle of man reaching out almost beyond his grasp in the wonderful Odyssey [sic] of Apollo 13." It was, in other words, the resourcefulness of Odysseus πολύτροπος in the face of danger which so readily encoded the experiences of the astronauts of Apollo 13.

Apart from the naming scheme chosen for Apollo 13, the American space program utilized classical mythology from its outset. The first named American rocket was the Jupiter rocket, which was followed by the Juno rocket, and so on until the manned Mercury, Gemini,

and Apollo rocket programs. My ongoing research aims to answer the question of what use this mythological symbolism played in the larger narrative put forward around the American space program. My preliminary suggestion is that the naming program of NASA was intended to respond to the rhetorical goals of the Soviet Space program and forward those of NASA itself. Whereas the Soviet manned programs *Vostok* ("East") and *Voshtok* ("Dawn") draw attention to the geopolitical divides of the Cold War, the American programs, named using a shared mythological vocabulary, emphasize (if only ostensibly) a more collective idea of unity.

Bibliography

Gardner, H. and S. Murnaghan (eds). 2014. *Odyssean Identities in Modern Cultures: The Journey Home*. The Ohio State University Press.