

## Odyssean Ἀήρ: Understanding the Temporal Dialectic and the Presentation of the Mist-ical

The narrative structure of the *Odyssey* presents time in an incredibly complex way. Some scholars have put forth a “subordinate” model in which they suggest that Homer’s choice to describe *isolated* past events during Odysseus’ absence evidences the past’s main role of providing details for narrative continuity (Jones 1992, Gartziou-Tatti 2010). However, I argue that Homer’s intense focus on thresholds as places of intersecting temporal relativities on the plot, metric, and formal levels allows one to more appropriately conceive of the past as engaging in a dialectical struggle with the present, since the continuous past proceeds *simultaneously* yet *relatively* to the present. More specifically, I examine the role that the liminal mist (“ἄήρ”) plays in locating and representing the dialectic between different temporal relativities as a threshold in the physical landscape, where Odysseus and his crew have the potential to succumb to the internal time of a new physical space.

To demonstrate this claim, I divide the paper into three cumulative parts. The first section examines the temporal conflict inherent in thresholds using the exemplum of Antinous’ death in book 22. I argue that Odysseus and Antinous follow two *simultaneous* progressions of motion: at the same time that Odysseus “was lining up [ἰθύνετο] his sharp arrow toward Antinous,” Antinous “was in the process of [ἔμελλε] lifting up a beautiful chalice” (*Od.* 22.8-9). Because the audience does not forget what Odysseus is doing when Homer switches to describe Antinous’ preparing to drink, tension is created for the reader between the simultaneous and relative time progressions, and is only resolved—much to Antinous’ misfortune—when the two progressions forcefully merge back together when Odysseus’ arrow pierces through Antinous’ neck. This idea is represented formally: just as descriptions of Odysseus’ murderous plot both frame and

interrupt Antinous' last moment (at 22.15, "Ὀδυσσεὺς" literally takes over the metrical progression of "τὸν δ'" in the first foot), the arrow Odysseus uses to kill Antinous formally frames and literally "interrupts" Antinous' "tender neck" within the line, "ἀντικρὺ δ' ἀπαλοῖο δι' αὐχένος ἦλθ' ἀκωκή" (*Od.* 22.16). Such evidence defines an Odyssean threshold as the place where worlds with different temporal notions collide and, as a result, where dialectic conquest requires one to *transgress* one's own temporal world to prevent death.

Section two of the paper analyzes how Homer delineates thresholds, asserting that those marked with visible forms of magic maintain a fundamentally different relationship to the temporal dialectic than those with ἀήρ. I scrutinize the Lotus-Eaters episode, arguing that the metrical and formal emphasis on the Lotus-Eaters' nonviolent nature reinforces the divine impossibility for Odysseus and his crew to struggle with forces more powerful than themselves. As I argue, the Lotus-Eaters' presentation of magic destroys the dialectic in favor of pure temporal assimilation: although forgetting one's *nostos* is problematic, it is not dangerous precisely because the non-confrontational nature of forgetting offers man no ability or method to counteract its force. I suggest that the confrontational nature of the scenes that inevitably follow ἀήρ-marked thresholds are therefore opposite to those of non-mist magic, and that mist must engage the dialectic as a way of offering some hope (however destructive the violence contained within the scene) that Odysseus and his crew are once again fighting among qualitative equals.

The final section of the paper investigates how the association of ἀήρ with the *movement* of threshold crossing attributes to ἀήρ a mystical quality indicative of its role beyond mere atmospheric description. I map an episode of mist: ἀήρ appears when Odysseus and his crew are close enough to—but not yet on—the island near that of the Cyclopes to see intimate details and ends when they land. In this way, ἀήρ specifies the nature of their journey to the island as

temporal attraction: Odysseus maintains his own relative time in “neutral” zones such as the open sea; however, his motion *toward* the island allows him to be absorbed into its temporal relativity when he gets *close enough*. Thus, I argue that ἀήρ marks the transition point between Odysseus’ personal temporal relativity on the ship and that of the island. In this way, ἀήρ—unlike the peace of other magical thresholds—necessarily requires the potential for violence, as the only way to engage with the dialectic of time.

### Bibliography

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