

Loneliness

Loneliness is much more intense than isolation. The ancient Greek playwright, Sophocles, devotes a powerful play, the *Philoctetes*, to the lonely fate of a young Greek warrior, Neoptolemos, who has suffered a grievous serpent-inflicted wound in battle at Troy, and as a result has developed a foul-smelling gangrene which makes his presence intolerable to other people. So intensely disgusting is this odor that the battle comrades of the young fighter see only one possible move, to abandon him on a rocky and isolated island called Lemnos where no one except the birds of the sky will be aware of him. Were the tale to drop there we would be left with a complete portrait of loneliness—images of the isolated young hero, whose only companionship was the sea birds who shared his cave. It was characteristic of Sophocles, and of the poignancy with which he characterized loneliness, that he appended, to any relief of Neoptolemos' misery, that the young man should re-enter the world of conflict and pain.

The long story, by which Neoptolemos was eventually to be lured from his loneliness back into the world, allows us to reflect on one classic hero's confrontation with loneliness.

The greatest of those heroic figures, Odysseus, might be thought susceptible to peripatetic loneliness. He wanders the world and gusts of loneliness beset him. On Calypso's island he sees the smoke rising from his own family house, on the distant island of Ogygia. It is the first sign of home for the traveller, after decades on the ocean. He does not emote; we share his deep loneliness. Odysseus is a humanist. Confronted with Circe the witch, who turns his men into swine, he feels a terrible isolation in the realm of the sub-human; he is desperately lonely for the human. His loneliness for the intimacies of his wife and home leads him to acts of brutality which only a supremely lonely man would undertake.