

## Chapter 2

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### **An Unconscious Reception of Homer's *Odyssey* – Marvel's *Silver Surfer***

*'The wayfaring man – tell me of him, O Muse – who, having plundered the sacred citadel of Troy, wandered so many ways, who saw the myriad cities of men and learned their minds, and who, upon an open sea, suffered in his soul so many pains to win life for himself and a homecoming for his companions. Yet he could not save them, hard as he tried, and through their own wickedness they were destroyed...'*

Homer, *The Odyssey* (1.1–7)<sup>1</sup>

The *Silver Surfer*<sup>2</sup> debuted as a last-minute addition to issue 48 of Marvel Comics' *Fantastic Four*, cover-dated March 1966. Two years later he had his own title, a series which quickly became a counter-culture icon characterised by its dark vision of a senseless world as experienced by a thoughtful and introspective outsider. Originally a creation of the artist Jack Kirby, the first *Silver Surfer* series was drawn, for the most part, by John Buscema (although Kirby drew the final issue of the first series) and scripted throughout by Marvel Comics' editor Stan Lee (in collaboration with the artists). Neither Lee nor Kirby were ever forthcoming in elucidating their inspiration for the *Silver Surfer*, but this chapter will argue that the character was modelled on that of Odysseus, and that the appearance of the comic book superhero coincided with a general shift in the reception history of Homer's ill-fated wanderer.

The first *Silver Surfer* series can be readily located within a greater context of American neoclassicism and its expression in the popular culture of the 1960s

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1 Ἄνδρα μοι ἔννεπε, μοῦσα, πολύτροπον, ὃς μάλα πολλά / πλάγχθη, ἐπεὶ Τροίης ἱερὸν πτολίεθρον ἔπερσεν: / πολλῶν δ' ἀνθρώπων ἴδεν ἄστεα καὶ νόον ἔγνω, / πολλὰ δ' ὃ γ' ἐν πόντῳ πάθεν ἄλγεα ὃν κατὰ θυμόν, / ἀρνύμενος ἦν τε ψυχὴν καὶ νόστον ἐταίρων. / ἄλλ' οὐδ' ὧς ἐτάρους ἐρρύσατο, ἰέμενός περ: / αὐτῶν γὰρ σφετέρῃσιν ἀτασθαλίῃσιν ὄλοντο; text cited after Murray (1919), all translations in this paper, unless otherwise stated, are my own.

2 Throughout this chapter I will be using the non-italicised name (*Silver Surfer*) to refer to the comic book character and the italicised title (*Silver Surfer*) to refer to the comic book series.

specifically: the advent of the surfing lifestyle, the final stages of America's obsession with *Peplum* films, and public weariness with the war in Vietnam. This is not to say that the modelling of the comic book character was self-conscious, however, or even self-aware, but rather that the pre-eminence of Neoclassicism in both the high-culture and popular-culture of the United States during the 1960s engendered a climate in which classical reception happened unconsciously, almost spontaneously. This chapter, therefore, concerns itself with the ways in which such an *Unconscious Reception* might have occurred, together with the factors that precipitated it.

### The Man with No Name

The epic that we have come to call the *Iliad* might just as aptly be referred to as the *Wrath of Achilles*. Certainly wrath (μῆνις) is the word with which the poet chose to begin the epic, and the name of the central hero is revealed in the very first line: 'Wrath. Sing (of that), oh Goddess – (the wrath) of Peleus' son, Achilles ...' (Homer, *Iliad* 1.1).<sup>3</sup> But in the *Odyssey*, we are kept waiting for the name of our eponymous hero for more than 20 lines and, even then, we are given only *Odusei* (Ὀδυσῆι, Hom. *Od.* 1.21) – less a name than a descriptive verb: one who both causes pain and suffers.<sup>4</sup> Thousands of lines later, in book 19, we learn that the hero's grandfather had chosen this name for him: 'let his name be Odysseus', Autolykos had said, 'just as I have come here, creating pain for many, both men and women, across the fruitful earth' (Hom. *Od.* 19.407–409).<sup>5</sup>

It was Herodotus (*Histories* 2.116) who first mentioned the title of the epic as the *Odyssey* and yet it is a stylistic feature of the poem that our hero's name remains perpetually (almost obsessively) obscure. Odysseus is shipwrecked on the Phaeacian shore at the end of book 5, but he manages to conceal his name from these people (despite their uncharacteristic hospitality) until book 9, the same book in which we learn that he had lied about his name to Polyphemus, claiming to be a man called Outis ('no-one'). Odysseus then goes on to lie a further four times about his name – to Eumaios, to the suitors in Ithaca, to his wife Penelope, and, finally, to his father Laertes. Indeed, the poet (or poets) of the *Odyssey* seem far happier to describe the hero in epithets, rather than name him, and so we know him as Polytropos ('much-travelled, much-wandering'), Polytlas ('much-enduring'), Megaletor ('great-hearted'), Poliporthios ('sacker of cities'), Polymetis

3 Μῆνιν ἄειδε θεὰ Πηληϊάδεω Ἀχιλῆος; text cited after Murray (1924).

4 See Kanavou (2015: 95)

5 πολλοῖσιν γὰρ ἐγὼ γε ὀδυσάμενος τόδ' ἰκάνω / ἀνδράσιν ἠδὲ γυναῖξιν ἀνὰ χθόνα βωτιάνειραν / τῶ δ' Ὀδυσσεὺς ὄνομ' ἔστω ἐπώνυμον. On the 'grammatical obscurity' of ὀδύσ(σ)ομαι see Kanavou (2015: 90, 93), who notes also that 'Odysseus is the only major Homeric hero whose name receives an explicit (and in fact quite elaborate) justification within the story'.

(‘clever, cunning’), or Odune (‘man of pain’). All of these epithets, I would argue, are equally applicable to the Silver Surfer.

The eponymous hero of the *Silver Surfer*, just like Odysseus, bears not a name, but a description. Fans of the series will know that the Surfer’s original name was Norrin Radd but, just like Odysseus, it took quite some time for that fact to be made known within the text itself. The character first appeared in issue 48 of the *Fantastic Four* (March 1966) and went on to feature in another fourteen issues without being named. He appeared, similarly unnamed, in the fifth *Fantastic Four Annual* (November 1967), and issues 92 and 93 of *Tales to Astonish* (June, July 1967). It was not until August 1968, more than two years after his initial appearance, that readers learnt the Silver Surfer’s name. By then, however, any of Odysseus’ many epithets might have served equally well to describe the ‘Sentinel of the Spaceways’ – the Silver Surfer had originally been a scientist (a ‘clever, cunning’ man), had sacked whole worlds for his master Galactus, had endured much, had travelled much and had suffered much on account of his own great heart: ‘Well do I remember those early days ... when only endless journeying could ease the bitter ache within my breast! ... I have seen the birth of planets ... and the death of worlds! I have seen galaxies crumble ... and new suns aborning!’ (*Silver Surfer*, 1.1.41). Homer’s Odysseus finally achieves an end to his ordeal, regaining his country and his family, but the presentation of the Silver Surfer’s journeys as literally endless brings his character into line with more modern receptions of the ancient king – Dante’s Odysseus, for example, never returns to Ithaca and never ceases his restless wandering (Dante, *Inferno* 26). Like the story of Odysseus, that of the Silver Surfer starts *in medias res*, when the cosmic ocean washes him onto Earth’s shores. After an initial confrontation with the Fantastic Four, he plunges through a skylight into the apartment of Alicia Masters, a blind sculptor. ‘Truly, the workings of Fate are strangely unfathomable’, the story’s narrator tells us, as Alicia goes to the help of the unconscious Surfer. This brief meditation on fortune continues once the hero awakens when, dismissing Alicia’s questions he responds that ‘understanding cannot alter the ways of Destiny!’ (*Fantastic Four*, 1.48.8). Alicia comments that the Silver Surfer is both strange and noble (both words again in bold, *Fantastic Four*, 1.48.8) before preparing him a meal. After eating the food prepared for him (along with the crockery on which it was served), the Silver Surfer praises Alicia for her ‘courage’ and her ‘beauty’ (*Fantastic Four*, 1.48.11).

Readers familiar with book 6 of the *Odyssey* will be aware of the parallels here with the first meeting of Odysseus and Nausicaa, princess of the Phaeacians. Nausicaa hails the shipwrecked hero as a ‘stranger’ (ξένος, *Od.* 6.187), and reminds him that it is fate, through the agency of Zeus, that has brought him to the land of the Phaeacians. She gives Odysseus food, which he devours voraciously,

and he praises her beauty and her courage. And just as Nausicaa serves as the means by which Odysseus is introduced to, and reconciled with, the famously xenophobic Phaeacians, so too Alicia serves to facilitate the eventual alliance between the Silver Surfer and the Fantastic Four (*Fantastic Four*, 1.48.20). It is also Alicia who first voices a description of the Silver Surfer that will, by the launch of the titular series in 1968, have come to dominate our understanding of this character: ‘Never have I sensed such unimaginable loneliness in a living being!’ (*Fantastic Four*, 1.49.8).

From the very first issue of the *Silver Surfer* series in mid-1968, this narrative of solitude and isolation defines our celestial hero, a narrative epitomised in the Silver Surfer’s early soliloquy: ‘Now here I stand alone and fore-saken upon this hostile world! I, who have crested the waves of infinity ... exiled forever upon this lonely sphere ... But, time is long and fate is fickle ... my destiny still lies before me ... and where it beckons ... there shall soar the Silver Surfer!’ (*Silver Surfer*, 1.1.44). It is a recurrent image. In the very next issue we witness the hero bewailing his isolation once again – ‘Not even the eagle is without a nest!’, he observes (*Silver Surfer*, 1.2.5), with the accompanying visual imagery reminiscent of the scene described in the second book of the *Odyssey*, where two eagles swoop down from the mountains (Hom. *Od.* 2.146ff.).

Other resonances with the *Odyssey* that appear in the Silver Surfer may appear superficial, but they are worth noting nonetheless. Just as Odysseus battles the Cyclops Polyphemus, so too, in issues 8 and 9, the Silver Surfer battles Joost Van Straaten, the ‘Flying Dutchman’. Joost stands condemned to an eternity of suffering because of his failure to protect his original ship’s crew. Mephisto, satanic ruler of the netherworld, arms the Dutchman with powerful prosthetic hands and a single ‘nether-blasting’ eye, but he fails to defeat the Silver Surfer whose compassion eventually frees the ghost from his cursed existence. Polyphemus is not the only primitive giant that Odysseus must fight – he recounts his battle with the savage Laestrygonian cannibals as well in book 10. So too, in the brief run of the Silver Surfer’s first series, we see him battle against similarly brutal foes – first the Yetis (*Silver Surfer*, 1.1) and then the giant troglodytes that serve the Overlord Rhakkal (*Silver Surfer*, 1.6). Odysseus’ sojourn among the witches finds a reflex in the Silver Surfer’s run-in with a coven of witches in issue 12 (a coven commanded by Sir Nigel Carruthers, a figure reminiscent of Alistair Crowley). There are also two separate occasions over the 18 issues in which we see our hero undertake a catabasis (issues 3 and 10), in order to confront Mephisto. Interestingly, the term ‘stygian’ is employed four times during these journeys to the underworld (*Silver Surfer*, 1.3.7, 1.3.33, 1.10.10, 1.10.15), but perhaps nowhere is the comparison between Odysseus and Norrin Radd easiest to draw than when we consider the roles of both as exiled lover.

While the allure of Odysseus as a hero seemed to pall with the Romans and the inheritors of their Latin tradition, the same was not true for Penelope, who became established in the Western canon as the epitome of marital fidelity. If there was anything positive to be salvaged from the Homeric epic in the medieval conception of it, it was a love story, mediated through the lens of Chivalric literature, in which Odysseus and his wife became star-crossed lovers and Penelope waited, forever, to be reunited with her one true love. When the origin of the Silver Surfer was revealed to readers in the first issue of his own series, this celestial Odysseus was found to have his own Penelope. Shalla Bal had been the lover of Norrin Radd on their home planet of Zenn-La before the coming of Galactus. Norrin had offered his life to the destroyer of worlds in order to save his planet and his love, and so his endless odyssey began. Eventually trapped on earth following his rebellion against Galactus, the Silver Surfer's one desire is to return to Shalla Bal, a desire voiced at least once in every comic of the first series. For her part, Shalla Bal never stops loving Norrin either, and never wavers in her efforts to be reunited with him: 'Though it takes a lifetime', she pines, 'or a thousand lifetimes ... I shall wait for him' (*Silver Surfer*, 1.6.3). Just as Penelope dreams of Odysseus in the ancient epic, so too Shalla Bal dreams of Norrin Radd. Awakening from one such dream, Shalla Bal cries out: 'No! It ... it was merely a dream! And yet ... it was so real ... so life-like ... I seemed to hear his heart beat!' (*Silver Surfer*, 1.8.16). Compare this to Penelope's recollection of a similar dream: 'This night again someone lay beside me, someone just like him, such as he was when he went forth with the host, and my heart was glad, for I thought it no dream, but the truth at last' (Hom. *Od.* 20.88–90).<sup>6</sup> Even Penelope's famous refusal of the suitors finds resonance in the thwarted passion of Shalla Bal: 'How tragic it is', remarks one of the elders of Zenn-La, 'that she ... the fairest of the fair ... has renounced all others ... while waiting for one who can never return! She ... who might be the bride of kings ... has chosen instead ... the meager solace of a memory!' (*Silver Surfer*, 1.6.3). The next image is one of Shalla Bal, her dark hair covered beneath a head-scarf, walking away, as one of her would-be suitors muses: 'I have offered her riches ... fame ... the dazzling glories of empire ... if she would be my bride! But, she sees no face ... she hears no voice ... save that of Norrin Radd!' (*Silver Surfer*, 1.6.3). Moreover, just as Penelope is forced into deception to keep her suitors at bay, so too we eventually witness Shalla Bal deceiving a Zenn La scientist, Yarro Gort, so that he will fly her to earth to look for her lost love, even though, in her own words: 'Yarro Gort is all that I hate ... all that I despise in a man!' (*Silver Surfer*, 1.10.2).

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6 τῆδε γὰρ αὖ μοι νυκτὶ παρέδραθεν εἵκελος αὐτῶ, / τοῖος ἐὼν οἷος ἦεν ἄμα στρατῶ: αὐτὰρ ἐμὸν κῆρ / χαῖρ', ἐπεὶ οὐκ ἐφάμην ὄναρ ἔμμενα, ἀλλ' ὕπαρ ἦδη.

I would argue also that the depiction of war, or rather of war-weariness, might invite yet another comparison between the epic of Odysseus and the comic book series of the Silver Surfer. It became more common during the 1960s for Homeric scholars to imagine an ontological distance between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, and to interpret the depiction of Achilles' ghost in the latter as critical of the heroic ideal.<sup>7</sup> By the mid-1970s Douglas Stewart would write that the underworld meeting between Odysseus and Achilles turned 'the whole heroic image and premise over into the dust'.<sup>8</sup> More recently, Jonathan Shay, former staff psychiatrist in the Department of Veterans Affairs Outpatient Clinic in Boston, utilised the character of Odysseus to illustrate the mindset of soldiers returning from deployment in modern conflict zones.<sup>9</sup> Similarly, the Silver Surfer, who debuted just as US involvement in the Vietnam war was peaking, can be seen to question, contradict, and eventually denounce the war efforts of America. The participation of US personnel in the Vietnam war had been escalating steadily from 1961. In response to this, student protests – initially against American involvement in the war, but eventually against the war itself – had begun in earnest by 1964. By the following year, domestic press coverage of the war was largely negative, with commentators beginning to draw unfavourable parallels between the actions of the military overseas (against the Vietnamese) with those of the military at home (against Civil Rights protesters). In 1967, Martin Luther King Jr. was prompted to say that if 'America's soul becomes totally poisoned, part of the autopsy must read "Vietnam"'.<sup>10</sup>

It was inevitable, perhaps, that against such a climate of military escalation and general war-weariness the philosophical musings of the Silver Surfer would be interpreted as a comment on current affairs. In the letters section of issue 54 of the *Fantastic Four* (September 1966) Greg Jones of Houston interprets Galactus as the Viet Cong, the Fantastic Four as South Vietnam and the Silver Surfer as America – 'the moral', Jones writes, is that 'a freedom-loving people, no matter where in the galaxy they exist, will not hesitate to help their fellows. We Americans, as the Silver Surfer, should be glad to help our neighbors in Viet Nam' (*Fantastic Four*, 54.23). Stan Lee's response was positive, if somewhat equivocal: 'your allegorical references are clever as all get-out ... That's one of the most interesting things about creating these little imageries for such aware fans – we can't dot an *i* without someone reading some deep subliminal message into it' (*Fantastic Four*, 54.23).

By the time the Silver Surfer got his own title, however, there were few people publicly supporting the war in Vietnam or, indeed, any of the wars that America

7 See, for example, Fränkel (1962) and Beye (1966).

8 Stewart (1976: 60).

9 See Shay (2002).

10 See Johnson and Adelman (2008: 139).

had engaged in overseas. We would do well to remember that the public's attention was not entirely focused on the war in Vietnam alone, and that the anti-war movement of the late 1960s was just as active in decrying US involvement in conflicts much closer to home. By 1969 the Bay of Pigs incident (April 1961) was still a raw wound in the American psyche. US troops had died in 1964 during their deployment following the January 9 anti-American riots in Panama, and in March of that year, the US had supported a military coup in Brazil, overthrowing the left-wing president, João Goulart. From late April through to May of 1965, America deployed some 24,000 military personnel to intervene in the Dominican Civil War, and US troops and intelligence operatives were also active in suppressing the Bolivian insurgency (led by Che Guevara) from 1966 until 1967. The long story-arc in issues 10 and 11 of the first series ('A World He Never Made', November and December 1969), used a brutal insurgency in a fictitious South-American nation to demonstrate the pointlessness of such wars, and the ongoing alienation of the central hero in the face of such brutality.

The parallels, therefore, between the Silver Surfer and Odysseus are considerable and, it must be said, have not gone unnoticed in more recent commentary.<sup>11</sup> Larry Brody, who wrote the script for *Silver Surfer: The Animated Series*, wrote that: 'Like the gods of ancient Greece and Rome, Galactus is a bad loser. Just as those ancient gods kept the hero Ulysses from getting home to his wife, Penelope, after the Trojan War, so Galactus keeps the Silver Surfer from returning to Shalla Bal.'<sup>12</sup> Brody's project aired for a single season in 1998 on the Fox Kids Network and was co-produced by the Marvel Entertainment Group with Saban Entertainment. Interestingly, Saban had, by that time, acquired the rights to *Ulysses 31*, a French-Japanese animated television series from 1981 that had reimagined Odysseus' adventures as a space-opera. Unlike *Ulysses 31*, however, *The Silver Surfer* did not concede its debt to the epic that had informed it.

It may be that the creators of the comic book series were unwilling to acknowledge their Classical sources because they preferred to present their product as original, or because they wanted to avoid issues of copyright, or even because they simply saw no purpose in referencing the *Odyssey*. But it is just as likely that, despite the obvious correlations between the two, the staff at Marvel Comics were unaware how much they had taken from the original. Operating in a culture saturated by a multitude of Receptions, individuals are often unaware how deeply indebted their art is. What results is still, strictly speaking, Neoclassical, but the conscious acts of Reception (homage, pastiche, parody) are subsumed into the phenomenon of Unconscious Reception. In the *Silver Surfer* we see the product of this Unconscious Reception – a comic book unaware of its own Neoclassicism,

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<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Hammontree (2010).

<sup>12</sup> Brody (n. d. [2019]).

an artefact generated almost spontaneously from the Homeric resonances that permeated the cultural medium in which it incubated. These resonances, as such, operated in multiple bandwidths, from the high-culture impulses of academia, through to popular-culture influences such as film and comic books, and analysis of all these inputs reveals some surprising facts about American Neoclassicism in the 1960s.

### **The Conscious Classicism of Academe**

For modern Classicists, inured to a steady decrease in student numbers and university offerings, it can be difficult to imagine how pervasive the Classics were in post-World War Two America, but by the 1960s, vastly more students were studying the ancient world in the universities and high-schools of the United States than ever before. American universities had experienced unprecedented levels of enrolment in all subjects in the decades following the Second World War following passage of the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944 (commonly known as the 'G. I. Bill') which guaranteed college tuition to any veteran who had seen 90 days active service and who had not been dishonourably discharged. The opportunity presented by this Bill was utilised by some 2,232,000 veterans in the decade following its implementation. The result was a 75% increase in university enrolment across the country with some college-schools doubling their pre-war numbers. These numbers continued to climb during the 1950s. The Veterans Readjustment Assistance Act of 1952 extended the same rights of education to veterans of the Korean Conflict, and tertiary student numbers rose by a further 49% during the 1950s. A further 120% increase during the 1960s was the result of a combination of factors – post-war increases in population, an increase in American affluence and, most significantly, a culture of college aspiration that had been extended by the G. I. Bill to a far wider range of Americans.<sup>13</sup> It was this change in the aspirational culture of America that produced one of the least expected outcomes for, although the legislators behind the Bill had intended to encourage veterans to retrain for 'practical' employment, many Americans had, in fact, gravitated towards liberal arts degrees. As a result, numbers had increased in unexpected areas, among them Classics.

Students who chose courses in Ancient History or Classical Archaeology are now largely invisible to us as a distinct group, their enrolment statistics being subsumed into the larger disciplines of History or Archaeology, and so it remains difficult to determine the exact numbers of students engaged in Classical studies during the 1960s. Nevertheless, we do know that by 1965 there were 40,000

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<sup>13</sup> For all this statistical data see Olson (1973: 608) and Snyder (1993: 66).

Americans studying Latin at a tertiary level.<sup>14</sup> This post-World War Two increase of Classics students at a tertiary level also had a direct impact on other levels of the American education system – Classics graduates became Classics teachers (in 1962 over 700,000 high-school students in the US were enrolled in Latin)<sup>15</sup> and while the demand for translations of Classical texts to service these classes rose steadily, so too did the supply of translators.

In 1946 Allen Lane and Emile Victor Rieu had begun publishing their new range of affordable, softcover versions of classic texts. This British innovation, the Penguin paperback, came into its own, servicing the needs of the burgeoning American colleges. For their first edition, Penguin chose Rieu's own translation of the *Odyssey* which, by 1964, had sold more than 2,000,000 copies.<sup>16</sup> Rieu's translation was joined in 1961 by the work of Robert Fitzgerald, a prodigious scholar who would serve as the Boylston Professor of Rhetoric and Oratory at Harvard from 1965 until 1981. Fitzgerald's translation of the *Odyssey*, initially released by Farrar, Straus and Giroux was the winner of the Bollingen Prize and, like Rieu, also sold more than 2,000,000 copies. Richmond Lattimore, whose 1951 translation of the *Iliad* had earned so much praise, released his own version of the *Odyssey* through Harper & Row in 1967. By 1968, the year that the first *Silver Surfer* series debuted, the renowned Classicist Donald Carne-Ross could boast of (or perhaps lament) more than 30 English versions of the *Odyssey* then available.<sup>17</sup>

University students were studying Classics in never-to-be-repeated numbers, and these students were going on to teach Classics at schools throughout the country. Americans were being exposed to Homeric epics in the classroom, in the library, and in the bookshop. But it was not only in the rarefied atmosphere of the Academy that they were meeting Homer. They met him in the cinema and on the television as well.

### **On-screen Odysseys**

America's obsession with the so-called 'sword and sandal' epics prepared comic book audiences for a new Odysseus while simultaneously mediating against stereotypical representations of the Homeric hero. By the second half of the 1960s, these Hollywood epics had all but run their course, and muscle-bound henchmen in short skirts were beginning to seem comical. It was at this time that the 'sword and sandal' epic began to give way to the Peplum film. The same gener-

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14 See Culham and Edmunds (1989: 23). These statistics were used to more theatrical effect by Hanson and Heath (1997 and 1998). For a more nuanced interpretation see Adler (2016).

15 See Culham and Edmunds (1989: xiv).

16 See Hall (2008: 23).

17 See Carne-Ross (2010 [1968]: 123).

ation that had embraced high-brow iterations of Classical learning, the students who swelled Latin classes at College, the reading public that turned the paperback *Odyssey* into a best seller, had also found that Hollywood was willing to cater to their tastes and, in the wake of the big studios, a plethora of smaller houses had continued even after the high-budget epics had run their course.

Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949) was one of the first post-war blockbusters to feature the ancient world, but it was soon eclipsed by Sam Zimbalist's epic *Quo Vadis?* (1951) which, although failing to win any of the eight Academy Awards for which it was nominated, returned more than \$5,000,000 profit for MGM, making it the highest grossing film of 1951.<sup>18</sup> Buoyed by this success, the major production houses began greenlighting a number of Classical-themed projects and over the next five years cinema audiences were to witness *The Robe* in 1953, *Demetrius and the Gladiators*, *Theodora Slave Empress*, *Attila* and *Ulysses* in 1954, *Helen of Troy* and *Land of the Pharaohs* in 1955, and *Alexander the Great* and *The Ten Commandments* in 1956. The success of these films came at a crucial time in the history of Hollywood which, by the early 1950s, was experiencing an unprecedented crisis.

The rise of the Peplum film coincided with the decline of the so-called 'studio system' that had operated in Hollywood since its beginning. The 'Paramount Case' of 1948 (*United States v. Paramount Pictures, Inc.*, 334 U.S. 131) was an antitrust ruling by the United States Supreme Court which made illegal the vertical integration of the industry (studios owning their own cinemas) and the practise of block-booking (which had forced cinemas to purchase unwanted films). The Paramount Case coincided with a change of focus for the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC), an investigative committee of the US House of Representatives originally created in 1938 to investigate individuals and organizations suspected of supporting Nazi Germany. Following the end of the Second World War, the Committee shifted its attention to the operation of suspected Communists in the United States and, from 1947, HUAC reserved a special level of scrutiny for Hollywood. Writers, directors and actors suspected of Communist sympathies could no longer be employed by the studios whose output was also being affected by increasing production costs and a general loss of audience – post-war intra-urban migration had seen the inner-cities, where cinemas were located, empty out as families moved to the newly-built suburbs, which had no cinemas. Beset by so many problems, the studios decided to off-shore the film industry.

The film industry in Europe was already well established by the 1950s – indeed many of the big names in Hollywood had fled Fascist Europe during the 1930s – but although rich in expertise, it was lacking capital. Nevertheless,

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18 See Wrigley (2008: 52).

American audiences had demonstrated that they were happy to watch 'sword and sandal' epics from Europe. A dubbed version of Alessandro Blasetti's *Fabiola* (1949) was released in the United States in 1951 and grossed more than \$1,000,000,<sup>19</sup> and a dubbed version of Riccardo Freda's *Sins of Rome* (1953) was released Stateside in 1954.

America's post-war European Recovery Program (the Marshall Plan) had in fact subsidized the rebuilding of the film industry in several European countries. This meant that production costs in Europe were low. Americans working overseas did not have to pay income tax at this time either, and the freeze on the movement of European hard-currency during post-war reconstruction did not apply to companies with offices in countries such as Italy. Moreover, films with a Classical theme could be shot on location with minimal sets. Producing films in Europe, therefore, was inexpensive, tax-incentivized, and allowed studios to use staff without HUAC oversight. The next wave of films to emerge from the Italian offices of the major Hollywood studios, however, was not of the same caliber as *Quo Vadis* or *Ulysses*.

Cinecittà studios, founded in 1937 by Benito Mussolini, was rebuilt by the Allies who had bombed it and pressed back into production, creating some 300 films between 1957 and 1965.<sup>20</sup> Although Peplum films accounted for only 4% of Cinecittà's output in 1958, by 1963 this percentage had almost quadrupled to 15%.<sup>21</sup> American producer Joseph Levine acquired the international distribution rights to Pietro Francisci's *Le fatiche di Ercole* (1958) for \$120,000, dubbed it into English, and released it in the United States in 1959 as *Hercules*, where it grossed more than \$5,000,000.<sup>22</sup> Francisci's sequel, *Ercole e la Regina di Lidia* (1959) was released internationally as *Hercules Unchained* (1959), enjoying similar ticket-sales in the US and becoming the biggest grossing film for the UK in 1959.<sup>23</sup> Buoyed by such success, the studios increased their levels of output significantly.

They continued to produce the worthier epics that had predated *Hercules* – *Ben Hur* and *The Last Days of Pompeii* were both released in 1959, Stanley Kubrick's *Spartacus* in 1960, and Rudolph Maté's *300 Spartans* in 1962 – but such offerings were swamped by the sheer numbers of B-grade Peplum films that flooded the US market. Between 1958 and 1965, no less than nineteen films were produced in the *Hercules* series. To this can be added nine films in the series dedicated to *Ursus*, *Son of Hercules*, five films in the *Samson* series, five in the *Goliath* series and twenty-five showcasing *Maciste*, a Herculean character created by

19 See *Variety* (1952).

20 See Günsberg (2004: 97).

21 See Günsberg (2004: 100).

22 See Frayling (2006: 73).

23 See Günsberg (2004: 99).

Gabriele d'Annunzio and Giovanni Pastrone during the earliest days of Italian cinema. All of these 63 films used the same sets, the same costumes and, quite often, the same actors. Nor were Americans restricted to viewing these films at the cinemas or at the, by now, ubiquitous drive-in theatres of the new suburbs, as fourteen of the most popular Peplum films were syndicated between 1961 and 1964 for US television as *The Sons of Hercules* series. Thus, American screens – cinemas, drive-ins and televisions – were swamped during the 1960s by these quickly-made Peplum films.

By this stage, more serious depictions of the Classical world on film were coming to an end. Fox studios claimed that Walter Wanger's *Cleopatra* (1963) had cost them \$44 million to produce, and although ticket sales eventually crawled into profit, it was far from the \$100 million Wanger had predicted.<sup>24</sup> The following year, Anthony Mann's *The Fall of the Roman Empire* grossed less than \$5,000,000 against a budget of \$18,400,000, bankrupting its producer Samuel Bronston and putting a final seal on the genre.

Marvel Comic's first response to the success of the Peplum craze was to produce a comic book version of Hercules, although they were in no way the first to think of this marketing strategy. William Moulton Marston's 1941 creation, Wonder Woman, was an Amazon princess and her contingent mythos exploited several aspects of classical Greek legends. When readers met Wonder Woman for the first time in issue 8 of *All-Star Comics* (1940), they met also the DC Comics incarnation of Hercules – a villain to be pitted against the Amazons. Following the release of the first Hercules film in the US, Dell Comics produced their own comic book adaptation of the Peplum hero and followed that up with a version of *Hercules Unchained* the following year. A low-budget animated series *The Mighty Hercules* debuted on American TV in 1963, running until 1966, and a comic book from Gold Key Comics based on that series appeared about the same time.

Like DC, Marvel's first portrayal of the Greek demi-god, in *Avengers* issue 10 (1964), cast him as villain. When he appeared again the following year in *Journey into Mystery* (Annual, issue 1) he was established as a rival to Marvel's other deity-cum-superhero, Thor – a much later storyline retconned the early *Avengers* Hercules as an impostor, so the official Marvel Hercules has never been evil.<sup>25</sup> Hercules became a regular guest character in *The Mighty Thor* and appeared in *Tales To Astonish*, before settling into a longer run in the *Avengers*, where he eventually became a 'full-fledged Avenger' in 1967, by which time he had competition from Charlton Comics' *Hercules: Adventures of the Man-God* (1967–1969).

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24 See Hall and Neale (2010: 166).

25 See *Avengers Forever* #1–12 (Dec. 1997 – Nov. 1999).

With their own Hercules established and the 'sword and sandal' craze winding down, Marvel were interested in developing new ideas, new heroes and new storylines, and so their Odyssean Silver Surfer owes his origin to both the Peplum craze that had immediately preceded his invention, and to the science fiction craze that coincided with it. In fact, a parallel might be drawn between the genesis of the comic book character and the contemporaneous production of that great cinematic epic *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

Arthur C. Clarke's 'The Sentinel', originally written in 1948, was published in 1951 (in *Ten Story Fantasy*) as 'Sentinel of Eternity'. The story piqued the interest of *Spartacus* director Stanley Kubrick who, by 1964, had begun working with Clarke on a project they were calling *Journey Beyond the Stars*. Eager to break out of what he perceived to be the science-fiction humdrum of 'monsters and sex', Kubrick's early interviews on the subject indicate a new direction: 'the best term we've been able to come up with is a space Odyssey ... It occurred to us that for the Greeks the vast stretches of the sea must have had the same sort of mystery and remoteness that space has for our generation'.<sup>26</sup> Released the same year as *The Silver Surfer* series began, *2001: A Space Odyssey* went on to become the highest-grossing North American film of 1968 and changed cinema forever.

### Surfing with the Alien

If the *Silver Surfer* was part Homeric epic and part space-opera, the eponymous hero of the series was also (and most obviously) a surfer. This editorial decision is easy to contextualise within another genre of film that was experiencing its heyday at the time of the series' creation – the surf-movie.

Novelist and screenwriter Frederick (Friedrich) Kohner had fled Nazi Germany and immigrated to Hollywood in the mid-1930s. His daughter Kathy grew up under the California sun and, by the mid-1950s, was a regular at Malibu beach. Frederick Kohner turned his daughter's lifestyle into a successful novel in 1957, selling more than 500,000 copies of *Gidget: The Little Girl with Big Ideas*. Columbia Pictures bought the rights to Kohner's novel and brought it to the silver screen as *Gidget* in 1959. In 1961 they followed up on this success with *Gidget Goes Hawaiian* and in 1965, Sally Field (perhaps most famous of the actors to play the teen surf sensation) starred in the American Broadcasting Corporation television series *Gidget*.

By then American International Pictures (AIP) had cashed in on the new fashion, producing their genre-making *Beach Party* in 1963. Directed by William Asher, *Beach Party* was the highest-grossing film AIP had made to that date and the company went on to make another six films in the same genre between 1963

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<sup>26</sup> See Bernstein (1970: 25).

and 1968. Nor were they the only company to cash in on the craze – even Elvis Presley was press-ganged into beach films at the time, performing in *Blue Hawaii* (1961), *Girls! Girls! Girls!* (1962) and *Paradise, Hawaiian Style* (1965). These movies also made use of a new style of popular music in their soundtracks, a style that came to be called ‘surf rock’. By 1961 Fender had developed a ‘wet’ spring-reverb effect that afforded a lush, wave-like wash to the electric guitar. Dick Dale (Richard Anthony Monsour) used this effect in combination with own rapid picking style and scales influenced by his Lebanese heritage to produce the seminal surf rock song *Let’s Go Trippin’* (1961). At about the same time the Wilson brothers (Brian, Dennis, and Carl) formed what was to become the quintessential surf-rock band, The Beach Boys, and soon released their debut album, *Surfin’ Safari* (1962). Both surf-rock music and beach-party movies proved to be passing whims – by 1964 the Beach Boys had moved on to far more ambitious compositions and beach-party movies ceased to be made after 1968 – but neither of these fads spoke for (or to) the surfers themselves. For the young enthusiasts who spent long hours off-shore waiting for a wave, for those who drove up and down the western beaches of America looking for surf, or, indeed, for those who chased the perfect break across the globe, this superficial engagement with so all-encompassing a passion must have seemed trite and belittling. Fortunately for the true believers, there were alternatives.

Bruce Brown had begun documenting his own obsession with surfing at about the same time Kathy Kohner was learning to catch a wave. He released a steady stream of low-budget high-intensity surf documentaries between 1958 and 1962 – *Slippery When Wet* (1958), *Surf Crazy* (1959), *Barefoot Adventure* (1960), *Surfing Hollow Days* (1961), and *Waterlogged* (1962). All of these were eventually eclipsed by his around-the-world surfing odyssey *The Endless Summer* (1964) which (after screening for a year in New York at Brown’s expense) found commercial release in 1966, just as surfing was transitioning from popular craze to alternative lifestyle. It can be no coincidence that the cosmic surfer drifted onto the pages of the *Fantastic Four* just as *The Endless Summer* was achieving its first taste of commercial success.

That Stan Lee was trying to connect with the surfing public through his Silver Surfer is obvious. The comic book emerges at the height of the craze and Lee himself used surfing terminology when referring to his creation. In response to reader’s letter in issues 5 and 6 of the first series, Lee refers to the Silver Surfer as a ‘hodaddy’ (*Silver Surfer*, 1.5.64 and 1.6.65). This term had originally been coined (probably from the Spanish *jodido*, meaning ‘tough’ or ‘tricky’) to describe ‘greasers’ who hung out near beaches, but didn’t actually surf, but by the mid-1960s the term had transformed into a slang designation for the surfers them-

selves – see, for example, Bob Denver's song 'Ho Daddy, Surf's Up' in United Artists' *For Those Who Think Young* (1964).

### Unconscious Reception

Part pop-culture referent, part transcendent archetype, the Silver Surfer was an ephemeral fruit born of a tree whose roots extended deep into the Classical influences that had permeated American society in the wake of the post-war college boom. His ship replaced by a surfboard, this new Odysseus traded the terrors of the wine-dark sea for the wonders of an ever-changing cosmos and emerged into a world flooded with Homeric Reception. When the *Silver Surfer* series first launched, James Joyce's *Ulysses*, originally published in 1922, was speaking to a new audience through Joseph Strick's film adaptation. This controversial interpretation of a controversial novel went on to secure an Academy Award nomination for Best Adapted Screenplay in 1967. That same year the supergroup Cream released their *Tales of Brave Ulysses* as the B-side to *Strange Brew*, and in May 1968 the song achieved iconic status after the group was filmed performing it for *The Smothers Brothers Comedy Hour*.<sup>27</sup> The 1960s, it would seem, was the decade for Odysseus ... which brings us back to the issue of Unconscious Reception.

We cannot know if Stan Lee or Jack Kirby or John Buscema consciously modelled the Silver Surfer on the Odyssean proto-type. I have read nothing in the comic books themselves that might indicate such self-awareness – no veiled references, no humorous asides or nods to the reader. The letters pages are equally unenlightening, and interviews given by Stan Lee in the last decades of his life contain little beyond the self-referential myth-making that has come to be a hallmark of the Marvel universe. For Lee, it would seem, the comic book heroes that he created sprang extemporaneously from his own feverish imagination, and yet, for even the most casual observer, this is manifestly nonsense.

Lee did not invent Thor or Hercules. Captain America was a product of the ultra-nationalism that proliferated during the lead-up to the Second World War, while both the Fantastic Four and the X-Men owe much to the pulp-fiction that Lee read as a young man. The legacy of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* is obvious in both the character and resultant storylines of *The Incredible Hulk*. But all this is not to say that the Silver Surfer has been plagiarised from Homer. It is entirely likely that neither Lee nor Kirby nor Buscema ever knew how great their debt to the Classical world was.

A letter from Michael Susko Jr. was published in issue 15 of the first series of *The Silver Surfer* asking Stan Lee if the title of issue 11, "O, Bitter Victory" was original. Susko wrote frequently to Marvel and was, himself, a comic book artist,

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<sup>27</sup> See Schumacher (1993: 107).

and his letter constitutes that sub-genre so fascinating to those of us who study these publications – the insider repartee that populates much of the ‘letters’ pages of Silver Age comic books. ‘I would like to know if “O, Bitter Victory” is a quotation’, Susko asked Lee, ‘If it’s original, congratulations; it’s got a beautiful ring’ (*Silver Surfer*, 1.15.32). Lee claimed credit for the line, answering: ‘Thanks for the congrats, Mike; to the best of our knowledge “O, Bitter Victory” is a Smiley original.’ Susko’s question makes sense in the light of other *Silver Surfer* issue titles. Issue 3, ‘The Power and the Prize’, took its name from the 1956 drama film directed by Henry Koster. Issue 4, ‘The Good, the Bad, and the Uncanny’ was an obvious parody on Sergio Leone’s Spaghetti Western *The Good, the Bad and the Ugly* (1966), while issue 6, ‘Worlds Without End’, was derived from the Christian doxology. Edwin Benson’s short story ‘A World He Never Made’ appeared in issue 25 of *Amazing Stories* (1951) and the title was re-used by Lee for issue 10 of *The Silver Surfer*. So Susko had every reason to suspect that Lee had taken ‘O, Bitter Victory’ from some other source.

We know that Lee liked to reuse his titles as well. ‘A World He Never Made’ would be reused for issue one of *Howard the Duck* in 1976, and by the time that *Silver Surfer* eleven was in print, ‘O, Bitter Victory’ had already appeared as the title for *The Amazing Spider-Man* issue 60 (1968). Lee must have been quite enamoured of ‘O, Bitter Victory’, as it would go on to serve as the title for *Marvel Tales* issue 43 (1973), *Thor* issue 234 (1975), and *The Uncanny X-Men* issue 255 (1989), but, despite Lee’s claims, it is not original. ‘O, Bitter Victory’ comes from Longus’ novel *Daphnis and Chloe* (1.18), probably first published during the 2nd century CE. More specifically, Lee’s exact wording comes from the popular 1896 translation of *Daphnis and Chloe*, commissioned by the Athenian Society in Greece.

It is tempting to imagine Lee leafing through this popular translation of an early pot-boiler (possibly the oldest survivor of its genre) in search of plots for his comic book superheroes. It seems incredible that he could come up with exactly the same title through sheer coincidence. To complicate matters further, though, Lee’s correspondence with Susko finishes with one of those sly nods that seems hard to dismiss. Lee is evasive about the future for Shalla Bal and the *Silver Surfer* until, in a spirit of condolence, he finishes off his letter by writing: ‘but you know what they say – love conquers all!’ (*Silver Surfer*, 1.15.32). Does Lee know that he is quoting here from Vergil’s *Eclogues*, or is it simply that Vergil’s poetry has become so completely embedded in Western culture that the reference itself is disembodied from its source, an aphorism that needs no citation?

## Conclusion

On the weight of it, I think it more likely that Lee had no idea of his debt to the Classical world. I think that the post-war drive to educate America had brought about a number of unexpected results, not least among them a renewed interest in the literature of ancient Greece and Rome. With tens of thousands of college students fuelling demand for new translations, and tens of thousands of college graduates transporting their new-found knowledge into not just the classrooms of America, but also the everyday workplaces, the theatres, cinemas, the bookstores, we should not be surprised to find Neoclassical referents abounding in popular culture.

The immediate impetus for *The Silver Surfer* lay in the pop-culture impulses of the 1960s – the waning of the Peplum film, the rise of the surf lifestyle, and the promise of interplanetary travel made manifest in the Apollo missions. And yet, like the Apollo missions, whose name evoked some Neoclassical memory barely understood in the minds of the general public, even the most ephemeral of these pop-culture impulses drew nourishment from the older, Classical foundations which lay at the heart of the United States. The Silver Surfer was an icon for his day, but he was also the latest in a long line of wayfarers who suffered in their souls, cast adrift upon an endless uncaring sea.

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