

## Lotus Land: The Flight from Pain

Throughout history, returning veterans have endured the pain of grief for dead comrades, along with the physical pain of war wounds. But there is a special pathos when comrades die *after* the war is over. In an epic that shows Odysseus losing *all* his comrades, the first winnowing of the crews at Ismarus is given a fuller appreciation than much greater losses later. Odysseus and his crew become progressively "numbed out" as these blows accumulate.

Odysseus and his squadron have taken heavy losses in their first post-war battle of homecoming, their plundering of Ismarus:

Six benches were left empty in every ship  
that evening when we pulled away from death.  
And this new grief we bore with us to sea:  
our precious lives we had, but not our friends.  
No ship made sail next day until some shipmate  
had raised a cry, three times, for each poor ghost  
unfleshed . . .  
then two long days and nights we lay offshore  
worn out and sick at heart, tasting our grief . . .  
(9:67ff, Fitzgerald)

Ismarus was a real place, north-northeast of Troy on the Thracian coast.<sup>1</sup> But once the flotilla pulls away it is caught in a violent storm and driven completely off the map. Odysseus will not set foot again in the known world until the Phaeacian rowers put him down, sound asleep, on the beach at Ithaca.

Phaeacian Court  
Raid on Ismarus  
➤ Lotus Land  
Cyclops  
King of the Winds  
Deadly Fjord  
Circe  
Among the Dead  
Sirens  
Scylla and Charybdis  
Sun God's Cattle  
Whirlpool  
Calypso  
At Home, Ithaca



Taking the *Odyssey* as an allegory of real homecomings from war, we should not be surprised that the next landfall is on the Land of the Lotus Eaters, who come across as stoned flower children:

[they] showed no will to do us harm, only  
offering the sweet Lotos . . .  
*but those who ate this honeyed plant, the Lotos,*  
*never cared to report, nor to return:*  
*they longed to stay forever, browsing<sup>2</sup> on*  
*that native bloom, forgetful of their homeland.*  
(9:96ff, Fitzgerald; emphasis added)

Odysseus reacts with the moves of a tough disciplinarian, having possibly learned a lesson from letting wine flow at Ismarus:

I drove them . . . wailing, to the ships,  
tied them down under their rowing benches,  
and called the rest: "All hands aboard;  
come, clear the beach and no one taste the Lotos,  
or you lose your hope of home."  
(9:105ff, Fitzgerald)

We shall never know if Homer had some particular narcotic plant in mind, and if so what plant this "*lotus*" was, but his description is clear enough: you get into *lotus* abuse and you lose your homecoming. Forget your pain—forget your homecoming! This is the path to destruction taken by a horrifyingly large number of Vietnam veterans. Chemical attempts to forget with alcohol or drugs—reaching the American Psychiatric Association criteria for dependence or abuse—were sought by 45.6 percent in alcohol and by 8.4 percent in drugs. If a veteran has current PTSD, these rates are higher still, 73.8 percent and 11.3 percent respectively. These data unfortunately lump together all in-country veterans, both combat and noncombat. It is shocking to realize that male civilian non-veterans who are demographically similar to Vietnam combat veterans have a 26 percent lifetime incidence of alcohol dependence or abuse and a 3.4 percent rate of drug dependence or abuse.<sup>3</sup>

The episode with the Lotus Eaters is actually the second time that Homer has suggested the complexity of combat veterans' "substance" use and chemically induced forgetting. We first encounter it during Telemachus' (Odysseus' son's) search for the truth of whether his father is