

The Journey Back To Where You Are: Homer's *Odyssey* as Spiritual Quest

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To Homer, whoever he or she or they may be.

The bridges of the Greeks. We have inherited them but we do not know how to use them. We thought they were intended to have houses built upon them. We have erected skyscrapers on them to which we have ceaselessly added storeys. We no longer know that they are bridges, things made so that we may pass along them, and that by passing along them we go towards God.

—Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*

To arrive where you are, to get from where you are not,

You must go by a way wherein there is no ecstasy.

In order to arrive at what you do not know

You must go by a way which is the way of ignorance.

In order to possess what you do not possess

You must go by the way of dispossession.

In order to arrive at what you are not

You must go through the way in which you are not.

—T. S. Eliot, “East Coker III” (From *Four Quartets*)

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Introduction

Regardless of whether one is a unitarian (one composer for all) or communitarian (a number of different composers over a long period of time), typical Homeric scholarship is rather like the blind men describing the elephant: the historian focuses on reconstructing the events, the geographer on identifying all the islands named, the linguist on dating the word usage, the literary critic on the imagery and metaphors, the folklorist on comparing with other sagas and epics. But these are all self-referential: there is a need to get outside the box and see the Homeric epics in a larger context. The *Odyssey* is not about the *Odyssey*; it's about the odyssey, “the return from darkness and death to light and life.” I of course have my own interpretation, and I hope through this book to open up this miraculous poem to become again the guiding light for peoples’ lives that it once was.

But first I would encourage you to read (or reread) the *Odyssey* (and the *Iliad*)—why deny yourself the pleasure? Forget all the commentary for now and just read them for the enjoyment. Don’t let anyone’s interpretations, including mine, influence you. The deeper meanings, especially of the *Odyssey*, will I hope become apparent later on. I suggest the (updated) Samuel Butler translation of the *Odyssey* since I think it offers a good balance of scholarship and poetry (and it's in the public domain). It's available online at the site of the Center for Hellenic Studies, chs.harvard.edu. There are also any number of excellent print translations available.

It should also be said that I am aware of the irony of using the rational part of the mind to produce evidence and quote authorities in an analytical approach to convince other rational minds of the existence of transcendent truths. But then I’m no Homer.

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Chapter 1: An Allegorical Tradition

1§1 If, as Alfred North Whitehead says, all Western philosophy consists of a series of footnotes to Plato,¹ it could also be said that all Western literature is a series of spinoffs from Homer. The *Odyssey* along with the *Iliad*, cast a long shadow even in the time of Athens' Golden Age, roughly the 2nd half of the 5th century BCE, and their influence is still felt today in poetry, novels, theatre, and films. They have also been a rich mine of material for archeologists, historians, linguists and technologists of different stripes, not to mention classicists. That this should be so shows their perennial appeal, but the fact that they are now the property of the academics means that most writing about them consists of slicing thinner and thinner bits of the body to place under a microscope. It cuts off our ability to see them as many ancient Greeks would: as a way of understanding the divided nature of humans and a guide to returning to the "native land" of our true selves. The *Odyssey* could be heard as a rousing adventure story on one level, and as a timeless metaphor for a spiritual quest on another. Werner Jaeger says as much in his classic *Paideia*²:

Art has a limitless power of converting the human soul—a power which the Greeks called psychagogia. For art alone possesses the two essentials of educational influence—universal significance and immediate appeal.

1§2 And there is also no doubt that the immediate appeal of these epics was originally in the hearing rather than the reading, as they were presented by professional rhapsodes who performed them from memory. This of course required a prodigious capacity—the *Iliad* contains about 15,000 lines, the *Odyssey* 12,000—all but incomprehensible to those of us who can barely remember our passwords. But it also required a capacity for sustained attention on

1. Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality, (The Gifford Lectures)*. Simon & Schuster. 1979

2. Jaeger, Werner. *Paideia: The Ideals of Greek Culture, vol. 1*. Oxford. 1945, p. 36

the part of those who did the listening. It's probably safe to say that hearing it spoken or sung in the company of others on some special feast day had the result of its going deeper into one's being than would reading it in solitary (especially if it's being read with the expectation that you will produce an essay on it). Listening with attention is an act of the heart; reading often stops with the mind. It's the difference between reading a Shakespeare play and attending a performance of it, between reading a musical score and hearing it played. The Greek word *kleos*, which means the glory associated with the hero, is derived from the verb *kluein*, which means 'to hear.' Singing the acts of valor brings glory to the hero; the "hearer" is also enabled to participate in that glory. It is the job of the rhapsode to communicate the emotional impact of the story, as evidenced by the description given by Ion in Plato's dialogue of the same name:

How vivid to me, Socrates, is this part of your proof! For I will tell you without reserve: when I relate a tale of woe, my eyes are filled with tears; and when it is of fear or awe, my hair stands on end with terror, and my heart leaps. (Ion, 535c)³

1§3 And he must be aware of the effect his recitation has on his audience (although his motives are not purely artistic):

Yes, very fully aware: for I look down upon them from the platform and see them at such moments crying and turning awestruck eyes upon me and yielding to the amazement of my tale. For I have to pay the closest attention to them; since, if I set them crying, I shall laugh myself because of the money I take, but if they laugh, I myself shall cry because of the money I lose. (Ion, 535e)

3. Plato. *Ion*. trans. WMR Lamb, Perseus.edu site.

1§4 But of course today most people know the *Odyssey* from reading it, and dissecting it is possible only because of reading. This is a major force in its becoming a favorite topic for academic analysis, which allows for forward and backward references, minutely looking for structure, themes, patterns—an approach that is not possible in hearing alone. The use of these deductive tools of the discursive mind, which began perhaps with Aristotle, can prevent us from understanding the *Odyssey* inductively as a guiding myth showing the steps involved in the spiritual journey. I hope with this book to return to usefulness the inductive approach. It was written for the person who has limited or long-ago familiarity with the *Odyssey*, and I would certainly encourage you to read it again before and/or after reading this work. I would also just mention that we will be looking at the same episodes and characters from different points of view, so certain passages may be repeated.

The Uses of Allegory

1§5 The use of myth, parable, fable, allegory or metaphor has a long history in wisdom literature, to which I believe the *Odyssey* belongs. Allegory has a way of bypassing the strictly analytical mind and showing correspondences between universals and particulars in a way that a logical exposition and literal interpretation never could. It uses the constraints of stories in time and space to point to truths which exist outside them; the realm of *doing* to illuminate the realm of *being*. Much has been written on this topic and I won't attempt to summarize it here, save for a quote given by the British psychiatrist Maurice Nicoll in his book *The New Man*⁴, an analysis of a number of New Testament parables.

The idea behind all sacred writing is to convey a higher meaning than the literal words contain, the truth of which must be seen by Man internally. This higher,

4. Nicoll, Maurice. *The New Man*. Shambala Publications. 1981

concealed, inner, or esoteric, meaning, cast in the words and sense-images of ordinary usage, can only be grasped by the understanding, and it is exactly here that the first difficulty lies in conveying higher meaning to Man. A person's literal level of understanding is not necessarily equal to grasping psychological meaning. To understand literally is one thing; to understand psychologically is another. (p. 2)

1§6 For most of its existence, the *Odyssey* has been understood psychologically by many commentators as a metaphor or allegory for the process by which the fragmented soul seeks its return to a state of unity. This tradition, developed most clearly by the Neo-Platonists,⁵ is well-documented by Robert Lamberton in his book *Homer the Theologian*.⁶ He says, for example, "It is difficult to say whether there was ever a time when the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* were *not* viewed as possessing this potential to reveal meanings beyond the obvious." (p. 21)

1§7 Initial evidence for an allegorical interpretation comes from the work itself: the explicit similes and metaphors⁷, but also all the references to things hidden and concealed (e.g. Calypso), the mirroring of events between gods and humans, the symbolic names of some of

5. That this kind of interpretation should have taken hold among the neoplatonists is not without irony, of course, given Plato's famous takedown of Homeric myth in the *Republic* 2:377ff. But as I've suggested in my essay [The Ideal of the Odyssey](#), I don't see this as a blanket dismissal of Homer; rather it applies primarily to protecting the young citizens of the Republic who cannot yet distinguish between allegory and fact. See also T. Addey, *Myth—The Final Phase of Platonic Education*, PrometheusTrust.co.uk

6. Lamberton, Robert. *Homer the Theologian: Neoplatonist Allegorical Reading and the Growth of the Epic Tradition*. University of California. 1989.

7. As the first works of literature in the West, *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* abound with first examples. The first simile: Describing the anger of Apollo at the mistreatment of his priest Chryses, he says, "The arrows rattled on the shoulders of the angry god as he moved, and his coming was like the night." (*Iliad*, I:45) The first simile in the *Odyssey*: "she bound on her glittering golden sandals, imperishable, with which she can fly like the wind over land or sea." (i:97) And as far as I can tell, the first conversation between a husband and wife about rearranging the furniture: (*Odyssey*, xxiii:175ff.) It provides implicit paradigms for much of what later became explicit in philosophy: the analogy of state and soul (Plato), the analogy of the soul as a chariot (Plato), the hierarchy/continuum of love to strife (Empedocles), even the journey by chariot to the heavens (Parmenides).

the characters, e.g. Antinoos ('*against the mind*'), Alkinoos ('*strength of mind*'), all point to a work which operates at once on the level of the universal as well as the particular. I believe for Homer that metaphors were a divine gift from the muses, the equivalent of one of his high-flying eagles that show the will of the gods, before they were captured and tamed by literary critics and later poets.

1§8 The central metaphor used in the parables of Christ is that of rebirth, *anagennese*. The central metaphor in the *Odyssey* is *nostos*, the return home, about which we will have more to say later. “Psychologically,” to use Nicoll’s term (that is, at the level of the psyche, or soul) they both mean the same thing. Christ is crucified and taken for dead, but he rises on the third day, born again. This represents our own need to die to our small selves—our egos—so that we can be born to our spiritual selves. Odysseus also goes to Hades and receives instruction about how to gain his way home. He too becomes “twice-born.”

1§9 The word “allegory,” made up of two other good Greek words, *allos* + *agora*, describes the act of speaking (to the assembly in the agora) of something other than the nominal topic; using a kind of code, if you will. Plato, who had a love/hate relationship with Homer, recognized the power of this approach and saw it as a reason to ban Homer from his Ideal state, or at least from the education of its children:

But Hera's fetterings by her son and the hurling out of heaven of Hephaestus by his father when he was trying to save his mother from a beating, and the battles of the gods in Homer's verse are things that we must not admit into our city either wrought in allegory or without allegory. For the young are not able to distinguish what is and what is not allegory, but whatever opinions are taken into the mind at that age are wont to prove indelible and unalterable. For which

reason, maybe, we should do our utmost that the first stories that they hear should be so composed as to bring the fairest lessons of virtue to their ears.”

Plato, [Republic](#), II 378d

1§10 (If this in fact represents the view of Socrates, it is one of any number of ironies associated with his life that he should be condemned and executed for teaching atheism and corrupting the youth of Athens.)

1§11 Although it’s not made explicit, a case can be made for the idea that Plato avoided the allegorical approach only for children: *the young are not able to distinguish what is and what is not allegory*. His use of myth and allegory in his own works suggest that he thinks they can be effective tools for those whose minds have been trained in the art of *dialectic*, and can operate on different levels at the same time.

1§12 Another key reading—positive this time—of the allegorical power of the *Odyssey* as a spiritual quest is to be found in *The Enneads*⁸ of Plotinus, a neo-Platonist who lived in the third century CE. He realizes that it is a metaphor for the inward journey, and that the Fatherland, the source of our being, is within:

“Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland”: this is the soundest counsel. But what is this flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he commands the flight from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso — not content to linger for all the pleasure offered to his eyes and all the delight of sense filling his days.

The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is The Father.

8. Plotinus. *The Enneads*, trans. S. MacKenna. Penguin. 1991, p. 54.

What then is our course, what the manner of our flight? This is not a journey for the feet; the feet bring us only from land to land; nor need you think of coach or ship to carry you away; all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use. (I:6:8)

1§13 Recently however the focus of commentary has shifted to taking a more literal interpretation as a document of history and geography, perhaps inspired by the location and excavation of what may be the historical city of Troy. So in addition to the primary Homeric question⁹—were these works composed by Homer or someone else named Homer?—this raises another: was Homer a journalist or seer? Was he just giving an account, however embellished, of events that actually occurred several hundred years before he lived (taken to be the 8th century BC), or is he giving shape to the universal process in which humans shed what is just limited and personal in order to reunite with that which is divine and universal within them? Without the acknowledgement that the *Odyssey* can be read as a true account of the soul's return to itself, it becomes only literature.

1§14 Another factor that has contributed to this literal approach was the work performed by Milman Parry and his successor Albert Lord in researching the oral storytelling techniques of the *guslar* of the former Yugoslavia beginning in the 1930s. These were the equivalent of the Greek rhapsodes, who could compose and perform very long verse-based heroic tales from memory, especially when supplied with sufficient quantities of cigarettes, coffee and wine. (One thinks of the Homeric alter-ego Demodokos and the careful instructions given at 8:65-72,

9. No doubt the “Homeric Question” will never be answered, and that’s a good thing. Let’s put them all to rest. What we have been given is a magical text, a guide to reintegrating our souls; does it really matter who wrote it when? It is rather like people who think we could understand Shakespeare better if we knew about his relationship with his wife. Perhaps we should take Homer at his word that it is the work of a divine Muse, for whom he was just a mouthpiece, a view seemingly shared by Plato (*Ion*, 533ff)

on how to keep him similarly well-supplied.) By recording and transcribing some of these epics, they were able to identify common recurring themes, phrases and structures which served as aids to memory. This made for a very insightful analysis, outlined primarily in Lord's book *Singer of Tales* (Harvard University Press, 1960. A second edition was reissued in 2000 which contains a CD of some of their recordings of the *guslar*.) But I believe this is an autopsy at the expense of the living work of art. The technique is not the inspiration. While no doubt there are some universal principles at work regarding themes and how the individual scenes are composed and structured, from what I have seen, the tales sung by their *guslar* can't hold a candle to Homer. They are accomplished craftsmen; Homer is conduit for the Muse.

1§15 So as suggested in the Introduction, I hope this work will help revive the status of the *Odyssey* as an allegory which still has meaning for people who sense that something is missing from a life built just around material comfort and pleasures. Not that there's anything wrong with that, except when, as with the suitors, we think that that's all there is. Homer can help us out of this limited view, if we can learn how to read him allegorically. As Simone Weil says in her collection of thoughts given the name *Metaxu* from the early 1940s:

The bridges of the Greeks. We have inherited them but we do not know how to use them. We thought they were intended to have houses built upon them. We have erected skyscrapers on them to which we have ceaselessly added storeys. We no longer know that they are bridges, things made so that we may pass along them, and that by passing along them we go towards God.¹⁰

10. Weil, Simone. *Gravity and Grace*, trans. E. Crawford & M. von der Ruhr. Routledge. 1999, p. 146

The Spiritual Quest

1§16 In the essay [The Ideal of the Odyssey](#), I looked at Homer's poem as an example of the Hero's Quest myth, whose main qualities are succinctly summarized in Joseph Campbell's *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*¹¹:

A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

1§17 This is a broad outline and can apply to a wide range of myths, from Theseus and the Minotaur to Jason and the Argonauts—to Jack and the Beanstalk. It has a universal and enduring appeal; who among us has not dreamt of going to a land of supernatural wonder and winning a victory over fabulous forces? And on one level, this description fits the experience of Odysseus: he leaves the common day of Ithaca, albeit unwillingly, and goes to Troy where he is involved with an epic battle involving gods and other heroes. His *metis* or craftiness in creating the wooden horse brings about the Greek victory, and he returns to Ithaca with enhanced powers.

1§18 But as a way of understanding the *Odyssey* this definition is necessary but not sufficient. I believe it also describes a spiritual quest; that along with the *Iliad* it describes a journey as Empedocles might put it, from multiplicity and Strife back to unity and Love: the reunification of the soul's *polis*, or state, under its rightful ruler. It is a parable for the journey of the human soul from confusion and disorder back to an Edenic state of integration and happiness. What Odysseus finds at the end of his journey is “my very self,” his “what-I-am,” as he once again makes whole the state of Ithaca. The real hero doesn't conquer monsters and

11. Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton University Press. 1968, p. 30

enemies; he conquers himself. (If you already feel like you've conquered yourself, and live in the sunlight of perpetual love, then you need read no further.) So in order to understand this inner journey, we have to at least entertain the possibility that we have within us our own "region of supernatural wonder," at once universal and particular, which can be attained by making the right choices. (It's also helpful to have a goddess for a champion to help you see the right path, and even a god who hates you to give you motivation.)

1§19 For this kind of spiritual quest the hero's myth can be supplemented by quoting (in abbreviated form) the four "fundamental doctrines" identified by Aldous Huxley¹² regarding the Perennial Philosophy:

First: the phenomenal world of matter and of individualized consciousness—the world of things and animals and men and even gods—is the manifestation of a Divine Ground within which all partial realities have their being, and apart from which they would be nonexistent.

Second: human beings are capable not merely of knowing about the Divine Ground by inference; they can also realize its existence by a direct intuition, superior to discursive reasoning.

Third: man possesses a double nature, a phenomenal ego and an eternal Self, which is the inner man, the spirit, the spark of divinity within the soul.

Fourth: man's life on earth has only one end and purpose: to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine Ground.

12. Huxley, Aldous. Introduction to *The Song of God: Bhagavad Gita*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and C. Isherwood. Mentor Books. 1951, p. 13

1§20 So if we are to believe Huxley, the goal of coming to realize this “eternal Self,” of uniting the soul with the Soul, is the only reason all humans have ever existed. It is our various colorful, sorrowful, laughable, maddening, pathetic and heart-breaking failures to do this that produce history. Or as Alkinoos rather off-handedly puts it in Scroll 8:

The gods arranged all this, and they wove the fate of doom for mortals, so that future generations might have something to sing about. (viii:579-580)

1§21 The fact that the gods may have arranged it, however, does not let us off the hook. We still need to play our part in the song, while simultaneously becoming aware of the song and learning to sing it ourselves. So for the spiritual hero, there is an extra dimension to the quest: *to identify himself with his eternal Self and so to come to unitive knowledge of the Divine*. This quest has been expressed by many different people in many different traditions over many centuries, but those who wish to can see the common thread: from Strife to Love (Empedocles), from becoming to Being (Parmenides), from the shadows to the sunlight (Plato), from the many to the One (Plotinus). It is, as we shall see, a *nostos*—“a return from darkness and death to light and life,” and although it is often portrayed as a journey, as Plotinus says, “It is not a journey for the feet.” It is an inner transformation, a return to a Self that is always there and does not change; a “journey back to where you are.”

1§22 Another model for this quest is made more explicit by Plato in the *Republic*. He is arguing for the role of philosophers as kings, since they have the unique capacity for knowing “the Good,” *agathon*. When asked to define the Good, he says he necessarily cannot, but offers to describe “the child of the Good,” and goes on to use three different analogies: that of the Sun, the Divided Line, and the Allegory of the Cave. The Divided Line describes a hierarchy in space, and the Cave Allegory describes a progression in time, but all the analogies have to do with freeing ourselves from the illusions of the senses and the mechanical mind. Here we will

focus on the Cave Allegory as a way of describing the journey to the Good, and as a way of understanding this quest. This journey can be daunting, since it requires us to admit to possibilities beyond the usual scope of our thoughts, but as a way of visualizing the Good—the end of this quest—the effort is worth it. (If you know Homer you likely also know Plato, so please forgive this condensation.)

1§23 Socrates describes a cave which houses people trapped in it since birth, their heads chained so they can only look forward to a wall on which shadows appear, move, and disappear. Having no other frame of reference, the prisoners take them to be real, but only because they cannot turn around and see a source of firelight and a parade of shapes which are casting the shadows, being carried by other people who are hidden behind a short wall. After describing the pains that would be experienced by one who was suddenly dragged from this situation and forced to look upon the actual sun, Socrates describes the “education” of one who takes a more systematic path:

And at first he would most easily discern the shadows and, after that, the likenesses or reflections in water of men and other things, and later, the things themselves, and from these he would go on to contemplate the appearances in the heavens and heaven itself, more easily by night, looking at the light of the stars and the moon, than by day the sun and the sun's light.”

“Of course.”

“And so, finally, I suppose, he would be able to look upon the sun itself and see its true nature, not by reflections in water or phantasms of it in an alien setting, but in and by itself in its own place.” (Republic 7:516a-b)

1§24 At this point the former prisoner would be able to transcend his purely sense-perception and use his reason to identify the sun as the source of all that is in the visible world, and to realize that his previous idea of reality was a pale derivation of it. In Huxley's formulation, the sun is the Divine Ground, the men in the cave are the individual egos, deluded by the limitations of sense, but also capable of knowing the sun directly through a systematic process of "dis-illusionment." The prisoner having seen the sun, Socrates says, "that he would feel with Homer and 'greatly prefer while living on earth to be serf of another, a landless man,'" ¹³ than return to his former state of ignorance. (Socrates goes on to describe what would happen if the escaped prisoner were to return and try to convince his former comrades of their delusion: it's not pretty.) In order to overcome this ignorance one must overcome the limitations of the senses, and then overcome the limitations of the discursive mind. When this happens, and one sees the Good itself:

...it must needs point us to the conclusion that this is indeed the cause for all ... that is right and beautiful, giving birth in the visible world to light, and the author of light and itself in the intelligible world being the authentic source of truth and reason.... (Republic 7:517c)

1§25 By quoting Homer, Socrates makes an implicit connection between the prisoners in the cave; that is "us" and the "all the dead that have perished." Achilles's attachment to glory or *kleos* has fated him to "live" in this lightless state of ignorance—Odysseus still has a chance to escape.

1§26 As has been pointed out, this allegorical interpretation has a long history among Western philosophers. Because, however, this idea is so alien to most people in the modern era, in particular the role played by the senses and the "mechanical mind," I will be drawing on

13. This is what Achilles tells Odysseus in the Underworld, *Odyssey* xi:489

the texts of other traditions as well, primarily the *Bhagavad-Gita* from India.¹⁴ This remarkable work, traditionally ascribed to the sage Vyasa, provides a clear and unmetaphoric description of the stages and obstacles present in undertaking the spiritual quest. Now a danger in quoting from any texts related to this quest, particularly from a different tradition, is that they can seem so remote from our actual lives. At best we can think that this was just something available only to some wise people a long time ago; at worst we can, like the suitors, stop believing that such a quest and reunification is possible. Even the *Odyssey* itself is so highly metaphorical that we can fail to see its real meaning, rooted as we tend to be in the literalism of the material world. But I hope to show that this is our odyssey also, today, here and now, one on which we need to embark to save our own *psyche*.

1§27 To begin then, we have this passage from Chapter 2, in which Krishna, an embodiment of the Self, speaks to Arjuna, his student, which is particularly apt for the *Odyssey*:

Even a mind that knows the path

Can be dragged from the path:

The senses are so unruly.

But he controls the senses

And recollects the mind

And fixes it on me.

I call him illumined.

Thinking about sense-objects

Will attach you to sense-objects;

14. This is not to argue for a direct transmission of principles as laid out by Thomas McEvilly in his masterwork *The Shape of Ancient Thought* (Allworth Press, 2001) although he makes a very strong case. I believe these are universal principles that would appear more or less identical in different traditions.

Grow attached, and you become addicted;
 Thwart your addiction, it turns to anger;
 Be angry, and you confuse your mind;
 Confuse your mind, you forget the lesson of experience;
 Forget experience, you lose discrimination;
 Lose discrimination, and you miss life's only purpose.
 When he has no lust, no hatred,
 A man walks safely among things of lust and hatred.¹⁵

1§28 At the end of the *Iliad* the soul of Odysseus has disintegrated into a “phenomenal ego” in both senses of that word. By the time Troy is sacked, he has become glory-seeking, greedy, bloodthirsty and vengeful, traits which although perhaps different in degree, are not different in kind from any other ego. I’m not talking here about the ego in the Freudian sense; rather that sense of limitation and isolation that keeps us from seeing our common humanity with others. And it's not some abstract literary device of an ego—I’m talking about yours and mine, and the odyssey we need to make to let go of it and to effect our own reunification.

1§29 If we allow it to, this search for the Fatherland can become a guiding force in how we live our lives; how we treat our neighbors, people with different opinions, even other drivers. People we think are not as good as we are, or are better than we are. Whether we do work we think is beneath us. Whether we make decisions that are based on timeless, true, universal principles, or ones that are limited, temporary, self-serving. Whether we always need to feel like we are winning, being one-up, if only in our own minds. As we watch Odysseus shed his ego, and its obsession with winning, we can learn how to shed our own.

15. Vyasa. *The Song of God: Bhagavad-Gita*, trans. Swami Prabhavananda and Christopher Isherwood. Mentor Books, 1951

1§30 Although it is not strictly a description of a journey, one more example from the Indian tradition can offer us insights into the *Odyssey*. *The Law Code of Manu*, and its articulation of the “Ten-Point Law for the Twice-Born Man,” states,

Twice-born men...must always observe the ten-point law diligently. Resolve, forbearance, self-control, refraining from theft, performing purifications, mastering the organs, understanding, learning, truthfulness, and suppressing anger: these are the ten points of the Law.¹⁶

1§31 Odysseus has become a “twice-born man” upon his return from the Underworld, and has varying degrees of success with adhering to these qualities. It is his struggles with them that give the *Odyssey* its drama. We will be looking more closely especially at the law of “mastering the organs,” which I take to mean the organs of sense, but by the end of his journey, with truthfulness and suppressing anger being the last, I would say he has succeeded in overcoming all of them.

16. Manu. *The Law Code of Manu*, translated by Patrick Olivelle. Oxford. 2004, p. 105

Chapter II: The Homeric Epics

2§1 As stated in the Introduction, I would hope that you have read or will read the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* for your own pleasure before reading my (or any) commentary on them. Since this is unlikely to be the case for everyone, here are brief overviews of each.

The *Iliad*

2§2 The *Iliad* is a description of a world—and a soul—at war. Its first word is *mēnis*, 'rage', or 'wrath', and that sets the tone for the whole poem. It is a world ruled by anger and conflict. Simone Weil¹⁷ puts it this way: “The true hero, the true center, of the *Iliad* is force. Force employed by man, force that enslaves man, force before which man’s flesh shrinks away.” When the “Greeks” are not fighting the Trojans they are fighting among themselves. It is a martial and masculine ethos, with soldiers from both sides striving for *kleos* or 'glory', and in which women for the most part are just booty, in both senses of the word. It is a world of bloody hand-to-hand combat that Homer describes in great detail, and in which it would seem that one way to obtain *kleos* for oneself is to be killed by a great hero.

2§3 The situation is this: Paris, aka Alexandros, a son of Priam, king of Troy, believes that Aphrodite, goddess of love, has given him the right to marry Helen, queen of Sparta and generally acknowledged to be the most beautiful woman in the world. Unfortunately, she is already married to King Menelaus, and after he learns she has run off he mounts a campaign along with his brother Agamemnon among various Greek tribes to retrieve her. (There is no “Greece” at this point, and the fighters are known variously as the Argives, the Achaeans, or the Danaans. This is where the “thousand ships” come in.) They are visited by bad luck from

17. Weil, Simone. *The Iliad, or The Poem of Force*, in *War and the Iliad*, trans. Mary McCarthy. New York Review Books. 2005, p. 3

the beginning, but eventually do lay siege to Troy for nine years. The gods are taking sides and getting more involved, and the whole situation is deteriorating into chaos. From a thematic viewpoint, Sparta has become dis-integrated because of the absence of its queen, as has Ithaca due to the absence of its king Odysseus.

2§4 The *Iliad* begins in the ninth year of the war with little progress on either side, and tensions are running high. The story actually opens not with a battle between the Trojans and the Greeks, but with a conflict between Agamemnon and one Chryses, a priest of Apollo whose daughter has been kidnapped by Agamemnon as a spoil of war. Agamemnon refuses to release her, even when looking at a very large ransom, and Chryses invokes the wrath of Apollo to punish the Greeks. This Apollo does by killing them in large numbers until Agamemnon finally agrees to release the captive daughter, but only on the condition that he be reimbursed by receiving Briseis, the captive woman of Achilles. Otherwise he would be dishonored you see, and maintaining one's honor is the most important thing. Achilles is forced to capitulate, but since *he* now feels dishonored he withdraws from the fighting— although he does stay in the Greek camp along with his best friend Patroklos. The almost superhuman rage of Achilles is the dominant theme permeating the *Iliad* and he eventually rejoins the fighting in order to avenge the killing of Patroklos by Hector, another son of Priam and the best of the Trojan warriors. Achilles prevails, leaving Hector's widow and orphan son behind, and the *Iliad* ends with Hector's funeral. So the tragedy begins in rage and ends in tears, an all-too-predictable course of events. Of course if you are Greek, you have won glory, you are victorious, and the normal state of affairs is then to steal all the treasure, to sell the women into slavery, and kill all the men so there can be no reprisals. This constituted "justice." As Simone Weil puts it:

What they want is, in fact, everything. For booty, all the riches of Troy; for their bonfires, all the palaces, temples, houses; for slaves, all the women and children; for corpses, all the men.¹⁸

2§5 It is a tale of the unchecked ego trying to destroy all that is good in men, to reduce his being to matter, to death. But every now and then against this bleak background a moment of humanity appears, and stands out the more strongly because of its contrast. Again to quote Weil:

A monotonous desolation would result if it were not for those few luminous moments, scattered here and there throughout the poem, those brief, celestial moments in which man possesses his soul.¹⁹

2§6 There is a famous and touching scene in Scroll VI between Hector and his wife Andromache in which she implores him not to fight, since she knows how it will probably end: “*Nay, Hector, thou art to me father and queenly mother, [430] thou art brother, and thou art my stalwart husband. Come now, have pity, and remain here on the wall, lest thou make thy child an orphan and thy wife a widow.*” (VI:429-32)²⁰ Hector reaches to embrace his infant son, who cries out at the sight of Hector’s great helmet, causing them all to laugh. It is the only laughter in this otherwise grim and violent landscape, a moment made all the more “celestial” in that involves the “enemy.”

2§7 Thus it should be said that Homer studiously avoids taking sides in this conflict: he just wants to sing a good song. (Weil: “*One is barely aware that the poet is a Greek and not a Trojan.*”) And he does so in spades. There are good guys and bad guys on both sides. Everyone is

18. Weil. op. cit., p. 16

19. Weil, op. cit., p. 27

20. Homer. *Iliad*, trans. S. Butler, from the Center for Hellenic Studies site.

praised, and when they need to be criticized he puts the words in someone else's mouth.

(Achilles to Agamemnon: “*Heavy with wine, with the face of a dog but the heart of a deer...*” (I:24))

2§8 The *Iliad* has also been the subject of allegorical interpretation, although not the same amount as the *Odyssey*. Proclus of Athens (412-485CE), sometimes called the Successor, since he followed Plato as head of the Academy (albeit some centuries later), offered an interpretation of the forces that bring about this kind of conflict.

The myths want to indicate, I believe, through Helen, the whole of that beauty that has to do with the sphere in which things come to be and pass away and that is the product of the demiurge. It is over this beauty that eternal war rages among souls, until the more intellectual are victorious over the less rational forms of life and return hence to the place from which they came.²¹

2§9 To this, Robert Lamberton adds: “Helen, then, is worldly beauty, the fragmented, imperfect copy of the form of the beautiful inhabiting the material world. The implication is that it is this beauty that entices souls (i.e., the Greeks) to leave their true home and to enter into a mode of existence for which war provides the most apt metaphor.”

2§10 Odysseus himself remains an important but background figure in this conflict. He is included in all matters related to strategy and also fights in the battles themselves, but the storyline really belongs to Achilles and Patroklos and Hector. They typify the Greek ideal of warfare and of *kleos*—Achilles chooses to die young and achieve immortal glory rather than return home after the war. They rely on the brute force form of combat ruled by the god Ares, while Odysseus is aligned with the more strategically-oriented Athena. And of course it is Odysseus who has the last word, as we shall see.

21. Quoted in Lamberton, *op. cit.*, p. 199-200. Lamberton goes on to mention several other allusions to the *Iliad* in the neoplatonic literature. I would just say that it would no doubt take an Athenian to think that the Greeks represented “the more intellectual over the less rational” Trojans.

2§11 Unfortunately, we don't have an a full account detailing the outward journey of Odysseus to Troy. In the *Odyssey* we hear from Agamemnon (now in the underworld—he was killed by his wife and her lover upon his return from Troy, and mourned by few), that it took a long time to convince Odysseus to join the rest of the Greeks²², and there are other stories that detail his attempts to portray himself as mad in order to obtain a “psychiatric deferment.” But as he appears in the *Iliad*, he is a more-than-willing participant in the mayhem and slaughter. He is depicted as a brave and skilled soldier, but it is his *mētis* or craftiness that is his main asset. Although the incident does not appear in the *Iliad*, it was his idea for the wooden horse full of Greek soldiers, which allowed them to penetrate the Trojan walls and finally sack the city. It should be said that this was seen by many as a betrayal of the Greek ethos of *mano a mano* combat, using as it did trickery and subterfuge.

2§12 From a thematic point of view however, we can assume that this journey involves the loss of his “fatherly” unified nature in the Eden of Ithaca, and its replacement with the ego, the progression made by us all as we move from childhood to adulthood, from innocence to knowledge. We are not aware of the change—the fall—because to the ego it feels like we are gaining something, that we are winning, when in fact we are losing our ability, like children, to “walk safely among things of lust and hatred.” As it was with Odysseus, it is a movement from love to desire, and we will have much more to say about this later.

2§13 The *Iliad* is still held by many to be the superior of the two works, perhaps starting with the faint praise of Longinus in *On the Sublime* where he says:

22. “It was a whole month ere we could resume our voyage, for we had hard work to persuade Odysseus to come with us.” (xxiv:119)

...in the *Odyssey* Homer may be likened to a sinking sun, whose grandeur remains without its intensity. He does not in the *Odyssey* maintain so high a pitch as in those poems of *Ilium*.

2§14 And of course its setting of violence and war, its simplistic value system of survival and victory and glory, its appeal to the ego are universal themes that unfortunately have been constants throughout history and continue today. More subtle and problematic are the themes of what happens after the war: how we live our lives, how we find purpose beyond killing the person in front of us, how we find an identity beyond that of the glory and pain of soldiering. The moments in which men “possess their soul” are much more plentiful in the *Odyssey*, but are easier to miss since the background in which they are set is not as black. This remembering of the soul is what the *Odyssey* addresses, and while it has its own share of cinematic excitement, it takes on these deeper questions of identity, of what it means to be a spiritual being having a human experience.

The *Odyssey*

2§15 We will be engaging a much closer reading of the *Odyssey* in pages to come, but again for those who may not have read it, an overview is in order. It is very different in tone and themes from the *Iliad* which feeds the ongoing debate about its authorship, many claiming that it could not have been “written” by the same person, and some suggesting, beginning with Samuel Butler, that its author was a woman. We won’t step into that debate other than to say that it obviously represents a much more human—as opposed to strictly male—document. There are fully drawn female characters, and the virtues and pleasures of home and hospitality (*xenia*) are much more prevalent. It has its share of violence, but does not have violence as its subject.

2§16 For those who really want the short course, I offer this summary from Aristotle's

Poetics:

The story of the *Odyssey* is quite short. A man is for many years away from home and his footsteps are dogged by Poseidon and he is all alone. Moreover, affairs at home are in such a state that his estate is being wasted by suitors and a plot laid against his son, but after being storm-tossed he arrives himself, reveals who he is, and attacks them, with the result that he is saved and destroys his enemies. That is the essence, the rest is episodes. (1455b)²³

2§17 The situation at the outset: Odysseus, king of Ithaca, through a combination of bad luck (the anger of the sea god Poseidon), and, let's face it, his own stupidity and that of his crew, has been absent from Ithaca for another nine years and counting. He's currently being held in luxurious captivity on the island of Ogygia by the goddess Calypso who fulfills all his desires and even promises him immortality. But he spends his days weeping and wishing to return to Ithaca. On Ithaca, his wife Penelope is surrounded by 'haughty suitors' who are trying to convince her that Odysseus is dead and will not return, and that she should marry one of them. Meanwhile they have also taken up residence in the palace and are devouring all the livestock and drinking all the wine. Her son with Odysseus, Telemachus, who has never known his father, is coming of age at twenty-one, but doesn't have the authority to expel the suitors. Under their influence, he himself has come to doubt that Odysseus is alive, but is at a loss to know how to handle this situation.

2§18 Enter the gods. Although you might not think it sometimes, Odysseus has a champion in the goddess Athena, and one day she suggests to her father Zeus that Odysseus has suffered enough and should be allowed to return home. Zeus, who has been musing on how much

23. Aristotle. *Poetics*. trans. W.H. Fyfe on the [Perseus site](#).

worse humans make things for themselves than they need to, tells her to go ahead and do what she thinks necessary. She proposes that the messenger god Hermes be sent to Ogygia to tell Calypso to release Odysseus, and she will go to Ithaca and start Telemachus on his path to knowledge and manhood. Which she does, and the story begins.

2§19 One of the more sophisticated aspects of the *Odyssey* is that it is told out of sequence, with the account of Odysseus' trials and temptations, the parts with which most people are familiar and which chronologically would come first, told in flashback. It consists of twenty-four "scrolls," usually broken down into six sets of four with an overall theme:

1-4. Telemachy—Athena visits Telemachus on Ithaca and tells him he should go on a sea voyage himself to some of his father's ex-comrades in search of news about him. After failing to convince the suitors that they should leave his mother alone, he takes a ship and goes first to Pylos to meet Nestor, and then onto Sparta to meet with Menelaus and Helen herself. He is treated like a prince—which of course he is—and gets to observe the gracious functioning of intact kingdoms, but does not get definitive news about Odysseus. The suitors learn of his departure and hatch a plot to ambush and kill him upon his return.

5-8. Hermes goes to Ogygia and tells Calypso to free Odysseus, which she does grudgingly. Odysseus builds a raft and sets sail, but is spotted by Poseidon, god of the sea, who is angry at Odysseus and raises a storm, leaving Odysseus almost drowned. He washes up on the shores of the island of Scheria, home of the Phaeacians, where he is found by Nausicaa, daughter of the king Alkinoos and queen Arete, who tells him to go to the palace and ask for their hospitality or *xenia*. He does so and they arrange a feast in his honor.

9-12. Odysseus recounts the stories of his trials and temptations, including a visit to the Underworld, about which more later.

13-16. The Phaeacians return Odysseus to Ithaca. But rather than coming as a conquering hero, Athena transforms him into a homeless beggar. He makes contact with Eumaeus, his swineherd, and eventually reveals his true identity to him and to Telemachus, who has avoided the trap set by the suitors and returned from his own odyssey. Odysseus goes to his palace to observe the bad behavior of the suitors and to determine the best way to deal with them.

17-20. Odysseus enters his house still in the disguise of the homeless beggar, although he is recognized by his faithful dog Argos, who promptly dies upon seeing him. Odysseus observes the suitors, who insult him, and meets with Penelope, who may or may not recognize him.²⁴ He plots the suitors' demise with Eumaeus and Telemachus and a couple of other loyal servants.

21-24. Penelope announces that she will in fact marry the man who can perform a set of trials including stringing Odysseus' bow and demonstrating great skill at archery. Odysseus is the only one able to do so, and he continues on to slay all the suitors and the disloyal housemaids who have abetted them. After purifying the palace with fire and sulphur, he meets with Penelope to whom he reveals something that only he would know, and she finally recognizes him. They then go to bed and catch up. The next day Odysseus and his men go to meet Odysseus' father Laertes, and they quell a potential revolt by the parents of the

24. This is a point of some controversy—there are those that says she does recognize him, but chooses not to give herself away.

suitors they have killed. Finally Athena, at the suggestion of Zeus, casts a spell of forgetfulness—a kind of reset button—that brings Ithaca back to a state of unity with Odysseus as king.

Chapter 3: Key Ideas

3§1 While the *Iliad* is concerned with traditional warrior values of glory (*kleos*) and honor (*timē*), the *Odyssey* brings in a new set of set of ideas appropriate to the spiritual quest, and they are introduced early on in the poem. Their metaphorical nature, the parallel between the main story and the spiritual parable, is established in the proem in which Homer invokes the Muse.

3§2 In line 5 he speaks of *psūkhē*, (*psyche*) which is usually translated as 'life', but which carries the deeper meaning of 'soul'.

Many were the pains he suffered in his heart while crossing the sea struggling to merit the saving of his own life [*psūkhē*] and his own homecoming as well as the homecoming of his comrades. (i:5)

3§3 As Gregory Nagy²⁵ points out,

At the beginning of the *Odyssey*, both the epic narrative about the hero's return to his home and the mystical subnarrative about the soul's return to light and life are recapitulated in the double meaning of *psūkhē* as either 'life' or 'soul'....

3§4 Odysseus wants to save his life—that is, his body and those of his comrades— but also to save his soul from what it has become: duplicitous, alienated, warlike. As we will see, in order to do this he must shed all the associations he has acquired as a result of his time in Troy, and this will include his crew. They represent impediments to the reintegration of the *psūkhē*, and their death by the sun god Helios frees Odysseus to continue the journey within.

3§5 The same double meaning exists in the word *nostos* (from which we get the English word “nostalgia”), which can apply to the physical return trip home as well as the deeper

25. Nagy, Gregory. [Homer and Greek Myth](#). [Center for Hellenic Studies](#). Washington DC. 2009

sense of a 'return to light and life', as shown by Douglas Frame.²⁶ Frame also shows the connection to Indo-European root *nes, which is the basis of the name *Nestor* and relates to his function as the 'homebringer'.²⁷ Again, Gregory Nagy describes the metaphorical function of this word²⁸:

While the epic narrative tells about the hero's return to Ithaca after all the fighting at Troy and all the travels at sea, the mystical subnarrative tells about the soul's return from darkness and death to light and life.

3§6 As shown by Frame in the work cited above, the word *nostos* is related to *nóos*, (both syllables pronounced), which also carries two meanings: it is usually translated as 'mind', but has the more universal meaning of 'consciousness'.²⁹ We normally are so identified with our mind that we make the *lethal* mistake of forgetting that it is a subset of consciousness, the medium through which we perceive and know anything; we are like the fish who don't understand "water." Nagy also brings these two ideas together³⁰:

The very idea of consciousness as conveyed by *noos* is derived from the metaphor of returning to light from darkness, as encapsulated in the moment of waking up from sleep, or of regaining consciousness after losing consciousness, that is of "coming to." This metaphor of coming to is at work not only in the meaning of *noos* in the sense of consciousness but also in the

26. Frame, Douglas. [The Myth of Return in Early Greek Epic](#), Center for Hellenic Studies, Washington, DC. 2009

27. Also see Frame, [Hippota Nestor](#). Center for Hellenic Studies.

28. Nagy, Gregory. [The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours](#). Harvard. 2012, p. 309

29. Related to the comments above about Homer's crew, Frame says: *In the first section of this chapter I spoke at length of the companions of Odysseus who are "murdered" by the Sun. When Homer refers to this event at the beginning of the Odyssey, he calls the companions "foolish" (i 8-9): νήπιοι, οἱ κατὰ βοῦς Ὑπερίονος Ἥελίοιο ἦσθιον. The significance of this in terms of tradition is that the companions lost their nóstos for their lack of nóos. Unlike his companions, Odysseus himself is one of the arch-embodiments of intelligence in ancient legend.*

30. Nagy, op. cit., p. 299

meaning of nostos in in the sense of returning from darkness and death to light and life. Remarkably, these two meanings converge at one single point in the master myth of the *Odyssey*. It happens when Odysseus finally reaches his homeland of Ithaca.... (xiii: 78-95)

3§7 Beneath all the allusions to homecoming and consciousness is the idea of the Fatherland. In terms of the story, this Fatherland of course relates to the island of Ithaca, but as we have seen implied by Plotinus it also stands for the inner “true home” of the soul. It is this Fatherland that is disrupted by the absence of its rightful ruler, a theme which is also put to good use many years later by Shakespeare among others. It represents what Plotinus also calls the One, or the Source of our being: *The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is The Father*. It is the familiarity of that place, the knowing without learning, that makes us recognize it when we see it, that makes Odysseus know that however beautiful Calypso and her island are, they are not home.

3§8 I have alluded to the concept of *xenia*, usually translated as 'hospitality', but which too has the larger implications we associate with *charity*. *Xenia* was the term for an elaborate custom governing the treatment of strangers. The word *xenos* could mean host, guest, stranger, friend, foreigner (from which we get our word *xenophobic*). It is a concept pretty much lost in the modern world, but still alive in many less “sophisticated” societies: that if a stranger knocks on your door and asks for shelter, you are obliged to provide it. Travel, at least by land, was quite rare in those times, and in fact many people would welcome the presence of a stranger who might be able to entertain them for a while with stories of other lands. The rules were not written, but were integral to their culture and everyone seemed to know them. You must provide shelter and meals for one night, two at most, and if possible you should exchange gifts. It is mentioned several times in the *Odyssey* that “suplicants are

protected by Zeus,” and so lack of *xenia* would be an affront to Zeus himself. (There is even a word—*theoxeny*—that describes the practice of a god putting on a human form and going to earth to test our capacity for *xenia*. Don’t say you haven’t been warned.)

3§9 The encounter between Odysseus and the Cyclops is an example of *xenia* gone bad: Odysseus starts to help himself to the store of artisanal cheeses before the Cyclops returns, and the Cyclops shows his displeasure by eating several of Odysseus’ crew. The Cyclops’ idea of a guest-gift is to tell Odysseus “I’ll eat you last.” And of course perhaps the most egregious violation of *xenia* is that of the haughty suitors, eating Ithaca out of house and home and giving nothing in return. But there are many examples of its proper practice as well, including that extended to Telemachus on his voyage and to Odysseus by the king and queen of Scheria.

3§10 Understand that I’m not suggesting that the good kind of *xenia* practiced in the *Odyssey* is appropriate to our day and age. I think most of us would be more likely to give someone the address of the nearest Holiday Inn. But the same general principles can apply to our day-to-day dealings with other people. The underlying assumption is that the “stranger” is Zeus in disguise, and we disrespect him at our peril. We can bring this same attitude (without the fear part) to all our interactions, seeing the god in each person we meet, realizing that under the apparent differences of gender, race, age, opinions etc., that we are all made of the same stuff. Even the boring and annoying people. But first we have to acknowledge the god/dess in ourselves. To quote Ralph Waldo Emerson, another lover of Homer, from [The Over-Soul](#):

We do not yet possess ourselves, and we know at the same time that we are much more. I feel the same truth how often in my trivial conversation with my neighbours, that somewhat higher in each of us overlooks this by-play, and Jove nods to Jove from behind each of us.

The Players

3§11 A key factor in understanding the *Odyssey* is realizing the allegorical nature of its characters. In addition to being well-drawn, full-blooded humans, they are also representatives of different parts of the soul as it embarks on its quest. Its quest is not to go somewhere else and become something different—become a “better” person—but to return to its original state before it fell into disarray and was taken over by the ego, in the sense of our small self. The ego thinks it is capable of improvement by rearranging its furniture, or upgrading it; the *Odyssey* wants to lift the roof off your house.

Odysseus

3§12 The most obvious character is of course Odysseus himself. In the *Iliad*, he is presented as a fairly typical Achaean (Greek) military type: brave, glory-seeking, articulate, and more intellectually resourceful than most. He is known by the epithets “sacker of cities,” “man of pain,” and a man of “twists and turns” (*polutropos*, often transcribed as *polytropos*), which can also be read as ‘One who could change in many different ways who he was’.³¹ But I believe these “qualities” come about as a result of his being in the world of Strife, of multiplicity. His intelligence has been reduced to cleverness, and his compassion to mere loyalty. He cannot be a “gentle father” in this environment. In his own world he would be an arbiter, a peacemaker; in Troy he has to take a side, to be in opposition, even though it’s not really his fight. He doesn’t seem to relish the fighting for its own sake, as do some, and seems largely concerned with protecting his men and trying to end the war. He is driven by the memory of his unified family, and has the will and resourcefulness to seek it again, although he often does let his senses, represented by his crew, get the better of him. (I’m talking to you, Eurylokhos.)

31. Nagy. *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*. Center for Hellenic Studies. 9§5

3§13 It is said that if you don't know where you're going, any road will take you there. Odysseus does know where he is going, and so only one road will serve—it is the one he is on, although it is full of “twists and turns,” long periods of forgetfulness, and of monsters and temptations. As we've said, in a way he creates these monsters himself on his descent into Strife, and must then overcome them on his way back to Love. What he is seeking is his own soul, and it is because of this goal that he can (usually) discriminate which option is better when he reaches a fork in the road. He is constantly having to start over to one degree or another, from being washed up on the shores of Ogygia and Scheria with nothing, to being dropped off asleep on Ithaca. Here he doesn't know where he is, but he does know who he is, although he still needs the advice and assistance of Athena to be transformed into a wizened beggar to reestablish his kingship.

3§14 On the individual level I believe Odysseus represents what could be called “conscience”— that faculty that we “know with.” It is a “superego,” although not in the Freudian sense; rather it is above the ego and can observe it. In the *Bhagavad Gita* it is called *buddhi* or discrimination; that which knows the truth of any situation, the proper course to take in any situation, even if we choose to ignore it. It's the knowledge with which we pursue Knowledge, even when the immediate evidence for it is scant. It may be a “king,” but it is not a tyrant, since it is in service to the benefit of the whole state, not itself alone. But for whatever reason, it has abrogated its responsibility and fallen into the world of multiplicity, the natural realm of the ego. There it is subject to trials and temptations, and for many of us it can fall short of wholeness by taking on the fragmentary identity of some established party or sect—us against them, Greeks against Trojans.

3§15 This is the realm of the prisoners in Plato's Cave, seeing the shadows on the wall and believing them to be reality. We also have our own set of virtues that are helpful in the

return—patience, hope, intelligence—unless they lose the bigger picture and start making their own decisions. Patience can turn to apathy, hope to cynicism, intelligence to opinion. Along with Odysseus we need to see what is really needed at each given moment without bringing in our own desires and fears, judgments and commentary. Once we can do this, by giving full attention to what is in front of us at each moment, our ability to discriminate the proper course of action becomes much clearer.

3§16 Odysseus' single-mindedness in returning home is perhaps his greatest asset. He is continuously being presented with choices, from the life-threatening to the trivial, and the desire for *nostos* acts as a guiding light in each of them. Should he sail near Scylla or Charybdis? Better to lose a few men than the whole crew. Should he sleep on the beach at Scheria or go inland? Better to head for the safety of the intertwined trees. Our own memory of our quest can help us to become aware of the choices and obstacles that present themselves in our own lives, and to make decisions accordingly. What do we do when we feel the pull of that attractive body walking down the street, the rising anger at the person taking too long in the checkout line, the envy directed at a friend who has just had a stroke of good fortune? Odysseus' ability to discriminate becomes more refined the more he uses it, just as ours grows as we begin to feel the stronger pull of our native land.

3§17 The *Gita* says:

When you let your mind follow the call of the senses, they carry away your better judgment as a storm drives a boat off its charted course on the sea. Use all your power to free your senses from attachment and aversion alike, and live in the full wisdom of the Self. (2:67-68)

Penelope

3§18 Penelope fills a similar function, although she remains in the now-dysfunctional state of Ithaca, and is also connected to the memory (*anamnesis*, or 'backward remembering') of unity. Just as Odysseus is tempted to forget the quest, she is tempted to forget that he may return. She has a strong desire to remain true to him, but without his presence her desire wavers. (Odysseus would probably claim that he too has been faithful “in my own way.”) She appears at least to consider giving way to the suitors, despite the fact that they are parasites who would usurp the role of Odysseus and destroy the kingdom for everyone. She feels incomplete, but knows that choosing someone over Odysseus would diminish the kingdom. “...so that with Odysseus before my mind I might even pass beneath the hateful earth, and never gladden in any wise the heart of a baser man.”(xx:82-3) As a result, she is drawn into her own (forgivable) realm of deceit, as seen through her weaving and unweaving the funeral shroud she is making for her father-in-law Laertes, as a way of putting off the decision the suitors are forcing on her.

3§19 Implicit in the quest we are describing is that there is something to be found, something waiting at the end of it. Although there’s no ready-made psychological term for this part of ourselves, this inner Penelope, its role is to provide the kind of stability and constancy that keeps the soul ready for the return of conscience. It is perhaps the complementary side of the memory found in Odysseus. As with his memory, it remains faithful even through the ups and downs of changing fortunes, is not swayed by bad luck or good luck, and knows that real happiness can only be had by re-union. She certainly knows sorrow, as does Odysseus, but she does not let that turn to despair or disbelief.

Telemachus

3§20 Telemachus, as befits the son of Odysseus and Penelope, has a more active role of trying to bring about this reunion. He has been treated as a kind of mascot by the suitors as the

tale begins, but with the help of Athena starts to see the picture more clearly—to see the damage brought on his mother and his own prospects by the absence of Odysseus and the presence of the suitors. He represents a latent but emerging memory of unity. He has not really experienced the unity himself—he has allowed the suitors to turn him into a kind of atheist, not really believing his father is alive—but he’s willing to start his own quest, to step into the unknown to find out for himself.

3§21 His quest takes him to the kingdoms of Nestor in Pylos and Menelaus in Sparta, where he can see for himself the operation of a well-run kingdom, jointly ruled by a wise king and queen, abundant in wealth, storytelling, athletics, and fulfilling the laws of *xenia*—all traits that are absent in Ithaca. (Sparta is kept from full happiness of course by the memory of the murder of Menelaus’ brother Agamemnon upon his return to Mycenae.)

3§22 On the level of the individual, this same quest can begin as the result of a “good impulse.” It may not seem good at the time—it can take the form of a sudden loss, perhaps of a dear friend or loved one, or it can be a slow-moving tragedy like that of Telemachus. On a more positive note it can be a good book or personal example of a teacher or parent or other person who embodies the kind of civilizing aspects seen in the kingdoms of Pylos or Sparta. But once begun, as with Odysseus, the pull of this quest will usually grow stronger, and it will continue until the goal is reached, despite trials, temptations, ridicule and doubt. We see the change in Telemachus going from shy and childlike to becoming an assertive master of the house; the “pull of the way” can effect the same change in each individual as well. I believe a sequel to the *Odyssey* might find Telemachus as a student or *mathematekos* to his century’s incarnation of a wise man such as Pythagoras—or perhaps being that man himself.

The Crew and the Suitors

3§23 I have quoted from the *Bhagavad Gita*, which is as I've said, one of the most plain-spoken and practical guides to our *nostos*. Here, in a different translation³² of the quotation used before, it speaks of two of the strongest impediments we face. Krishna says:

Even of those who tread the path, the stormy senses can sweep off the mind.
They live in wisdom who subdue their senses and keep their minds ever
absorbed in me. When you keep thinking about sense objects, attachment
comes. Attachment breeds desire, the lust of possession that burns to anger.
Anger clouds the judgment; you can no longer learn from past mistakes. Lost is
the power to choose between what is wise and what is unwise, and your life is
utter waste. But when you move amidst the world of sense, free from
attachment and aversion alike, there comes the peace in which all sorrows end,
and you live in the wisdom of the Self.

3§24 The senses and the mind. Two aspects of our being that we normally take completely for granted, often going so far as to think that they are *who* we are. But they are not: they are instruments for our use, and when we forget that we are led down the path to where our “life is utter waste.” It is this attachment leading to anger that shapes the events of the *Odyssey*. Achilles’ attachment to his spoils of war and his own desire for *kleos* “burns to anger” and leads to his own “utter waste” in the Underworld. These same forces are embedded into the *Odyssey*, but without the disastrous consequences: Odysseus’ crew represents the senses and the “haughty suitors” the mind.

3§25 Our senses—the standard catalog of sight, hearing, taste, touch and smell—are the channels through which we receive information about the outside world. We then use our

32. Vyasa. *The Bhagavad-Gita*, trans. Eknath Easwaran. Nilgiri Press. 2007, p. 96.

discrimination to make judgments about what is presented— pleasant/unpleasant, healthy/unhealthy, useful/useless. If we think of the *Odyssey* as an allegory of one person, it becomes easier to see how the crew fills the role of the senses. In addition to navigating over the vast waste of the sea, one of their functions is to gather intelligence about the places where they land and bring it to Odysseus. In the land of the lotus eaters, for example, he says:

I chose [krinein] two of my company to go see what manner of men the people of the place might be, and they had a third man under them. (ix:90-92)

Again in scroll 10 with the Laestrygonians he uses similar words:

So I sent two of my company with an attendant to find out what sort of people the inhabitants were. (x:100-103)

3§26 On Circe's island, at a loss as to what to do, he decides it is best to "*give my comrades their meal, and send them forth to make search.*" (x:155) Later he sends off the search-party, headed by Eurylokhos, to check out the island and bring back a report.

3§27 The senses are what I think William Blake had in mind when he spoke of "the doors of perception," and Emily Dickinson when she spoke of "the valves of attention." Properly functioning, we are able to open and close them, let them pass on their unfiltered information to the Odysseus-like conscience whose function is to discriminate, to judge, to "learn from past mistakes." The senses and their objects are relegated to the bottom of Plato's Divided Line, in Book 6 of the *Republic*, as the most illusory of the ways of knowing.

3§28 But if we take an honest look at the functioning of the senses in our own being, I think most of us would have to admit that it is out of whack. For us moderns, the senses have become demanding beasts: we walk everywhere with earphones, are surrounded by attention-grabbing video screens, are constantly grazing to feed our taste buds. And the flow works in

both directions. If the valves are constantly open, what leaks out is consciousness, our very being. We lose our ability to give our attention fully to any one thing—we multitask, and what we do sense loses its significance and grandeur.

3§29 From the beginning, the crew often proves self-willed and problematical. In the encounter with the Kikones, it is their wish to remain on shore eating and drinking that almost causes them all to be killed, and when they meet the lotus-eaters they need to be saved from their own *amnēsis*. They turn particularly foolish when Odysseus, as the force for discrimination, goes to sleep or is absent: in one episode, harboring suspicions that he is holding out on them, they open the “bag of wind” given to them by the god Aiolos which blows them away from Ithaca. On Circe’s island, off by themselves on a scouting mission, she easily turns them into pigs. In fairness, there are times when they seem to be more astute than Odysseus, providing good information and counsel that he tends to ignore. They encourage him to leave the cave of the Cyclops before it returns, and also suggest to him when it’s time to leave Circe’s island.

3§30 But ultimately it is “through their own blind folly they perished,” when they eat the cattle of the Sun. They cannot be restrained; they think themselves to be masters and try to take over the function of discrimination. As a point of comparison, Krishna tells his student Arjuna in the *Gita*:

When the senses contact sense objects, a person experiences cold or heat, pleasure or pain. These experiences are fleeting; they come and go. Bear them patiently, Arjuna. Those who are unaffected by these changes, who are the same in pleasure and pain, are truly wise and fit for immortality. Assert your strength and realize this! (2:14-15)

3§31 Homer provides us with an example of the proper working of the senses, when the messenger god Hermes visits Calypso's cave in Scroll v. Here is how a god uses his senses:

He found her at home. There was a large fire burning on the hearth, and one could smell from far the fragrant reek of burning cedar[60] and sandal wood. As for herself, she was busy at her loom, shooting her golden shuttle through the warp and singing beautifully. Round her cave there was a thick wood of alder, poplar, and sweet smelling cypress trees,[65] wherein all kinds of great birds had built their nests – owls, hawks, and chattering sea-crows that have their business in the waters. A vine loaded with grapes was trained and grew luxuriantly about the mouth of the cave,[70] there were also four running rills of water in channels cut pretty close together, and turned here and there so as to irrigate the beds of violets and luscious herbage over which they flowed. Even a god could not help being charmed with such a lovely spot,[75] so Hermes stood still and looked at it; but when he had admired it sufficiently he went inside the cave. (v:55-75)

...where he is treated to nectar and ambrosia. But there is no envy in him, no wish to have what she might have. He stands still, “admires it sufficiently,” and then delivers his message.

3§32 Compare this to how our senses work. A good test is to see how long you can sit quietly in a room with nothing to watch, or read, or eat or hear. How long does it take the senses to get antsy, to start looking for something to take hold of? We are so used to the continuous satiation that it is a kind of addiction, and we start to exhibit symptoms of withdrawal when there is nothing to consume: “Grow attached, and you become addicted; Thwart your addiction, it turns to anger....” Occasionally the senses can suffer a major attack

as from the monster Scylla, or be swept into the turbulent maelstrom of Charybdis, when they are completely taken over by some attachment.

3§33 The traditional religious alternative to this over-consumption often takes the form of deprivation or punishment of the senses. Some people deny them or starve them—in the old days they would “mortify the flesh.” But this is just another form of legitimizing their power. They are not your masters and they are not your slaves. They are tools; just as you wouldn’t overuse a tool until it fell apart, you wouldn’t mistreat it either. You care for it, keep it sharp, use it appropriately, clean it and put it away when you are done. Well, your eyes and ears are much more important to you than your lawnmower. If we learn to see them as tools, or perhaps better as instruments, they do not need to be destroyed.

The Suitors

3§34 Just as the crew stands for the senses, the suitors who are harassing Penelope and Telemachus are representative of our discursive or mechanical mind. The Greek word for suitors, *mnēstēres*, is derived from the root *mnē-*, as in 'mnemonic', and can be taken to mean 'calling to mind, mindful of'. They can be best seen as that raucous internal monologue that provides a running commentary to our lives—making judgments, feeling superior, feeling inferior, criticizing, gossiping, nursing grudges, becoming angry and jealous, always looking for an advantage. Ruled by the Ideal, they would be ideas rather than thoughts, they would be love rather than desires. But as tools of the ego, they usurp the role of conscience and have us settle for things that, although attractive, are in fact limitations—more stuff, personal fame, insider status. From one point of view they seem like harmless delusions, but they form a kind of spiritual asteroid belt, orbiting space junk that restricts us from expanding to our full infinity. Often, with Telemachus traveling and Penelope in her room, we can begin to think that these thoughts are who we really are.

3§35 Another hint as to their deleterious influence can be found in the prophecy of Teiresias. He tells Odysseus “*And I will tell you a sign [sēma], a very clear one, which will not get lost in your thinking.*” ([xi:126](#)), and this kind of thinking is exactly where things can get lost. It is the level on which we get most of our thoughts—from newspapers, television programs, social media. These new ideas just join the continuous stream of previous superficial thoughts and can get lost as they flow downstream. What is needed is a “very clear sign,” of a different order from those represented by the suitors, one which will stand out, not get lost, and serve as a guide for future decisions. These are the kinds of ideas in which the *Odyssey* abounds, if only we can learn to read them.



John William Waterhouse, *Penelope and the Suitors*, 1912 (Wikimedia Commons)

3§36 You can see their effect as represented by the suitors in this painting by J. W. Waterhouse. It is not just their saying Odysseus does not exist, it is their constant demands for Penelope’s attention that are wearing on her. She tries to concentrate on her weaving, to give her attention fully to the task at hand, but is constantly being distracted with music and gifts, not to mention longing gazes (Choose me! Choose me!). Now this is something that most people would not see as a problem until we remember that the suitors are also taking much more than they are giving, eating all the food and drinking all the wine and generally

“devouring her substance.” Insofar as Penelope represents that constant memory of unity within us, this means they are devouring her consciousness as well, replacing it with doubt and fear and sorrow.

3§37 And so it is with us. It is when we do sit quietly in the room with nothing for the senses to feed on, that we can most easily see the workings of this mechanical mind. Anyone who has ever tried to do anything that requires focused concentration knows what a formidable adversary this mechanical mind can be. (Mine is very evident to me as I write this.) It is not that it’s actively trying to deny our unity with the One; it may in fact think it’s a very commendable idea. But it will do anything to prevent the unity from actually taking place, by keeping it as a remote ideal and then distracting us from experiencing it. That would mean its death. But, as with Penelope at her loom, we must let go of these distractions and remain attentive to our task at each moment.

3§38 It’s necessary though to address the violence visited upon the suitors in Scroll xxii, which is still quite shocking even after a number of hearings. We can feel a sense of satisfaction when Antinous gets his, but most of the suitors are like Amphinomus, who just wants to have it “both ways,” or Eurymakhos (“good war”) who wants to negotiate. I mean, really, is being arrogant and self-indulgent a capital crime? If so, we’d all be on death row. Rather, as George Dimock³³ says, “The monstrous quality of the suitors’ crime, one and all, is their impudence in treating a man as though he did not exist.” Despite repeated warnings, the suitors do not believe in the return of Odysseus, or in his existence at all— *“they violently devour the house of Odysseus, who, they say, will no more return.”* (ii:236-238)

3§39 Odysseus takes no pleasure in the killing. When his old nurse Eurykleia, who has good reason, begins to rejoice upon seeing them dead, Odysseus says to her:

33. Dimock, George. *The Unity of the Odyssey*. Massachusetts. 1990, p. 297

“Old woman,” said he, “rejoice in silence; restrain yourself, and do not make any noise about it; it is an unholy thing to vaunt over dead men. Heaven’s doom and their own evil deeds have brought these men to destruction, for they respected no man in the whole world,[415] neither rich nor poor, who came near them, and they have come to a bad end as a punishment for their wickedness and folly.
(xxii:411-416)

3§40 And this is the same crime also visited on the level of the individual. All the “suitors” that would distract us from the steadfast patience embodied by Penelope and the active seeking embodied by Telemachus, themselves have no belief in the existence of this state of unity. They are not rational and cannot be brought into negotiations. (I will resist the temptation to invoke any comparisons to current politics.) They are at the core unlawful, devoted only to themselves, and the comparison to parasites is apt. They represent a disease, a psychopathology, a “disease of the soul.” We would not hesitate to take an antibiotic to kill bacteria that have invaded the body, and we must ultimately kill the ego and its components in order to achieve health in the Ideal state. That the suitors are imaginary and in no sense real is shown by the almost cartoonish violence used to eliminate them and the serving maids.

The gods

3§41 As with any good Greek drama, the gods are fully engaged, providing a kind of meta-text or super-plot to the events on earth. I’ve discussed the gods in general elsewhere³⁴, but I think the main characterization stands: “a pretty insufferable lot, kind of like high school with life-and-death powers.” Which is basically what it seems they think of us (without the powers). Zeus, in the very opening of the *Odyssey* says to his fellow nectar-drinkers:

34. Beardsley, David A. *Idealinthewest.com*. Episode 36, [The Ideal and Religion](#)

“See now, how men consider us gods responsible [aitioi] for what is after all nothing but their own folly. (i:33-4)

3§42 It is interesting to note that even the gods recognize, like Shakespeare in *Julius Caesar*, that “The fault...is not in our stars, but in ourselves.” Alkinoos, who is always good for a wise observation, says of Odysseus:

We must see that he comes to no harm while on his homeward journey, but when he is once at home he will have to take the luck he was born with for better or worse like other people. (vii:195-197)

3§43 So it would seem that behind and separate from the whole interaction of gods and humans there is this realm of what’s “ordained”—a world of necessity, fate, destiny, or seemingly blind chance in which even the gods themselves may not interfere. Homer doesn’t give any explanation of it, but it seems to be a result of a personal burden of “injustice” that each of us carries, and which determines our “fate” in this and the next life. In the *Gita* and other Oriental texts this concept is called *karma*; Emerson calls it “[Compensation](#).” But as Simone Weil says:

The Occident, however, has lost it, and no longer even has a word to express it in any of its languages: conceptions of limit, measure, equilibrium, which ought to determine the conduct of life are, in the West, restricted to a servile function in the vocabulary of technics. We are only geometricians of matter; the Greeks were, first of all, geometricians in their apprenticeship to virtue.³⁵

3§44 Zeus plays a prominent role in the events, offering helpful advice from time to time, but of course the most prominent is “gray-eyed Athena,” who has a soft spot in her heart for

35. Weil. op. cit. p. 16

Odysseus, and for Telemachus by extension. It is she who really puts the events in motion, after receiving permission from Zeus her father, by visiting Telemachus “in the likeness of a stranger, Mentis, the leader of the Taphians.” (You get the impression that she could pretty much also put a stop to events whenever she wanted, as she essentially does in Scroll xxiv, but then there would be no story.) She addresses Telemachus’ doubts and gives him the courage to begin taking on the role of master of the house and to call the suitors into assembly. When they ignore him and the warnings from the gods, she also gives him the courage to put together a ship and crew to begin his quest for Odysseus. And of course she appears to Odysseus at key moments, giving advice, transforming his appearance as needed, or shrouding him in an invisible mist.

3§45 On the minus side we have Poseidon, father of Polyphemus the Cyclops, and Odysseus’ nemesis on his journey. He is of course the god of the sea, which in general symbolizes a dangerous ignorance: it is variously described as a “salty waste so vast,” “this waste of water.” (We still refer to the state of confusion or indecision as being “at sea.”) From Scroll i, Poseidon is associated with duality, remoteness, division. “*Howbeit Poseidon had gone among the far-off Ethiopians—the Ethiopians who dwell sundered in twain, the farthestmost of men, some where Hyperion sets and some where he rises....*” (i:22-4)

3§46 Not to get too psychoanalytical about it, but Poseidon seems to be suffering from a severe case of sibling rivalry, as he complains to his brother Zeus after the Phaeacians have safely returned Odysseus to Ithaca, that, “*no longer shall I, even I, be held in honor among the immortal gods, seeing that mortals honor me not a whit—even the Phaeacians, who, thou knowest, are of my own lineage.*” (xiii:128-131) (The king and queen of the Phaeacians, Alkinoos and Arete, are cousins, great-grandchildren of Poseidon.) Like a petulant child, like the Agamemnon of Olympus, he asks for revenge:

... I should like to wreck [150] the Phaeacian ship as it is returning from its escort. This will stop them from escorting people in future; and I should also like to bury their city under a huge mountain.” (xiii:149-153)

3§47 To which Zeus memorably replies, in the Robert Fagles translation, “Whatever warms your heart.” And that’s pretty much the last we hear from Poseidon.

3§48 In Scroll v, Hermes, messenger of the gods, is dispatched to talk to the “fair-tressed nymph” Calypso, whose name means 'to conceal', (as apocalypse means 'to reveal'.) She had saved Odysseus after he washed up on her island, and has been holding him as a kind of boy toy in her “hollow cave.” She tempts him by offering him immortality, as well as a very pleasurable life—he spends his nights making love to a goddess, but his days weeping because he is powerless to fulfill his *nostos*. Hermes, who “*took the wand wherewith he lulls to sleep the eyes of whom he will, while others again he awakens even out of slumber,*” tells Calypso it is the will of Zeus that Odysseus be released, and she reluctantly agrees to do so.

3§49 This kind of captivity to pleasure is repeated in Scroll 10 (although chronologically it occurs before) with the story of Circe, (pronounced in Greek with a hard “K”) and the root of our word “circle,” a reference to her power to encircle or confine. (It could also have to do with her ability to bring Odysseus “full circle.” See [The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours](#), 10§31). She is also a goddess, and uses her knowledge of drugs to turn Odysseus’s crew into pigs, and to hold him captive for a year, albeit more willingly. (Odysseus has been prevented from becoming a pig himself by the intervention of Hermes, who gives him an antidote to Circe’s powerful drugs.) She has a house with “bright doors,” not a cave, but the result is the same—captivity, confinement. But after a year, when Odysseus and his crew have recovered their strength, as it were, Circe agrees to send them on their way, but with what would come to be another required stop on the questor’s tour: the Underworld.

‘Resourceful Odysseus, noble son of Laertes and seed of Zeus, you shall none of you stay here any longer if you do not want to,[490] but first you [= Odysseus] must bring to fulfillment [teleîn] another journey and travel until you enter the palace of Hādēs and of the dreaded Persephone, and there you all will consult [khrē-] the spirit [psūkhē] of Teiresias of Thebes, the blind seer [mantis], whose thinking [phrenes] is grounded [empedoi]: to him, even though he was dead, Persephone gave consciousness [noos],[495] so as to be the only one there who has the power to think [pepnusthai]. But the others [in Hādēs] just flit about, like shadows [skiai].’ (x:487-96)

3§50 The supernatural presence is pervasive throughout the story, and there are many other times when Odysseus is propelled or constrained by “some god.” We needn’t look at them all, but I think they correspond to that realm of forces in our own lives that push or pull us in one way or another—our choice of career, our choice of mate, residence, religion (or not), pastimes, even whether or not we will embark on our own quest. We like to think that these are all rational decisions, but if we look closely we see that they all contain forces of predisposition, talent, luck, and timing, which a poet could call the handiwork of the gods. They can be metaphors for inner resources that we don't know we have, and which can impel or restrain us in different situations. (I know I have done things in my life that should have resulted in disaster, and can only think that I have been protected from their full catastrophic effects by my own private Athena, to whom I would like to give public thanks. Our own quests would be much less interesting—pointless, in fact—without these gods and goddesses. And to the extent that we are all deities in training, it would be well to get to know them as future colleagues.)

Nature

3§51 From the gods we turn to nature, which exerts its own force on this journey. We have already mentioned the sea, ruled by Poseidon, which is illustrative of a dual nature—very still and constant in its depths, but with a surface that is changeable, fickle. In concert with the wind-god Aiolos, the ocean can go quickly from a state of calm to violent turbulence. Its beauty is often lauded in Homer, but it is generally seen as a place to be avoided—portrayed, as appropriate to Poseidon, as a vast waste, full of potential dangers, merciless, full of pirates and monsters. In general, the sea represents a state of ignorance, where nothing can be learned. It is something to be crossed, to get over, in order to find a place where learning and *xenia* can take place. It represents the kind of featureless emptiness that keeps us separated from home.

3§52 We need only think of the description of Odysseus after his raft is destroyed on his way to Scheria, and he is plunged into the water, suspended in a state between gravity and buoyancy. He finally washes up on the shore after three days in the sea:

Here at last Odysseus' knees and strong hands failed him, for the sea had completely broken him. [455] His body was all swollen, and his mouth and nostrils ran down like a river with sea-water, so that he could neither breathe nor speak, and lay swooning from sheer exhaustion... (v:455-457)

3§53 He has internalized the sea, and one could say that this is really his nadir, but I think that came with his attack on the Kikones. Here he's naked, alone, beaten, speechless—everything has been taken from him by the sea, but that also seems to include his murderous identity as “sacker of cities.” He will no longer be the aggressor, the seeker of personal glory. Through his trials to this moment, about which more later, he has paid off some of his debt of injustice, and has reached a point of being a blank slate, a point from which he begins to re-

member himself. And this is also a lesson for us: unless we are prepared to lose everything we think we know about who we are, we should just stay on Ogygia with Calypso and enjoy.

3§54 We don't need to catalog all the trials encountered by Odysseus and his crew on the sea, except to note that there is very little good that comes of it. Except for the men eaten by the Cyclops, pretty much all the other crew die at sea, devoured by Scylla, pelted with rocks by the Laestrygonians, or shipwrecked by Zeus after eating the cattle of Helios. (There seems to be an exception made for the sailors of Scheria who transcend the sea, "trusting in the speed of their swift ships, cross over the great gulf of the sea, for this the Earth-shaker has granted them; and their ships are swift as a bird on the wing or as a thought." (vii:34-5) Until, as we've seen, Poseidon puts a sudden stop to them.)

3§55 This is the way many of us feel about day-to-day life in the working world, a life lived at the surface, far from the shore or any landmarks. It describes the slow erosion of the soul, what Thoreau calls the life of "quiet desperation." Smooth sailing under these conditions can actually be a kind of punishment; an autopilot without direction. We become executable files, playing out some mechanism implanted in us at some other time in some other place. We too may be required to hit some kind of bottom, some Charybdis, in order to wake us up and change course.

3§56 We have also alluded to caves or grottoes, and these too are often portrayed as places of danger or temptation, such as the rocky home of the flesh-eating monster Scylla. But they are also shown as places we enter willingly to some extent, seeking something we think is of value for the quest. Once there, though, we can be trapped: think Calypso, or the cave of the Cyclops, or stretching it a bit, the house of Circe. (The Underworld, as described in Scroll 11, is perhaps the ultimate cave: hardly anyone gets out alive.) The message seems to be that we enter these caves at our peril and should always be planning our escape, like Theseus in the

labyrinth. The ego can too easily become addicted to the tokens of the Good we find there, the small doses of exhilaration found in drugs, sex, drink, fame, wealth, and other pleasurable states. I think Homer is saying not to reject them totally, but not to get attached—they are not the Good you seek, but rather images of it like the shadows on the wall in Plato’s cave. Or, as Plato says in the *Gorgias*, “the Good is one thing; the pleasurable another.”

3§57 In fairness I should mention that caves are not always given such a bad rap. In a lovely description of the harbor where Odysseus is dropped off on his return to Ithaca, Homer tells us that:

At the head of this harbor there is a large olive tree, and at no distance a fine overarching cavern sacred to the nymphs who are called [105] Nymphs of Wellsprings, Naiads. There are mixing-bowls within it and wine-jars of stone, and the bees hive there. Moreover, there are great looms of stone on which the nymphs weave their robes of sea purple – very curious to see – and at all times there is water within it. It has two entrances, [110] one facing North by which mortals can go down into the cave, while the other comes from the South and is more mysterious; mortals cannot possibly get in by it, it is the way taken by the gods. (xiii:102-112)

3§58 This cave of the Naiads³⁶ sounds like a lovely place where men and immortals may mingle, although they have separate entrances. Later (xiii:345), Athena uses this same

36. It is also the subject of one of the earliest Platonic interpretations of the *Odyssey*, written by Plotinus’s student Porphyry. A sample:

*In this cave, therefore, says Homer, all external possessions must be deposited. Here, naked, and assuming a suppliant habit, afflicted in body, casting aside everything superfluous, and being averse to the energies of sense, it is requisite to sit at the foot of the olive (tree) and consult with Minerva by what means we may most effectually destroy that hostile rout of passions which insidiously lurk in the secret recesses of the soul. Indeed, as it appears to me, it was not without reason that Numenius and his followers thought the person of Ulysses in the *Odyssey* represented to us a man who passes in a regular manner over the dark and stormy sea of generation, and thus at length arrives at that region where tempests and seas are unknown, and finds a*

description to prove to Odysseus that he has in fact landed on Ithaca. It sounds like a step up from the other caves, and we can only wish that Odysseus had entered it for a more thorough description. But then he might become entranced by the ever-flowing streams and have trouble escaping from it as well.

3§59 The harbor containing this cave had at its head “a long-leaved olive tree,” and trees, especially olives, play important roles at key moments. The tree of course has a long rich life as a mythological symbol: the tree of life, the tree in the Garden of Eden, the “tree” of the cross. The tree can also serve as a 3-D analogy for the Divided Line, used by Plato in Book 6 of the *Republic* to illustrate the continuum of the Good, from the physical world of senses and effects to the invisible, intelligible world of causation. On a tree the leaves are the most changeable and transitory, subject to birth and death³⁷, while the eternal part is also the invisible—not just the roots themselves but the earth itself which holds and nourishes them.



Sensible:

Eikasia--Illusions--Leaves and fruit
Pistis--Beliefs--Trunk and branches

Intelligible:

Dianoia--Understanding--Roots
Noesis--Reason, Forms--Earth

The tree as an image of Plato's Divided Line

nation "Who ne'er knew salt, or heard the billows roar."

The full text is accessible on the website philaletheians.co.uk in a translation by Thomas Taylor (warning: frequently tough slogging).

37. In the *Iliad*, Homer applies this metaphor to all of mankind: *And the son of Hippolokhos (Glaukos) answered, son of Tydeus (Diomedes), why ask me of my lineage? Men come and go as leaves year by year upon the trees. Those of autumn the wind sheds upon the ground, but when the season [hōra] of spring returns the forest buds forth with fresh vines. (Iliad VI:146)*

3§60 Unlike other symbols in the *Odyssey*, there is seldom ambiguity about trees—they are unalloyed good. Its first use is to describe the beauty of Calypso’s island, which as we’ve seen causes even the god Hermes to pause on his mission and take notice:

Round her cave there was a thick wood of alder, poplar, and sweet smelling cypress trees, [65] wherein all kinds of great birds had built their nests... (v:64-6)

3§61 It is from these trees that Odysseus makes his raft that will carry him away from this bittersweet captivity.

3§62 The next appearance of this symbol is the pivotal scene described above where Odysseus washes up on the shore of Scheria having lost everything. As noted before, he immediately faces another dilemma: if he stays on the shore he could die of exposure, but if he heads inland he could be eaten by animals. A solution presents itself in the form of two trees that reflect his dual state of mind:

In the end [475] he thought it best to take to the woods, and he found one upon some high ground not far from the water. There he crept beneath two shoots of olive that grew from a single stock – the one ungrafted, while the other had been grafted. No wind, however squally, could break through the cover they afforded, nor could the sun’s rays pierce them, [480] nor the rain get through them, so closely did they grow into one another. (v: 474-481)

3§63 These also represent another stage in his transition from Strife into Love. He is leaving behind the aggressive thornlike identity of warrior and “sacker of cities,” and preparing to reenter the civilized world of the Scherian court symbolized by the olive tree. Although they are two, they have essentially become one. In this womblike environment, Odysseus covered himself with olive leaves,

And as a man hides a brand beneath the dark embers in an outlying farm, a man who has no neighbors, [490] and so saves a seed of fire, that he may not have to kindle it from some other source, so Odysseus covered himself with leaves. And Athena shed sleep upon his eyes, that it might enfold his lids and speedily free him from toilsome weariness.” (v:487-493)

3§64 Soon after, when he has been rescued by Nausicaa, the bounteous nature of the island of Scheria is described in part by its own orchard with neverending fruit that “lasts throughout the year.” Later, when he recounts to the Scherian court the story of navigating the twin dangers of Scylla and Charybdis on his return from the Island of Helios, it is a fig tree to which “I clung steadfastly” that saves him. (xii:432)

3§65 When he reunites with Penelope in Scroll xxiii, it is the shared secret of the bed he made fixed to the root of an olive tree that finally convinces her of his identity. And finally when he goes to find his father, Laertes, the secret recognition, in addition to the scar caused by the boar, is also based on trees:

Furthermore I will point out to you the trees in the vineyard which you gave me, and I asked you all about them as I followed you round the garden. We went over them all, and you told me their names and what they all [340] were. You gave me thirteen pear trees, ten apple trees, and forty fig trees; you also said you would give me fifty rows of vines; there was wheat planted between each row, and they yield grapes of every kind when the seasons [hōrai] of Zeus have been laid heavy upon them. (xxiv:337-41)

3§66 The reunion is complete: he has moved from the fallen dried leaves of the olive tree on Scheria, up the Divided Line as it were or like downward-moving sap, back to the unseen root, to the earth. He has finally returned to his native land.

Truth and Fabrication

3§67 It is not unreasonable to ask why, if this tale is one of returning to a state of truth and unity, there is so much deceit and duplicity along the way. In terms of the ten-point law of Manu at which we looked earlier, this question of truthfulness seems to be the one with which everyone has the most trouble. Why does Athena always appear as someone else, and why is Odysseus always lying about who he really is, especially after he has arrived home in Ithaca?³⁸ Why lie to Eumaeus, to Penelope, to Laertes? Penelope deceives the suitors by weaving and then unweaving the funeral shroud for Laertes—a real case of “fabric”ation. Sometimes it seems that the suitors are the only honest ones in the story; they at least are upfront about wanting to marry Penelope, even if it means reducing her to poverty. The short answer of course is that it makes for a better story. But the deeper answer I believe has to do with our own quest, and the lies we tell ourselves along the way.

3§68 We don't really need to catalog all the deceit, and I think Athena's shape-shifting isn't really in the same category. (We know what happens if a god appears in his/her true form. Ask Semele, one of Zeus's lovers who made the mistake of asking that of him.) Early on, truth-telling is associated with wise ones, like Nestor, who have in fact returned home, and Athena instructs Telemachus:

38. This question of Odysseus' truthfulness is a major, but unresolved, theme in the *Lesser Hippias* of Plato.

...so go straight up to Nestor, breaker of horses that we may see what he has got to tell us. Beg of him to speak the truth, [20] and he will tell no lies, for he is an excellent person. (iii:17-20)

3§69 At the end of Scroll 3, Nestor pays the same compliment to Menelaus. (iii:327-8)

3§70 Odysseus however has not returned home, is still in the land of Strife, even if only in his own mind, and is shown to use his famous resourcefulness by making up lies about who he is when it is expedient—or sometimes just, it seems, because he feels like it. Even after he has returned home to Ithaca, he puts off revealing himself to his loyal servants and his loyal wife—he still harbors suspicions and has been warned to avoid the fate of Agamemnon, who was murdered by his wife upon returning from Troy. Penelope needs to be tested, but Odysseus himself needs to be tested in his ability to trust. When it comes to meeting his father,

He doubted whether to embrace him, kiss him, and tell him all about his having come home, or whether he should first question him and see what he would say.

In the end he thought it best [240] to be crafty with him... (xxiv:235-241)

3§71 He needs to see that Laertes too has been faithful to him over the years and starts to embark on an elaborate tale of having met Odysseus five years before and not having seen him since. Laertes begins to mourn anew, which melts the heart of Odysseus:

A dark cloud of sorrow [akhos] fell upon Laertes as he listened. He filled both hands with the dust from off the ground and poured it over his gray head, groaning heavily as he did so. The heart of Odysseus was touched, and his nostrils quivered as he looked upon his father; [320] then he sprang towards him, flung his arms about him and kissed him, saying, “I am he, father, about

whom you are asking – I have returned after having been away for twenty years.” (xxiv:319-322)

3§71 And when we are in our own inner Ithaca, this is true for us as well: “Lo, father, I (am) here before thee, my very self.” The Good presides, and our minds and hearts are in service to it, reasoning clearly and loving fully. But when the rulership is usurped by ego, and we wander off to our own Troy, mind and heart fall seamlessly into its service, and we are filled with opinions and cleverness, and the lesser emotions of criticism, anger, envy and so on—all eager suitors. If we attend to our own inner speech, we can see this mechanism (for it is mechanical) at work, but normally we just accept it as who we are. As in a dream I create a story where I am the central character; superior to most, inferior to some. My opinions are true, my humility is praiseworthy, my judgments correct, my anger justified, my successes are my own, my failures are from Fate. Happiness comes from without; it becomes pleasure and the accumulation of more stuff. Always just a little more, and I’ll be satisfied.

Chapter 4: Trials and Temptations

4§1 The trials and temptations that Odysseus endures, particularly those which he recounts in Scrolls 9-12, form the core of his transformation. They are not accidental or just good stories: they are necessary for his *nostos*. Again to quote Nicoll³⁹: “Let us ask ourselves: How is inner evolution reached? All inner development is possible only through inner temptation.”

4§2 (It should be mentioned that perhaps the first systematic interpretation of the trials and temptations, although with an strong astrological context, was undertaken by the self-taught Greek scholar Thomas Taylor in 1823, entitled *The Wanderings of Ulysses*. This text is available from the Prometheus Trust in vol. 2 of the Thomas Taylor Series. It’s also available online at philaletheians.co.uk as noted before.)

4§3 The word temptation means “to test the strength of,” and trial (from the same root as “try”) means to discriminate. In the sense of a legal trial, it is to discriminate guilt from innocence. The temptations of Odysseus, such as the Lotus-eaters and the sojourns with Circe and Calypso, are designed to make him forget his quest, “to test the strength of” his commitment to it. In the trials, he is required to choose between pursuing a path that will bring him closer to the goal or send him back toward confusion and strife. (It should also be noted that Penelope is under constant temptation by the suitors to be unfaithful to Odysseus. Telemachus is tempted to forget about Odysseus, and is also tried.)

4§4 Like them, we are all constantly tried and tempted, between giving up and continuing, between the higher and the lower. Nicoll:

39. Nicoll. op. cit. p. 19

And since the spirit is the intermediary, drawing the lower by a series of transformations to the higher, the work of the spirit is to lead a man into the wilderness—nay, rather into utter bewilderment—and subject him to being tempted by every element in himself so that all that is useless for his self-evolution is put behind him and all that can grow and understand is put in front. The devil represents all in a man that cannot evolve and all that does not wish to and hates every idea of inner evolution, all that wishes only to slander and misunderstand and have its own way. All this must gradually be put behind a man who seeks real inner development and not allowed to take the first place and control him. That is, the order of things in a man must change and what is first become last.⁴⁰

4§5 Christ had to go into the wilderness to be tempted by the devil for forty days. Odysseus had a period of ten years, and ultimately had to put the first last by giving up his identity as hero/king and returning to Ithaca as a poor homeless beggar.

4§6 If we look at the chronological sequence of events, it can become clearer how Odysseus makes the journey from “sacker of cities” through his *nostos* to Ithaca and the reestablishment of order. Homer, combining the skills of Penelope and Calypso, weaves his text(ile) with the chronology out of sequence, hidden so it is not readily apparent. But if we reorder it, from the events recorded in the *Odyssey* itself, I believe the progression becomes apparent, and the *nostos* takes on a hierarchy of its own. Penelope is the stable warp, Odysseus, the “man of twists and turns” is the weft, and the reunited state of Ithaca is the beautiful cloth they weave.

4§7 The first incident is actually told by the arch-narcissist Helen during the visit to Sparta by Telemachus. After recognizing him as the son of Odysseus, (and giving everyone the

40. Nicoll. op. cit. p. 24

narcotic *nepenthe*), she tells the story of how Odysseus had entered Troy, disguised as a beggar and she alone had recognized him. “...he hid himself under the likeness of another, a beggar, he who was in no wise such an one at the ships of the Achaeans.” (iv:247-8) This shows his mastery of deceit and disguise, which will of course be a recurring theme for most of the poem. A further example follows immediately with the first telling (by Helen’s husband Menelaus) of the use of the wooden horse, the device conceived by Odysseus to trick the Trojans into bringing the Greeks into their walls (ironically appropriate, since the Trojans, Hector especially, are known as “tamers of horses”.) (iv:265) Helen tries to give them away by imitating the voices of their wives, but Odysseus “of the steadfast heart,” keeps them silent. He is steadfast in his deceit.

4§8 In Scroll iii, Nestor (whose name as we’ve seen is related to *nostos* and means “homebringer”) tells Telemachus about Odysseus’ break with him after the fall of Troy, fating him to a long wandering. He describes how they had once been “as one” in their friendship:

He and I never had any kind of difference from first to last neither in camp nor council, but in singleness of heart and purpose [noos] we advised the Argives how all might be ordered for the best. (iii:126-130)

4§9 But once the common enemy is gone, the Greeks start fighting among themselves.

But after we [= the Achaeans] had destroyed the lofty city of Priam and we went into our ships, the god dispersed us. And then it was that Zeus devised in his thinking a plan to make a disastrous [lugros] homecoming [nostos] for the Argives [= Achaeans]; for they had not at all been either mindful [= having noos] or just [dikaioi], not all of them, and so many of them met up with a bad destiny [135] because of the disastrous [oloē] anger [mēnis] of the daughter of the

mighty father - of the goddess with the looks of an owl, who brought about a quarrel between the two sons of Atreus. "The sons of Atreus called a meeting which was not as it should be [= without kosmos], for it was sunset and the Achaeans were heavy with wine. [140] When they explained why they had called the people together, it seemed that Menelaos was for sailing homeward [nostos] at once, and this displeased Agamemnon, who thought that we should wait till we had offered hecatombs [145] to appease the anger of Athena. Fool that he was, he might have known that he would not prevail with her, for when the gods have made up their minds [noos] they do not change them lightly. So the two stood bandying hard words, whereon the strong-greaved Achaeans sprang to their feet [150] with a cry that rent the air, and were of two minds as to what they should do. "That night we rested and nursed our anger, for Zeus was hatching mischief against us. But in the morning some of us drew our ships into the water and put our goods with our women on board, [155] while the rest, about half in number, stayed behind with Agamemnon. We - the other half - embarked and sailed; and the ships went well, for the gods had smoothed the sea. (iii:130-157)

4§10 It is all division and discord: two brothers, recklessness, at sunset, heavy with wine, harsh words and hard feelings. It is an appropriate end, if it can be called that, to the strife of the *Iliad*. The strife continues on the next day when Nestor and his men depart to Tenedos, but some unspecified conflict infects them, and Odysseus himself gives up the prospect of a quick return, and sails back to join forces with Agamemnon: *cruel Zeus, however, did not yet mean that we should do so, and raised a second quarrel in the course of which some among us turned their ships back again, and sailed away under Odysseus to make their peace with Agamemnon....* (iii:162-165)

4§11 Of course in a major stroke of Homeric irony, Agamemnon shows the perils of a too-quick return; he is murdered by his wife Clytemnestra and her lover Aegisthos, a cautionary tale whose moral is repeated a number of times throughout the *Odyssey*, as is the revenge then taken by Agamemnon's son Orestes.⁴¹ If Odysseus had also returned that quickly, he may well have been killed by the suitors, and it is unlikely that Telemachus could have avenged his death on all of them. But the real reason for his prolonged *nostos* is not just the curse of the Cyclops (*grant that Odysseus, ransacker of cities, son of Laertes, who makes his home in Ithaca may never reach his home alive; or if he must get back to his friends at last, let him do so late and in sore plight after losing all his men let him reach his home [535] in another man's ship and find trouble in his house. (ix:534-6)*), it is that he must lose the warlike arrogance that he has acquired in Troy.

4§12 Once Troy has been sacked and the break with Nestor has happened, the next episodes in order come during the account given in Scroll 9 by Odysseus himself in the court of Alkinoos and Arete on the island of Scheria. Each episode threatens to prevent his return, whether through trial or temptation. Each place he lands is inviting on the surface, but each contains something that evokes in him a “fatal flaw,” and ends badly.

4§13 In his first act after leaving Troy, he behaves as would a common pirate, sailing to Ismarus and sacking the city of the Kikones:

There I ransacked the town and put the people to the sword. We took their wives and also much booty, which we divided equitably amongst us, so that none might have reason to complain. (ix:42-44)

4§14 In a foretaste of the episode with the cattle of Helios, his crew is too busy feasting and they ignore his command to embark. They are attacked by reinforcements who drive them

41. In the *Oresteia*, Aeschylus' retelling of the Agamemnon/Orestes story, Athena also serves to bring “creative mercy” to Athens by taming the Furies (Erinyes) by persuasion into Good Thinkers (Eumenides).

away after killing a number of his crew (six from each ship). This incident is narrated by Odysseus in a way that tries to make him sound like a victim, but despite the nice touch about sharing, let us not forget what has happened: he has slaughtered all the men, taken the women captive (no doubt to spend their days in sexual slavery) and stolen all their belongings. He seems to think this should bring him glory, but he has for all intents and purposes become a raging beast. High on the conquest of Troy, his need is to prevail completely, to subjugate, to win. (As Joseph Campbell says: “Clearly such a brute was not ready for domestic life; a complete change of character was required.”⁴²)

4§15 In this regard the incident is an exemplar of the ego’s need to win, to feel superior in some way to those around it. The Kikones are not among the “men whose cities he saw and whose mind he learned.” (i:3) They are nonentities there to be destroyed. While perhaps not as dramatic, the effect on the individual soul is the same. It is the basis of our unconscious and unspoken criticisms and stereotypes of others, especially “those people” we read about in the newspaper and other media. We dismiss them and bask in the feeling of superiority that results—with the effect of poisoning our own soul.

4§16 His next encounter is of a very different sort: the island of the Lotus-eaters. Odysseus’ senses are sorely tempted to linger and eat of the honey-sweet fruit.

When they had eaten and drunk [90] I chose [krinein] two of my company to go see what manner of men the people of the place might be, and they had a third man under them. They started at once, and went about among the Lotus-eaters, who did them no harm, but gave them to eat of the lotus, which was so delicious that those who ate of it [95] left off caring about home, and did not even want to go back and say what had happened to them, but were for staying and

42. Campbell, Joseph. *Myths to Live By*. Joseph Campbell Foundation. 2011

munching lotus with the Lotus-eaters without thinking further of their nostos; nevertheless, though they wept bitterly I forced them back to the ships and made them [100] fast under the benches. Then I told the rest to go on board at once, lest any of them should taste of the lotus and leave off wanting to get home [nostos], so they took their places and smote the gray sea with their oars.
(ix:89-104)

4§17 Take that, you pot- and hopheads.

4§18 This episode is so evident that it really needs no interpretation. It is the first example of the various temptations to forget about the trip; to slip into unconsciousness and go back to sleep. Just chill and enjoy and don't worry about it. Sedate yourself and when it starts to wear off just have some more. The image I get here is sitting on a couch with a game on, surrounded by pizza boxes and beer cans, the equivalent of the "honey-sweet fruit of the lotus." It's the opposite of the violence seen previously, but just as deadly to the soul in terms of the homeward journey.

4§19 The encounter with the Cyclops is one that most people know, even those who have not read the entire poem. Odysseus benefits from *xenia* at the hands of most of his encounters, but suffers badly from several others, including this one. Their land is another that is welcoming on the surface; Homer tells us that "*all ... things spring up for them without sowing or ploughing.*" (ix:109) Odysseus and his men transgress against *xenia* by entering the Cyclops' cave unbidden, and also by feasting on his food stores without permission. But then the cyclops, Polyphemus, does the same and worse by eating two of the crew upon his return to the cave. Things go from bad to worse until Odysseus and his crew, in another bit of Trojan horse-like ingenuity, blind the Cyclops by ramming a burning log into his one eye. (This is the last use of violence until Scroll xxii.) Odysseus, who has given his name as "No One" or "Noman,"

(Polyphemus: “*Noman is killing me!*”) returns to his “heroic” boastfulness mode once he has escaped, and cannot help but identify himself. “*Cyclops, if any one asks you who it was that put your eye out and spoiled your beauty, say it was the valiant warrior Odysseus, ransacker of cities, [505] son of Laertes, who lives in Ithaca.*” (ix:501-506)

4§20 Polyphemus then calls upon his father Poseidon, the god of the sea, to destroy Odysseus on his homeward journey. Another example of how we too must always win and then gloat—even if only in the privacy of our own mind.

4§21 The next voyage brings them to the island of Aiolos, god of the wind, where all is feasting and “boundless good cheer,” even though they have a strange arrangement whereby his six sons are married to his six daughters. Here *xenia* is practiced by the rules, and after a month’s stay Odysseus is given a “wallet” that contains all the winds except for the one needed to blow him home, and he and his crew set sail. They come within sight of Ithaca itself: *We got so close in that we could see the stubble fires burning, (x:31)*—but unfortunately Odysseus chooses this time to take a nap. This is the first time his loss of consciousness will result in disaster. His crew, thinking there must be some great treasure in the wallet, open it; the “evil-winds” are released and blow them “back to the Aiolian isle.” This time when they request *xenia*, they are sent packing: *‘Vilest of humankind, get you gone at once out of the island; him whom the gods hate will I in no way help. [75] Be off, for you come here as one abhorred of the gods.’ And with these words he sent me sorrowing from his door. (x:73-76)* They forsake the one good wind for multiple winds that blow them off course again.

4§22 I think this episode speaks to the role played by our own “crew” in our return. Unlike the suitors, which because of their denial of the possibility of reunification bring their fate on themselves, the crew—that is, our senses—are usually helpful and necessary. But when consciousness is lost and they start to serve the ego, things can go terribly wrong. They start

to think they can make their own decisions. They develop a suspicion that they are being exploited and shortchanged, not getting their “fair share,” and the results are disastrous. We are never really “hated by the immortals,” but the ego would have us think we are. We lose sight of the big picture, our larger identity, and then wonder why we feel alienated.

4§23 Polyphemus’s curse continues in their next encounter, with the Laestrygonians. As with most other adventures, this one starts off well enough—Odysseus sends three men to make contact with the inhabitants, and (in a preview of his encounter with Nausicaa) they meet “the goodly daughter of Laestrygonian Antiphates,” the king of the land. She leads them to her parents’ home, but (in a repeat of the encounter with Polyphemus), instead of being greeted warmly they too are attacked, one is eaten, and their ships are bombarded with boulders by the giant natives. Only Odysseus and his immediate crew escape. The tables have turned; now, although he doesn’t realize it, instead of being the victor he is the victim, and he begins to lose his grip on who he is and where he is going.

4§24 His confusion is made evident when he lands on Circe’s island. Although it is lush and inviting, it reflects his state of mind:

My friends, I am speaking this way because I do not know which place is west and which place is east - which is the place where the sun, bringing light for mortals, goes underneath the earth and which is the place where it rises. Still, let us start thinking it through, as quickly as we can, whether there is still any craft [mētis] left. I must tell you, though, I think there is none. (x:191-194)

4§25 He cannot tell east from west, and his famous *metis* is deserting him. He sends off a search party as before, but this time disaster strikes when it meets Circe and she turns the men into pigs. Things are falling apart around him. He is compelled to go search for the men (I’m condensing here), but this time he needs the help of a god. Hermes appears to give him a drug

(moly) that will prevent him from being enswined himself by Circe. When her spell does not work on him, she does a U-turn, releases his crew and takes him to her bed. They all pass a pleasant year enjoying more good *xenia* until the crew, in a rare display of insight, point out to Odysseus that they should be on their way.

We stayed with Circe for a whole twelvemonth feasting upon an untold quantity both of meat and wine. But when the year had passed, [470] and the seasons [hōrai] had turned round, and the waning of moons and the long days had begun, my men called me apart and said, ‘Sir, it is time you began to think about going home, if so be it you are to be spared to see your house and native country at all.’ (x:467-473)

4§26 This episode represents a “plateau” period in the spiritual quest. Things are going pretty well—it appears the gods like us and will take care of us. A lot of our anger, and we think, egotism, is behind us and we think we can just relax and enjoy. We can even feel a measure of self-righteousness. “I thank you, Lord, that I am not like one of these.” But if we are honest, there is always the nagging realization that we are not home, that there is much further to go. Circe of course knows this, and when Odysseus tells her it’s time to leave, she sends him on his way, but tells him that his next trial will be to visit the Underworld to receive a message from a dead, but still conscious, seer: Teiresias.

4§27 The descent into Hell and return from it (the *Nekyia*), has become a standard part of the quest myth, but it is important to realize that this is probably the first instance of it. In its own way the idea that a mortal can visit the land of the dead and return to the land of the living is as remarkable as the idea that gods and humans can interact. It is a turning point in Odysseus’ journey which enables him to put to rest some chapters of his quest and open up others. He first sees the ghost of his mother Antikleia ('against glory'), who tells him she died

of grief in his absence, and also tells him of the state of affairs in Ithaca, with Penelope under assault by the suitors. He meets the ghost of Achilles who relieves him of any illusions that a glorious death is something to be sought. In the encounter quoted by Socrates that was cited in Chapter 1, Odysseus tells him that he (Achilles) has achieved his wish of great *kleos* on earth, and Achilles replies:

‘Say not a word,’ he answered, ‘in death’s favor; [490] I would rather be a paid servant in a poor man’s house and be above ground than king of kings among the dead.

(xi:488-492)

4§28 So much for glory. Homer doesn’t spell this out for us—he seldom does—but I think this is a turning point for Odysseus in giving up the heroic ideal and becoming not exactly an “anti-hero,” but perhaps an “unhero.” He sees the fruit of anger and separation and the lust for mere fame as meaningless.

4§29 He meets many other departed spirits, but the main message he receives comes from Teiresias, who tells him what he must eventually do to complete his journey:

...you must go on a journey then, taking with you a well-made oar, until you come to a place where men do not know what the sea is and do not even eat any food that is mixed with sea salt, nor do they know anything about ships, which are painted purple on each side, [125] and well-made oars that are like wings for ships. And I will tell you a sign [*sēma*], a very clear one, which will not get lost in your thinking. Whenever someone on the road encounters you and says that it must be a winnowing shovel that you have on your radiant shoulder, at that point you must stick into the ground the well-made oar [130] and sacrifice

beautiful sacrifices to lord Poseidon a ram, a bull, and a boar that mounts sows. And then go home and offer sacred hecatombs to the immortal gods who possess the vast expanses of the skies. Sacrifice to them in proper order, one after the other. As for yourself, death shall come to you from the sea, [135] a gentle death, that is how it will come, and this death will kill you as you lose your strength in a prosperous old age. And the people all around [your corpse] will be blessed [olbioi]. All the things I say are unmistakably true.”⁴³(x:121-137)

4§30 This prophecy does not actually occur in the *Odyssey*, but we will examine its significance later on. Odysseus sees many more heroes and heroines but becomes overwhelmed with the suffering and zombie-like lack of consciousness and quickly sails away again.

4§31 Odysseus returns briefly to Circe’s island to give her a full report and is then sent on his way to Thrinacia, the island where the sun god Helios pastures his cattle and sheep—but he is told there will be additional trials on the way. He must resist the temptation of the Sirens, and navigate the strait between the man-eating monster Scylla and the deadly whirlpool Charybdis. (Thanks a lot.)

4§32 As the draw of the senses becomes less the trials become stronger. The sirens use their beautiful song to tempt Odysseus not with sex, but with the memories of his glories in Troy and the promise of great knowledge.

Come here, Odysseus, famed for your many riddling words [ainoi], you great
glory to the Achaean name, [185] stop your ship so that you may hear our two

43. As he often does, Plato has the last word, recounting the activities of Odysseus as he chooses the life for his next incarnation: “And it fell out that the soul of Odysseus drew the last lot of all and came to make its choice, and, from memory of its former toils having flung away ambition, went about for a long time in quest of the life of an ordinary citizen who minded his own business, and with difficulty found it lying in some corner disregarded by the others, and upon seeing it said that it would have done the same had it drawn the first lot, and chose it gladly.” Plato. *Republic*. 10:620

voices. No man has ever yet sailed past us with his dark ship without staying to hear the sweet sound of the voices that come from our mouths, and he who listens will not only experience great pleasure before he goes back home [neesthai] but will also be far more knowledgeable than before, for we know everything that happened at Troy, that expansive place, [190] - all the sufferings caused by the gods for the Argives [= Achaeans] and Trojans and we know everything on earth, that nurturer of so many mortals - everything that happens. (xii:184-192)

4§33 But Circe has pointed out that “There is a great heap of dead men’s bones lying all around, with the flesh still rotting off them.” She has also given him the secret for withstanding them: he plugs the crew’s ears with wax so they cannot exercise the sense of hearing and has himself tied tight to the ship’s mast so he will not join those mouldering men. This is another temptation to give up the quest, to remain in our “glory days,” rest on our laurels. Had he not stopped the ears of the crew, they could have fallen for the sweet song of the past, and led the whole quest into disaster. (Which unfortunately is not far off.)

4§34 Next they come to another powerful trial—the choice between Scylla, a man-devouring monster who strikes without warning, and the maelstrom named Charybdis which can suck entire ships below the waves. (The phrase “between Scylla and Charybdis” of course still persists to indicate an impossible choice.) Odysseus has been warned by Circe and has already made the choice to take his chances with Scylla, reasoning that it is better to lose only six of his men rather than the whole ship. But their loss does affect Odysseus deeply:

As a fisherman, seated, spear in hand, upon some jutting rock throws bait into the water to deceive the poor little fishes, and spears them with the ox’s horn with which his spear is shod, throwing them gasping on to the land as he

catches them one by one –[255] even so did Scylla land these panting creatures on her rock and munch them up at the mouth of her den, while they screamed and stretched out their hands to me in their mortal agony. This was the most sickening sight that I saw throughout all my voyages. (xii:252-259)

4§35 I believe this episode represents those moments when our senses are completely overwhelmed by some thing or some desire that comes seemingly out of nowhere and takes over all sense of reason. This can sometimes seem pleasant enough when the attention appears to be focused on one great thing, but the difference is that we are not giving our attention—it is being taken from us. It is rather like the scene in the horror movie where you think the hero is finally in the clear when the monster rises up again, eyes blazing and teeth bared. A beautiful body, a new car, a new ideology, a large dose of praise can exert a powerful influence, perhaps even give us the sense that we have arrived home, but they are actual temptations that would serve to cut short the trip. Fortunately they are usually seen for what they are within a few days, but no doubt many of us would admit to having been devoured by some Scylla or caught in the vortex of some Charybdis.

4§36 So having passed through this strait, they next come to the island of Thrinacia, where the sun god Helios keeps his herds of cattle and sheep. On the surface, given the association with the sun, one might think that this could be the final destination. But Odysseus has been warned by both Teiresias and Circe not to harm these herds and he tries to convince the crew to sail past. The crew, however, led by Eurylokhos, threaten mutiny and against his better judgment Odysseus agrees to land. Again, long story short, Zeus creates an unfavorable wind keeping them on the island for a month and when their food runs out—and again Odysseus goes to sleep—the crew kill and eat some cattle rather than starve. Helios asks Zeus for vengeance, making an odd threat: *'If they do not square accounts with me about my cows, I will go*

down to *Hadēs* and shine there among the dead.’ (xii:383-384) When they try to leave their ship is wrecked and all but Odysseus are lost. Lashing together some pieces of the wrecked ship, Odysseus makes his way back through the straits and takes his chances with Charybdis this time, clinging to a fig tree when his raft is swallowed up. When it reappears, he is carried by the wind to Calypso’s island of Ogygia, all his crew gone, worn down by the sea, his identity as the hero of Troy drowned beneath the waves. The outer senses have been purged to make way for the opening of the inner senses: “*all this order of things you must set aside and refuse to see: you must close the eyes and call instead upon another vision which is to be waked within you, a vision, the birth-right of all, which few turn to use.*” But he has not completely surrendered his ego, and his stay on Ogygia becomes another plateau in his journey.

4§37 Ogygia would seem to be perfect: the island and its hostess are beautiful, and all his wants are filled. He has no cares, no responsibilities, and Calypso promises him all manner of sensual pleasure, and to make him immortal. It would be very easy to see this as the end of the line; the reward for all his suffering. *She took me in and treated me with the utmost kindness; indeed she wanted to make me immortal that I might never grow old, but she could not persuade me to let her do so.* (vii:256-258) He is kept there in a kind of bird-in-a-gilded-cage existence for 7 years until the day when Athena brings up his plight before Zeus. I think this represents another stage in the return, a kind of holding pattern similar to that of the island of Circe, which is of course superior to the confusion and constant trials that have gone before, but which will become a prison if we let it. Odysseus knows that it is not home, and when the gods decide it’s time for him to leave he jumps at the chance even though it means throwing himself again onto the salt sea and taking his chances with the wrath of Poseidon.

4§38 Which is, as we’ve seen, what happens. After being spotted by Poseidon, he is again shipwrecked and tossed about until he washes up on another land to be rescued by another

woman: Nausicaa of Scheria, (possibly 'burner of ships') who signals the end of Odysseus's career as a wanderer on the sea. She tells him how to gain the favor of her father, the king Alkinoos ('strength of mind') and her mother the queen Arete ('she who is prayed to'), and he is welcomed and shown complete *xenia*. Scheria is also a magical land, and the king and queen entertain a brief hope that Odysseus will stay and marry Nausicaa, but they all seem to know that he must return.

Lovely Nausicaa, with the gods' loveliness on her, stood by one of the bearing-posts supporting the roof of the hall, and admired him as she saw him pass.

[460] "Farewell stranger," said she, "do not forget me when you are safe at home again, for it is to me first that you owe a ransom for having saved your life." And resourceful Odysseus said, "Nausicaa, daughter of great-hearted Alkinoos, [465] may Zeus the mighty, high-thundering husband of Hera, grant that I may reach my home and see my day of homecoming [nostos]; so shall I bless you as a goddess all my days, for it was you who saved me." (viii:456-467)

4§39 While on Scheria, Odysseus is entertained like a king even though no one knows who he is. They have games and feasts and dancing and finally a performance by Demodokos, the court *rhapsode*, who sings the song of how Odysseus built the wooden horse and finally defeated the Trojans. It is a measure of how thoroughly he has distanced himself from this identity that it brings him no joy to hear that he is now immortalized in song. In fact:

He made wet his cheeks with the tears flowing from his eyelids, just as a woman cries, falling down and embracing her dear husband, who fell in front of the city and people he was defending, [525] trying to ward off the pitiless day of doom that is hanging over the city and its children. She sees him dying, gasping for his

last breath, and she pours herself all over him as she wails with a piercing cry. But there are men behind her, prodding her with their spears, hurting her back and shoulders, and they bring for her a life of bondage, which will give her pain and sorrow. [530] Her cheeks are wasting away with a sorrow [akhos] that is most pitiful [eleeinon]. So also did Odysseus pour out a piteous tear [dakruon] from beneath his brows.... (viii:522-532)⁴⁴

4§40 The extended metaphor Homer uses here is heartbreaking, but also reflects back on Odysseus the pain and misery he caused. This should be his moment of triumph when he realizes that he has attained *kleos* perhaps even greater than that of Achilles, but the image we get is one of empathy with the victims of his hubris. (It would be hundreds of years before the rest of the Greeks could allow themselves to feel the same empathy while watching Euripides' *The Trojan Women*.) And it is perhaps this realization that makes him even more eager to return home and free Penelope from the hubris of the suitors, as described by his mother Antikleia and Agamemnon in his visit to the Underworld.

4§41 In any case, the pull of the way back to Ithaca and reunion is very strong now, and cannot be broken, even though Scheria, like Ogygia, is bountiful and its court reflects Odysseus' model of the integrated state. If there is one episode in which Odysseus "flips," in which the force of his inner pull exceeds that of the outer pulls and temptations, it is this. He has relearned the principles of *xenia*, and the blessing he offers to the Scherians when he leaves is the same he wishes for himself, and overcomes the curse laid upon him by the

44. This metaphor is quoted by the Irish poet Seamus Heaney in his 1995 Nobel Prize acceptance speech, and he says of it: "Even to-day, three thousand years later, as we channel-surf over so much live coverage of contemporary savagery, highly informed but nevertheless in danger of growing immune, familiar to the point of overfamiliarity with old newsreels of the concentration camp and the gulag, Homer's image can still bring us to our senses. The callousness of those spear shafts on the woman's back and shoulders survives time and translation. The image has that documentary adequacy which answers all that we know about the intolerable." (nobelprize.org)

Cyclops. Here the good in his soul stands out, but may not be as apparent without the contrast of evil as seen in the *Iliad*.

“Sir, and all of you, farewell. Make your drink-offerings and send me on my way rejoicing, [40] for you have fulfilled my heart’s desire by giving me an escort, and making me presents, and may the gods grant that I turn those things into blessed [olbia] possessions; may I find my admirable wife living in peace among friends, and may you whom I leave behind me give satisfaction to your [45] wives and children; may the gods grant you every kind of good accomplishment [aretē], and may no evil thing come among your people.” Thus did he speak.

(xiii:37-47)

4§42 The Scherians load up one of their magic ships and transport Odysseus in less than a day back to Ithaca. Again he sleeps, but this time there are no self-serving senses to disrupt the plan: he is deposited, still asleep, on the shore of Ithaca with all his treasure. (The Scherians, however, make their way back but as we’ve seen are punished by Poseidon, who really knows how to carry a grudge, for helping Odysseus.) One last time Odysseus is deposited on an island and does not know that it is his native land until he meets again with Athena. And again, as we’ve seen, he comes not as a conquering hero, but is transformed into a homeless beggar. *The first shall be last and the last shall be first.*

4§43 We have already discussed the significance of most of the episodes that follow on Odysseus’ return to Ithaca—the killing of the suitors, the recognition of his family—so there is no need to repeat them. Odysseus has given up almost all of his former identity, his participation in violence, and needs only an act of Zeus by way of Athena to finish it. As the relatives of the slain suitors come looking for Odysseus, Zeus tells her:

Do whatever you like, but I will tell you what I think will be the most reasonable arrangement. Now that Odysseus is revenged, let them swear to a solemn covenant, in virtue of which he shall continue to rule, while we cause the others to forgive and forget the massacre of their sons and brothers. [485] Let them then all become friends as heretofore, and let peace and plenty reign.”

(xxiv:481-486)

Chapter 5: The Prophecy of Teiresias

5§1 We return now to the final metaphor in the *Odyssey* as prophesied by Teiresias in his meeting with Odysseus in Hades. His words were:

...you must go on a journey then, taking with you a well-made oar, until you come to a place where men do not know what the sea is and do not even eat any food that is mixed with sea salt, nor do they know anything about ships, which are painted purple on each side, [125] and well-made oars that are like wings for ships. And I will tell you a sign [sēma], a very clear one, which will not get lost in your thinking. Whenever someone on the road encounters you ¹²⁸ and says that it must be a winnowing shovel that you have on your radiant shoulder, at that point you must stick into the ground the well-made oar [130] and sacrifice beautiful sacrifices to lord Poseidon a ram, a bull, and a boar that mounts sows. And then go home and offer sacred hecatombs to the immortal gods who possess the vast expanses of the skies. Sacrifice to them in proper order, one after the other. As for yourself, death shall come to you from⁴⁵ the sea, [135] a gentle death, that is how it will come, and this death will kill you as you lose your strength in a prosperous old age. And the people all around [your corpse] will be blessed [olbioi]. All the things I say are unmistakably true.” (xi:121-137)

45. It's worth pointing out that several translations, including the one by A. T. Murray on the Perseus.edu site, and that of Robert Fagles, translate this as “far from the sea,” in keeping with the symbol of the sea as a state of ignorance. The original Greek lends itself to several interpretations.



A winnowing shovel in use (Wikimedia Commons)

5§2 A winnowing shovel, as you may know, is a pole with a flat surface at one end used to toss harvested wheat into the air so the wind can blow away the outer husk, or chaff, and allow the heavier wheat kernel to fall back to earth. It is a very ancient form of discrimination; separating the wheat from the chaff, the useful from the not useful. The implement itself bears a strong resemblance to an oar. What Teiresias is saying is that Odysseus must carry his oar until he finds people who have no experience of the “vast waste” of the sea—the state of ignorance—but who see it as a tool of discrimination. Gregory Nagy⁴⁶ carries this metaphor further:

Just as the implement carried by Odysseus is one sign with two meanings, so also the picture of this implement that we see stuck into the ground is one sign with two meanings. We have already noted the first of these meanings, namely, that the sema or ‘sign’ given by Teiresias to Odysseus in *Odyssey* xi 126, ... is in fact the tomb of Odysseus, imagined as a heap of earth with an oar stuck into it on top, just as the tomb of the seafarer Elpenor is a heap of earth with his own

46. Nagy. *The Ancient Greek Hero in 24 Hours*. Harvard. 2013

oar stuck into it on top, ...; this heap of earth is actually called the sema of Elpenor (xi 75), and the word here clearly means ‘tomb.’ Accordingly, I paraphrase the first of the two meanings as a headline, “the seafarer is dead.” As for the second of the two meanings, I propose to paraphrase it as another headline, “the harvest is complete.” Here is why: the act of sticking the shaft of a winnowing shovel, with the blade pointing upward, into a heap of harvested wheat after having winnowed away the chaff from the grain is a ritual gesture indicating that the winnower’s work is complete (as we see from the wording of Theocritus 7.155-156). And the act of sticking the shaft of an oar into the grounds, again with the blade facing upward, is a ritual gesture indicating that the oarsman’s work is likewise complete—as in the case of Odysseus’ dead comrade Elpenor, whose tomb is to be a heap of earth with the shaft of his oar stuck into the top (xi 78-78 and xii 13-15, ...). So also with Odysseus: he too will never again have to sail the seas.

5§3 The seafarer is dead—he will never again wander and be tossed about on the salt sea of ignorance. And the harvest is complete—he will no longer need to use his discrimination, because everywhere he looks, he sees the One.

Nostos

I can't recall just what it was that made me leave,
To venture into that dark world of Strife.
Some dream, some urge for glory to Odysseus alone.
Instead I got deceit and mere cleverness.
I found myself among those stealing armor from men still dying,
Confused, not yet having begun their trudge to Hell.
If that be glory, god grant me shame.
Years later, I would wash up on the shores of Scheria,
Alone, naked, spent, nameless; mere flotsam.
I was truly No One then, but at least I was not a beast.
Still the memory that had led me past the rocks, the sirens,
The concealings, the enchantments, Hell itself, led me back to Ithaca.
I had to slay those who wanted my throne; no negotiating there.
So I have brought justice again, but have lost my stories;
No murder and madness now, no struggles. A dull dinner companion,
But that my heart is swollen with love.
Now I am no more the man of pain, of twists and turns,
I am Telemachus, I am Penelope, I am Laertes, I am Athena.
I am I again, unnamed and whole.