Rereading Homer

Voyaging with Odysseus: The Wile and Resilience of Virtue

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Odysseus has lived through many transformations since Homer commemorated him in the *Odyssey*. None of them, however, has made Homer obsolete. Both the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* have been translated many times. By common consent of those competent to judge such matters, Robert Fagles has done a superb job with the *Odyssey*.[1] Even before I read it, I heard it read by Ian McKellan. That was an eye-opener, or should I say ear-opener. It sounded as though that was the natural way to come at it. The spaciousness, the contrast of tones alternating between casual, even rambling digression and the tightness of dramatic moments, the sense of intimacy a voice establishes—all these drew me into the poem and made me aware of new meanings, or forgotten relationships, that I would like to share. The *Odyssey* is so large and various that we need reminding of its riches. The only way to do this properly, it seems to me, is to travel along with Homer, hitting the highlights and commenting as I go.

The son goes in search of his father

As the poem opens, the gods, who steer human destiny in the large while leaving elbow room for humans to confound themselves on their own, are having a conference. The assembled gods

[1] Homer, *The Odyssey,* translated by Robert Fagles; introduction and notes by Bernard Knox (New York: Viking, 1996), 560 pp., cloth $35; (New York: Penguin USA, 1999), 541 pp., paper $14.95.

Ignoring the gods is costly.

take pity on Odysseus held captive on Calypso's island, all except Poseidon, still enraged at what Odysseus did to his son, the Cyclops. But Poseidon is away in far-off Ethiopia, so the others are uninhibited. Zeus speaks, complaining that mortals blame the gods for their miseries when they themselves add to their problems by their own recklessness. As example he takes Aegisthus, who was repeatedly warned by Hermes not to court Clytemnestra or murder Agamemnon but who went right ahead anyway and is now paying the price. Exactly so, says Athena, let all die thus who deserve it. But, father Zeus, Odysseus longs for his home and wife despite all the goddess Calypso can do to seduce him. So why are you dead set against him? What nonsense, he replies, I think Odysseus a splendid man; it's brother Poseidon who has it in for him. But let's plan the poor fellow's return. How can Poseidon stand against the rest of us?

Of course Athena has it figured out: let Hermes tell Calypso she has to let Odysseus go while I go to Ithaca and rouse his son to go seek information about his missing dad. She descends from Olympus as Mentes to find sad Telemachus sitting amidst the good-for-nothing suitors. He greets her with automatic courtesy, but when they have eaten he tells her so no one else hears of the wicked behavior of these revelers feasting at the expense of his father, who he presumes is dead. Athena assures him it is not so and offers advice: tell the suitors to go home and let Penelope go home to her father if she wishes, but he should go to Pylos, Nestor's home, then on to Sparta, where Menelaus and Helen live, to find out what is known about Odysseus. You are tall and handsome now, you're no longer a boy, you must act like a man.

Penelope comes down from her room, begging the bard to sing a different song—this one saddens her so. Surprisingly, Telemachus rebukes her, saying it's not the bard's fault, but Zeus's.

> So mother,
> go back to your quarters. Tend to your own tasks, the distaff and the loom, and keep the women working hard as well. As for giving orders, men will see to that, but most of all: I hold the reins of power in this house.

Everyone is astonished—perhaps even Telemachus is—at this bold speech, the first indication that now he is indeed a man. Soon he is off on his way to Pylos, but not before rebuking the suitors soundly.

Even Zeus, apparently, is afraid to offend his brother Poseidon, the god most responsible for Odysseus's misadventures. Athena, who showed her partiality for Odysseus as a person only once or twice in the *Iliad* now becomes his ardent patron and guardian in the *Odyssey*. Why the gods have made Odysseus languish on Calypso's island for seven long years before bestirring themselves we will never know, but without Athena's support Odysseus might never have escaped that nymph.

Odysseus's character draws the gods' attention.

Calypso, though a goddess of sorts, does not have the power to make Odysseus love her and forget Penelope. Nor do the gods endow humans with their character: Odysseus was resourceful and long-enduring and a born leader before the gods paid him any attention; it was because of his character that he drew their attention. Athena sees a masculine counterpart of herself in the man, so she loves him as though he were her own son. And she sees in Telemachus a true son of his father. Still so young, the boy needs a little urging to take matters into his own hands, and this she provides.

Repeatedly in the poem the Odysseus-Penelope relationship is contrasted with that of Agamemnon-Clytemnestra. Never for a day, perhaps never for an hour, does Odysseus not think of Penelope. And she does everything she can to avoid bedding with any of the suitors. On the other hand, poor Agamemnon arrives home to find not only an unfaithful wife, but a murderess. The strength and purity of the bond between Odysseus and Penelope is the best indicator we could have of the essential integrity of our hero. This is so despite the fact that Odysseus finds beautiful women attractive, as they certainly find him. Whatever momentary satisfaction he may find in sex with others—and Homer is reticent about this—Penelope remains the strong magnet pulling him toward home.

We know early on that Odysseus is the kind of hero who succeeds against all odds. But the gods, or at least Poseidon, make sure he sustains extremes of peril and suffering to earn his final peace. The kind of suspense we find in the *Odyssey* is the vivid reliving through of things past until Odysseus reaches Ithaca; then we are, so to speak, at his side in a steadily advancing present. Events are prolonged, sometimes almost unbearably stretched out, because Odysseus wills it so. Experience has taught him a continual wariness, just as it has Penelope. But in addition he enjoys

the sense of power he gets from knowing what those around him do not.

To return to the simpler, youthful Telemachus. The suitors all consider him a kid to be laughed at until he succeeds in taking ship to Pylos; then they begin to think it is time to get rid of him when he returns—if he does. They plan an ambush. Really it is Athena who has guided his transition to manhood and given him sound advice about what to do. Though she appeared in disguise, in his heart Telemachus realized that he was dealing with an immortal. When pressed Telemachus admits a doubt that he is the son of Odysseus, though his mother has always told him so. But to Athena his appearance leaves no doubt. That build, those fine eyes—there can be no mistake. And she is charmed by his courtesy and frankness. (I imagine him as longer of leg than his father and less heavy in the shoulders and chest.)

Constantly guided by the motherly Athena, the inexperienced young man arrives safely at Pylos. Now he is embarked on his first real adventure; Athena tells him it is no time for shyness. Good old Nestor is overjoyed to see him and almost overwhelms him with his hospitality. Eager as ever to talk, Nestor gives a long account of the hardships the Achaeans encountered both at Troy and on the way home. Again we hear how Agamemnon met his death at the hands of that villain Aegisthus, but also how Orestes exacted vengeance on the very day that Menelaus arrived after a seven-year absence. Young Telemachus astonishes the company by the splendor of his oratory, thereby giving further proof that he is truly the son of his illustrious father. Loaded down with supplies and accompanied by Pisistratus, Nestor's son, they make their way by land to Sparta.

Menelaus and Helen, apparently now content with her housewifely role, live in luxurious splendor. A festive occasion is at hand: two weddings, of a son and of a daughter, are in progress. Nevertheless, Menelaus commands that the guests be welcomed with full hospitality, which includes the maid service of being bathed and rubbed down with oil, then supplied with a soft cloak and tunic. Telemachus is as astonished at the richness of Menelaus's establishment as the hosts are at the kingly behavior of the two young guests.

Like Nestor, only more so, Menelaus in his leisurely tale of the doings at Troy insists on his closeness to Odysseus. Once more we

hear of our hero's greatness; in fact we might get the impression that Odysseus, much more than Achilles, was responsible for winning the Trojan War. Helen, still ravishing, appears and expresses sorrow for all the misery she is responsible for, "shameless whore that I was." To her, the likeness of Telemachus to his father is immediate: the feet, the hands, the eyes, the head, the hair. Menelaus agrees.

At the mention of great Odysseus none of them can restrain their tears. Vergil is said to celebrate the tears in things, but as for weeping, the *Odyssey* is full of it. Not only does Odysseus find many occasions for tears; he is also the cause of tears in others. Nothing is recollected in tranquility. And Odysseus is never far from the thoughts of others, so that his greatness is made to loom up before he ever appears in person.

Odyssey *full of tears.*

Meanwhile Penelope, hearing that Telemachus has gone, gives way to even sharper tears than she has for her husband. She continues to hope that her husband survives, though she always tells herself and others that he must have perished. While her husband is always on the move, Penelope is fixed in one spot. She rarely leaves her room; her only company is her maids—and Telemachus. But lately, it seems, she has seen little of him. She is not only a patient woman but one with iron resolve. Her heroism is the only kind available to a woman.

Out on the western sea

The gods are in good session once more. Athena reminds Zeus that Odysseus still languishes on Calypso's isle; he sends Hermes down to tell the nymph that she must let the hero go. Zeus declares that destiny rules that Odysseus shall reach his homeland and the ones he loves. So Hermes leaves to set the ball in motion. Here is some of the description of the god's journey:

> The wand in his grip, the powerful giant-killer,
> swooping down from Pieria, down the high clean air,
> plunged to the sea and skimmed the waves like a tern
> that down the deadly gulfs of the barren salt swells
> glides and dives for fish,
> dipping its beating wings in bursts of spray—
> so Hermes skimmed the crests on endless crests.

The gods travel lightly and at great speed, and Hermes is doubtless the best at space travel. But that doesn't mean he doesn't get

his feet wet. Luckily, Homer is able to give us a bird's eye view.

Odysseus ever faithful to beloved wife.

He finds Calypso sitting by a blazing fire. Outside her cave is surrounded by deep woods with the trees full of birds; clusters of ripe grapes grow wild; four fountains gush forth cold water; lush meadows are filled with violets and parsley. Hermes himself, we hear, is struck with wonder at this paradise. And at the center of all this beauty is lovely Calypso herself. We will find no such landscape in the *Iliad*, that poem of force with death never far off. But in this untamed garden made for pleasure what do we find? Odysseus is sitting gazing out to sea, sobbing his heart out for his beloved wife.

He readily admits that Calypso is more beautiful than Penelope. Moreover, she has offered to confer immortality on him. Maybe, after seven years . . . .

At any rate, Calypso blazes up against the "greater gods" in protest at their decision. But when she submits, she does all in her power to help her erstwhile lover. He must build his own raft, but she supplies clothes and food and wine and water. True to form, Odysseus suspects another trap, but the nymph vows that she is thinking only of his welfare. Fortune seems to be smiling as he sets sail for home.

Unfortunately Poseidon, on his way home from Africa, is furious when he learns how the gods have let Odysseus off so easily. He whips up a terrible storm. We along with Odysseus feel the malicious power of the sea as it tears to pieces his raft and leaves him clinging to a shard for dear life. *We* know that fate has decreed his ultimate survival, but he doesn't. And his great patron Athena is nowhere around (even she dare not challenge an angry Poseidon).

What a watery poem the *Odyssey* is! The waves can be angry but often the sea is the safest place to be. Once landed, as we shall see, danger if not death hangs over our hero and his men. His misadventures come straight out of folklore. The difference is that Homer fills out his stories with realistic little details that naturalize the fantastic. And many of those details are not for the squeamish. But from this nightmarish fairy land Odysseus finds himself tossed up on Phaeacia, a country out of romance but of a very different sort from any he has previously tackled. This is a place of high civilization on the "edge of the world" where the arts are cel-

ebrated, including the art of gracious living. Life here is an esthetic experience with only a few bumps here and there.

But wily Odysseus knows nothing of this. He only knows that he has been tossed naked and exhausted on some foreign shore. Once again Athena busies herself to assure her favorite's success. In dream she visits the princess Nausicaa and puts into her head the thought of taking laundry to the river near where it empties into the sea. She sets out for the place in a mule cart accompanied by her maids, after duly getting her father's permission. Their duties done, they play ball and their shouts awaken Odysseus, who has spent the night in the bushes. He makes bold to appear, holding a branch to cover his nakedness. The other maids start back in terror, but Nausicaa, filled with courage lent her by Athena, stands her ground. Summoning all his eloquence, Odysseus questions whether she is a goddess. Whatever her doubts, she has no hesitation in welcoming this scrubby, brine-crested creature who speaks with such a honeyed tongue. She orders her maids to bring cloak and shirt and take him to the river to bathe and get a rubdown with oil. Unlike other occasions when the routine of hospitality of being bathed and oiled by maids is offered and accepted without comment, this time Odysseus says he would be embarrassed to appear naked before these young maids and bids them stand back. So he takes care of his own toilet, remarking how long it has been since oil touched his skin.

Once he is washed and clothed, Athena happily makes him tall and handsome, a man any maid might desire as a husband. Nausicaa, as thoughtful as she is lovely, welcomes him warmly but takes the precaution of preventing gossip by sending him alone to wait in a grove while she goes to tell her father of the stranger's arrival. She instructs him to approach the queen and try to win her favor; that will assure his successful homecoming.

This charming scene, unique in this poem, has a light-hearted quality combining tact, wit, surprise, and a subtle sexuality. Underneath, of course, tension exists. Odysseus feels he cannot afford to let his guard down despite the innocence and good will of this lovely young stranger. Even when he is naked he is still in disguise, simply an anonymous man from the sea (however like a god he may appear). But the ever-resourceful Odysseus adapts to his new circumstances like the chameleon he is. And of course, especially when Athena lends a helping hand, he makes a substan-

tial impression without benefit of any reputation; consequently, when people actually learn who he is, they should have suspected all along.

Like everything on this blessed isle, the palace of King Alcinous is an esthetic masterpiece with its high ceilings, spacious hall, and rich appointments. Along one wall is a series of thrones, not only for the royals but for other nobles as well. Odysseus, made invisible by a mist created by Athena, reaches the throne of Queen Arete unobserved. He grasps her knees and, citing his many woes, pleads for her help. Arete, as kind as she is wise, soon bids her maids to tend to the stranger's needs. In water poured from a golden pitcher into a silver basin, he rinses his hands and helps himself to the generous meal set before him. What a tyrant the belly is, he remarks, demanding food whatever the circumstances are. The king, following his wife's lead, promises Odysseus not only a handsome welcome but the assurance that he will direct his men to bring Odysseus safely home to his own dear land. Then he goes to bed in soft throws and wools; such luxury he has not known for many a long year. The next day he is entertained by festivities and games: running, wrestling, boxing, and dancing. Meanwhile Athena has again been at her hobby of making Odysseus appear more massive and impressive. Odysseus is challenged to join in the games and mocked when he refuses. So he takes up a discus and throws it an unbelievable distance. That silences all criticism.

The ship is prepared and the crew made ready to take Odysseus home. What most impresses him in the farewell proceedings is the singing of the bard Demodicus, blessed by the Muse at the expense of blindness. First he sings the comic tale of Ares and Aphrodite, caught in a net in their lovemaking by Hephaestus, enraged that Aphrodite should betray him. All the gods laugh heartily. But when the bard turns to tales of Troy in which Odysseus played a part, tears fill the hero's eyes, unobserved by all except the king.

Finally Odysseus reveals himself and starts an account of his adventures up to the time he landed on Calypso's isle. Skipping over the lesser trials, I will stop with Odysseus as he encounters Cyclops. Here he both saves himself and makes a dreadful mistake when he blinds the monster who happens to be the son of Poseidon. Arriving at the land of these giants, Odysseus leaves

most of his men safely on board ship in the harbor while he and a dozen of his men venture ashore and discover the cave of the Cyclops. In this anarchic society it is every Cyclops for himself. The land is wild and uncultivated, though sheep and cattle find pasturage. In the cave are great stacks of cheese. Like mice running free they tackle the huge stacks. Then some of the men want to make their getaway; it is Odysseus who bids them stay until it is too late—the Cyclops arrives home and shuts the entrance with a huge boulder. Odysseus tries to bargain with the monster, but nothing doing. Brute force cares nothing for eloquent words. The Cyclops seizes two of the men, dashes their brains out against the floor and stuffs them into his mouth—blood, guts, bones and all. He washes the meal down with milk from his sheep.

This calls for desperate measures, and resourceful Odysseus comes up with one of his most famous schemes: take the giant's stick, sharpen one end, char it in the fire, and plunge it in the Cyclops's one eye. Luckily Odysseus has some unmixed wine which he persuades the giant to drink; they have only to wait until he's snoring to do the dirty deed. The Cyclops's yells reverberate far and wide, but when he cries out, Nobody is killing me, the other Cyclops retire and leave him alone. Odysseus has used yet another disguise, though in name only. One might expect the Cyclops to comb every inch of his cave to catch the miscreants. Instead he retires to nurse his wound, assuming that there is no escape. Using the underbellies of those shaggy sheep to cling to, Odysseus and the remaining men make their escape. Taunted by Odysseus from the distance of his ship, the Cyclops prays to father Poseidon for vengeance.

Folklore lifted to epic level.

Stories of the defeat of brawn by brain are popular in folklore, and cannibalism is a not uncommon threat. Homer has added to this pastoral fairy tale such vividly realistic detail that we see and feel and smell these gory events:

> Hoisting high that olive stake with its stabbing point,
> Straight into the monster's eye they rammed it hard—
> I drove my weight on it from above and bored it home,
> As a shipwright bores his beam with a shipwright's drill
> the men below, whipping the strap back and forth, whirl
> and the drill keeps twisting faster, never stopping—
> So we seized our stake with its fiery tip
> and bored it round and round in the giant's eye
> till blood came boiling up around that smoking shaft

and the hot blast singed his brow and eyelids round
the core
and the broiling eyelid burst—
its crackling roots blazed
and hissed—
as blacksmith plunges a glowing axe or adze
in an ice-cold bath and the metal screeches steam
and its temper hardens—that's the iron's strength—
so the eye of the Cyclops sizzled round that stake!

There's writing for you! Thus is folklore lifted to the realm of epic.

Once Odysseus is in sight of Ithaca's shore only to be blown way off course because he falls asleep and his men, suspecting the bag containing the winds holds secret treasure, open this Pandora's box of misfortune and let the wild winds free. After the Lestrygonians, yet another cannibalistic adventure, it is a relief to arrive at Aeaea, a seemingly peaceful and verdant isle. A party sent ahead to scout the situation is greeted by the beautiful Circe, who, according to her custom, exercises her magic to turn the men into swine. Eurylochus returns alone to warn Odysseus and beg him to leave at once. Odysseus rejects him and makes his way to the witch's palace. On the way he meets a youth (actually Hermes) who bestows on him the moly which will make Odysseus immune to the deadly charms of Circe. Finding Odysseus cannot be transformed, she succumbs to him and invites him to be her bed mate, a suggestion that results in a year's stay. His men, returned to their human form, urge him to set out for home again. Now Circe proves very helpful (she had sworn not to harm Odysseus or his men). She gives him careful direction about the perils that lie ahead and tells him that he and his men must visit the Land of the Dead before they go home.

Yet even as fortune presents a smiling face, bad luck strikes again: Elpenor, the youngest of the crew, rising from sleep ventures out on the roof and falls to the ground, breaking his neck. Businesslike Odysseus tells his men that grieving does no good; they take to ship leaving Elpenor without burial rites.

Fully primed by Circe, Odysseus knows exactly what to do when they arrive at the border. He has them dig a trench and fill it with milk, honey, wine, and barley. To this must be added the sacrificial blood of animals, which those spirits A. E. Housman called "the strengthless dead" must drink in order to be able to speak. First to appear is Elpenor, and Odysseus weeps to see him. To the

young man's plea for a proper burial Odysseus vows to carry out his request.

Odysseus is brought to tears again when his aged mother appears, but he must hold her off until Tiresias has spoken. When the great prophet comes forth he greets Odysseus by name and asks, "What brings you to this joyless kingdom of the dead?" No need of an answer—once the prophet's voice is blooded, he fulfills his function, warning Odysseus not to give in to temptation when they reach the Oxen of the Sun. If only you could control your passions, he seems to say, the homeward journey could be clear sailing. If not, poor Odysseus will arrive home a broken man. The prophet appears to know what will happen, but does offer the consolation that Odysseus will die a peaceable death. He predicts the trouble Odysseus will have with the suitors, being vague about the circumstances.

Control of passions would smooth journey.

Now his mother is permitted to drink the blood. She is bursting with questions. He tells her of his many sufferings ever since he left for Troy; she gives him news of his wife and son. But how did she die? Pitiably. She was brought low not by some god or long illness but by grief for her son "with his gentle ways." Three times Odysseus tries to embrace her, and three times her spirit merely "flutters through his fingers." As for Penelope, besieged by unmannerly suitors, she keeps hoping against hope that her beloved husband will return one day.

And now a swarm of women sent by Persephone jostle each other to get news of their husbands and sons. Each individual has a story to tell, so we along with Odysseus are treated to a veritable anthology of myths and legends which, though briefly told, is as comprehensive as anything until Ovid's *Metamorphoses*. Prominent among them are accounts of Heracles, Oedipus, Agamemnon (again!), and among the women Leda, Phaedra, and Ariadne. Gods and humans are endlessly entangled, but the offspring of intermarriage do not inherit the immortality of the deathless gods.

It is getting late at night. Queen Arete urges her fellow Pheacians to do all they can to honor and help this conquering hero. Meanwhile they beg Odysseus for more of his story. Still to come is one of the most famous encounters: the shade of Achilles strides forward. He is anxious to know if his son Neoptolemus has lived up to his name. He is gratified to learn that his son indeed has. When

Odysseus congratulates him on his leadership and rule, however, he makes the memorable reply, "By god, I'd rather slave on earth for another man—/some dirt poor tenant farmer who scrapes to keep alive—/than rule down here over the breathless dead." So saying, Achilles strides over the fields of Asphodel and disappears. Others come forward, but great Ajax, next in prowess to Achilles, hangs back. Still furious that Odysseus won the armor of Achilles, he refuses to say a word despite the eloquent attempts of Odysseus to conciliate him. Odysseus is unforgivable.

The whole visit to this land of shadows is both appalling and touching. Achilles explains clearly enough why an existence so *insubstantial* would be almost worse than hell. A life (in death) without gravity, especially for a man so passionate as Achilles, would be like being weightlessly comatose, except for the fact of memory, which would make the contrast between life and death even more frustrating. Some have thought Achilles's remark exaggerated, but it seems to me a fitting epigraph for this realm. Achilles would have understood that later legend, Abandon hope, all ye who enter here (though in his own terms). To anyone a bloodless state of being is bad enough, but to a man of action . . . . For a visitor like Odysseus, however, access to the dead is surprisingly easy. No river to cross, no hungry three-headed dog to pacify, and no one to bribe—and control of each shade's capacity to talk! Odysseus cannot embrace his mother, not because there is some kind of wall between them but because there is "nothing" there except a talking head. Luckily for us none of the denizens of this joyless land can leave the precincts; otherwise we could face an army of vampires! True, Tiresias can tell the future (as he always could) and Odysseus can learn of the recent past from his mother, for the little space where Odysseus has provided the necessary sustenance, but these poor bloodless shades must find visitors like Odysseus few and far between.

True to his word, Odysseus returns to Aeaea to give Elpenor proper burial rites. Circe greets Odysseus's men warmly; then, drawing Odysseus aside, she warns him of the horrors of Scilla and Charybdis, of the perils of the sirens' song—if you must hear it, have your men tie you to the mast and put wax in their ears—and particularly take care not to bother the Oxen of the Sun. That would be most devastating of all.

The ship loaded with good things to eat and drink, they depart once more, the men in high spirits. But sometimes it is lightest before the dark. Though they escape the sweet song the sirens sing to lure the men to their death (by carefully following Circe's directions), they do not pass Scilla and Charybdis unscathed—the six-headed monster Scilla succeeds in grabbing six men and chawing them down. But worse is yet to come. In the land of the Sun they are held up by contrary winds for a month; their supplies give out and hunger gnaws; while Odysseus sleeps (rest apparently not allowed him) Eurylochus persuades the men to kill the fatal oxen. Odysseus wakes to the enticing smell of roasting meat and realizes that their doom is sealed. Once they are out at sea Zeus raises such a storm that the ship is totally destroyed and all the crew except Odysseus is lost. He barely manages to reach Calypso's isle. At this point Odysseus ends his long narration, not wanting to repeat what the audience has already heard.

The Pheacians give Odysseus a grand send-off, providing gifts and ship and crew. Still asleep, he is deposited on his native soil. From now on a very different kind of adventure awaits our hero.

The homecoming

On Ithaca's shores at last, Odysseus does not know where he is. Athena has cast a mist around him that hides familiar landmarks, so his first reaction is to curse the very Pheacians who have done him such a favor, thinking they have played a dirty trick on him. When Athena clears away the mist and appears as a shepherd boy, Odysseus thankfully greets him, inquiring what land this is. He learns that it is truly Ithaca. Wily as always, he invents a fantastic story about his ancestry in Crete. Athena smiles at his fabrication and transforms herself into a lovely maiden. She cannot resist this man, so alert and resourceful, and pats him on the head. Meanwhile the generous Pheacians pay a steep price for their boon to our hero: within sight of the shore the angry Poseidon smashes their ship and creates a great mountain cutting them off from the outside world.

Now Athena reveals herself and advises Odysseus on his next moves. He must disguise himself as a beggar (she will do the makeup job) and present himself to his faithful swineherd, one of the very few he can trust with his secret. Used to disguises,

Odysseus makes no objection, though it is hard to imagine any other great heroes who would quietly submit to such a degradation.

Odysseus praised for kindness.

Honest Eumaeus receives the stranger with generous hospitality. Having known hardship himself, he easily sympathizes with this apparently wretched old man. Eumaeus is a slave bought long ago by Laertes and treated like a son (though according to his story he was once a prince). At any rate he needs no lesson in manners. Odysseus has the satisfaction of hearing himself described as a kind, good master who is sorely missed. With the single exception of Ajax, other people always speak with respect, and usually affection, of Odysseus. But of how many of the passionate warriors in the *Iliad* can we ever say that they were praised for kindness? Perhaps Hector saying farewell to Andromache and his little son Astyanax. But no, even Achilles giving in to Priam to allow Hector's funeral rites is motivated by a sense of rightness rather than kindness. In war mercy and kindness are weaknesses, and in fact we see little evidence of kindness in Odysseus these last twenty years. In peacetime things were different.

It is a kind of irony that must be heartbreaking but yet deeply satisfying to Odysseus to hear opinions of himself expressed by those who suppose him dead. In the story he concocts for Eumaeus, Odysseus portrays himself as a man of high birth betrayed by his pretended benefactors. Yes, he was at Troy and knew Odysseus well. He is ready to swear that Odysseus will return, but Eumaeus, who has heard many a fraudulent tale by strangers, cannot believe him.

Athena reminds Telemachus that it is time to leave Lacedaemon. He has met with generous hospitality from Menelaus and Helen, as well as from Nestor, as the son of admired Odysseus but also as a young man of substance in his own right. The homeward bound ship, filled with gifts and supplies, is given a fair breeze by Athena and arrives home safely, avoiding the ambush prepared by the suitors. A favorable omen, an eagle carrying a dove in its talons, is interpreted by the sage Theoclymenus to mean that indeed Odysseus and his line will reign in Ithaca. But Telemachus is not convinced.

The always-wary Odysseus tests Eumaeus again, saying that he must go to the city and beg. The loyal swineherd will not hear

of it. At least wait till Telemachus returns. So Odysseus does, passing the time hearing the sad news of Penelope, who spends her days in her second-floor room, praying for the return of her husband. Old Laertes is even more isolated on his farm where in sorrow for his missing son he hopes for death. As for his mother (as Odysseus already knows), she died of grief longing for her missing son.

Fine-tuned judgment essential.

Long enduring Odysseus is going to have to bide his time before he can release his pent-up emotions in a final act of gory violence. Patience, self-control, wit and deceit must be his weapons. The suitors present a redoubtable obstacle for a single man; yet how can he lose with a son like Telemachus, two loyal servants, and above all the warrior goddess Athena to help him? Nevertheless, careful maneuvering and fine-tuned judgment on his part are essential. The gods help those who help themselves. And even when we know in a large sense what is going to happen, we do not know the actual details that must be lived through. There is plenty for suspense to feed on. Over and over we see those about to be damned damning themselves. Homer is reticent about intervening in his own person; nevertheless, the lines are clearly drawn: the good prove to be very good, and the bad are equally extreme in the other direction.

When Odysseus approached the swineherd's house, several fierce dogs rushed him and Eumaeus had to call them off. But now Odysseus hears footsteps but no action from the dogs. Telemachus enters and is greeted by Eumaeus with joyful tears. Odysseus, sitting quietly by, contains himself. (Homer compares the meeting of Telemachus and Eumaeus with that of a father meeting his long lost son!) Odysseus in his beggar-like role gets up to give his seat to Telemachus, who waves his father back and has Eumaeus set another place. Telemachus with his accustomed courtesy waits until the meal is done to inquire of the stranger. It is not Odysseus but Eumaeus who answers, saying that the stranger comes from Crete and has wandered the world as a vagabond. When Odysseus finally speaks up, he inquires about the suitors and whether Telemachus has anyone he can count on to help him, just as though he had no knowledge of these matters. Telemachus tells Eumaeus to go to his mother with the news that he is back, but for her not to tell anyone else. Now that father and son are alone the goddess Athena appears and the dogs whimper in terror. Only Odysseus

sees her; she bids him to reveal himself so that he and Telemachus can plan their strategy for getting rid of the suitors. Her eyes "blaze" in anticipation of battle. She strokes him with her golden wand and he looks youthful and godlike again.

Telemachus is terrified, thinking he must be in the presence of a god, but Odysseus says, "No, I am not a god," and stands revealed as himself. Weeping bitter tears, he embraces his son, but Telemachus is still not convinced until Odysseus explains the power Athena has to work such magic in a person's appearance. Only then can father and son allow their emotions free play:

> They cried out, shrilling cries, pulsing sharper than birds of prey —eagles, vultures with hooked claws—when farners plunder their nests of young too young to fly.

Odysseus tells his son to return to the suitors and try to win them over, though it won't work. Meanwhile no matter how he is abused as beggar, Telemachus is to make no outcry. Not even Penelope or Laertes is to be told about his return. In preparation for what is to come Telemachus is to gather the arms of the suitors and store them away. When asked what he is up to, he should say he is doing this for their protection lest when they are in their cups someone should be hurt in a drunken brawl.

Eumaeus has carried out his mission telling Penelope of her son's safe return. He goes back to his farm. Meanwhile the suitors who lay in ambush have returned empty-handed, arousing trepidation in all their hearts. They had better get the young prince out of the way—and soon. Only Amphinomous objects, saying he will accept the idea of murder only if the gods approve!

Upon hearing of the plot to murder her son, Penelope descends from her room and directly addresses Antinous, the leader of the suitors, reminding him of the favor Odysseus did his father when a mob would have destroyed him. Eurymachus, trying to soothe her, says he will not allow anyone to plot the death of Telemachus, though he does not mean a word of what he says. Penelope retires, once more weeping for Odysseus before Athena brings her blessed sleep.

When Telemachus goes to see his mother he is first greeted by the old nurse Eurycleia, whose tears and hugs are only outdone by those of his mother, longing for news of her husband. Telemachus repeats the account Menelaus gave him of Odysseus being trapped on Calypso's isle, tells her to go bathe and change

her clothes, and returns to the council hall, astonishing the suitors by his commanding appearance, worked by Athena's magic.

Eumaeus and the beggar (Odysseus) have set out for town, where Odysseus has insisted he will beg his fortune. On the way Odysseus suffers the first of many abuses when a goatherd taunts him on his miserable condition and even tries to knock him down. Odysseus stands firm, resisting the temptation to split the fellow's skull. Eumaeus is the one who speaks up on his behalf, calling down curses on the goatherd and praying to the gods for justice.

A dog remembers.

He is treated quite differently when they arrive at the royal palace, not by any human but by a dog. Old Argos, a mere puppy when Odysseus left twenty years ago, lays back his ears and thumps his tail in recognition of his master. Odysseus turns aside to hide his tears. The dog, a mighty sports dog in his prime, as Eumaeus tells us at some length, can do no more and dies. This is not the least of the recognition scenes that grow in intensity as we near the promised end.

Antinous, the cruel and haughty leader of the suitors, heaps insults on Odysseus the supposed beggar and, going beyond the other suitors, not only refuses him a pittance of food but throws a footstool at him. Odysseus does not budge. The others warn Antinous that this may be a god; Antinous ridicules the idea. Telemachus boils within but keeps his cool, again proving he is a true son of his illustrious father.

Penelope sends for the beggar, hoping to hear news of her husband. When Telemachus hears his mother say how Odysseus and his son would avenge the terrible wrongs of the suitors if only Odysseus were here, he lets forth a mighty sneeze! Penelope breaks out laughing (perhaps for the first time in years); she tells Eumaeus to call the stranger at once. "You hear how my son sealed all I said with a sneeze?" And she goes on to promise that if what the stranger says is true, she will give him cloak and shirt. An excruciating scene for Telemachus!

A braggart beggar, thinking it safe to challenge an aging compatriot, and egged on by the suitors, fights Odysseus who easily beats him. This performance should have alerted the suitors that this man was no ordinary beggar—and indeed they do treat him better—so at least he gets plenty to eat. In return Odysseus addresses Amphinomus, perhaps the most reasonable of the suitors, with some worldly advice:

The human condition inescapable.

> Of all that breathes and crawls across the earth,
> our mother earth breeds nothing feebler than a man.
> So long as the gods grant him power, spring in his knees,
> he thinks he will never suffer affliction down the years.
> But then, when the happy gods bring on the long hard times,
> bear them he must, against his will, and steel his heart.
> Our lives, our mood and mind as we pass across the earth,
> turn as the days turn . . .
> As the father of men and gods makes each day dawn.

Odysseus speaks as one who failed to heed this advice—and all you listeners can see the result—so "Just take in peace what gifts the gods will send."

He warns the suitors directly that Odysseus will soon be back. If you want to escape leave now, because blood will flow. This makes the hearer sick at heart, but Athena will not allow a single suitor to escape. There is no offer of repentance here! If you associate with evil you are evil.

Even after this speech (by a beggar, no less) no one suspects that the beggar might be Odysseus. The will to believe that Odysseus is dead is too strong. No other ancient hero has the sense of irony that Odysseus has. He is daring the suitors to take advantage of him, to suspect something. Lover of disguise that he is, he even makes the truth deceptive, for this "sacker of cities" and putter-out of eyes has known little of the peaceful life he advocates. No hero does. But perhaps many a hero would gladly exchange his burden of heroic performance for a less strenuous life in his less passionate moments. Events give little time for reflection. Though Odysseus is a warrior hero when he need be, his brain, we feel, never relaxes except when he sleeps. We are suspicious of a hero who thinks too much. After all, his usual business is to do and very likely to die.

Penelope decides to do something unusual—make an appearance before the suitors. Her nurse wants her to make the best of her looks, but Penelope says the gods have worked their will on her and there is little point in pretence. Athena, however, has other ideas. She causes Penelope to fall asleep; when she awakes, she is more gorgeous than ever. As soon as the suitors catch sight of her, "The suitors' knees went slack, their hearts dissolved in lust —/ all of them lifted prayers to lie beside her, share her bed." Despite the praises heaped upon her, she denies that she can be beautiful in the absence of her husband. Yet the fateful day approaches

when, as Odysseus himself told her, she must remarry, for her son now has a beard. To her another marriage would be as hateful as it would be desirable to any of the suitors.

Odysseus is delighted to hear of Penelope's ruse to get presents from the suitors. But when a maid mocks him, saying someone will come along and give him a good beating, for once Odysseus flashes out; he will tell the prince and she will end up cut into little pieces. And he gives as good as he gets from a taunting suitor.

In the evening, as prearranged, the "stranger" comes to Penelope's chamber. To answer her questions he invents a long tale of being a brother of Idomeneus and coming from Crete. Growing in confidence that this stranger can be trusted, Penelope reveals how she fooled the suitors for three long years by unwinding at night what she wove during the day—a shroud for old Laertes. But eventually a maid betrayed her. Now even her parents are urging her to remarry. Though she weeps in compassion at the sad tale of woe Odysseus tells her, she probes him further. She wants him to describe more precisely the Odysseus he claims to have known. Not surprisingly, he does so convincingly. When she weeps again upon hearing the accurate description, he tries to comfort her by promising that Odysseus is certain to return, and soon. What gifts she would pile on the stranger, she exclaims, if what he says proved to be true.

She sends for the old nurse Eurycleia, who once held the baby Odysseus in her arms. As she washes his leg she discovers the scar that a wild boar gave to the boy Odysseus long ago. The basin and water fall from her hands. Realizing that she knows him, Odysseus seizes her and makes her swear she will tell no one. It was on a visit to Autolycus (who gave Odysseus his name) that the accident occurred.

An auspicious omen.

Bathed and oiled, Odysseus calmly sits by the fire ready to resume the conversation with his wife. She has a dream: an eagle was killing her geese. Odysseus promptly interprets it for her—her husband will return and slaughter all the suitors. But cautious Penelope is still skeptical. There are two types of dreams, she says, one of horn and the other of ivory. She fears hers is of ivory, even though the eagle spoke in a human voice assuring her that this was a vision, not a dream. At any rate, this is the very last day that she plans to put into effect a test: whoever can shoot an arrow using Odysseus's bow straight through the space left by the

handles of a row of axes placed together will win her hand. Odysseus applauds her plan and urges her to proceed at once. Odysseus, he swears, will appear. She retires to sleep, and Athena gently puts an end to her insomnia.

Poor Penelope has seen her Odysseus, heard him talk, and thought constantly of him; yet she cannot believe in his presence. The testing that goes on on both sides cannot help being nerve-wracking. It has the virtue, however, of proving to each of them how worthy they are of each other. A hero could not be greater; a wife could not be more faithful. And all this revealed in pure innocence by Penelope.

Tossing restlessly, Odysseus hears some maids sneak out to be with their suitor lovers. He would like to slay them on the spot, but of course he does not. That iron self-control. Instead he turns over in his mind the problem of the suitors. How can he alone stand up against so many? And even if he succeeds, how will he be able to cope with their avengers? Athena appears. With her and Zeus on his side, how could he fail? No, she says, they could stand off an army if necessary.

Penelope too is wide awake. The thought that she might have to marry a "weaker man" is unbearable. She prays to Artemis to end her life. In a dream Odysseus is lying beside her. She cries out and Odysseus hears her. It causes him to daydream about his wife. He prays to Zeus to give him a sign, and the god does—thunder comes out of a clear blue sky.

Telemachus is awake too. He asks the nurse how the stranger was treated last night. He was offered a good bed but chose to sleep on the floor, she says. Good old Eumaeus appears and asks how his master has been treated. He learns that these no-goods have no sense of shame. A bad shepherd insults him, but a good shepherd shows his loyalty to his absent master. Again Odysseus swears an oath that Odysseus will appear and avenge himself on the suitors.

Seated by his son amid the suitors, Odysseus gets plenty to eat but is still subjected to insults. Telemachus makes a daring speech chastising the suitors for their behavior. In reply, one of the more moderate suitors urges Telemachus to have his mother go home to her parents (leaving this place to the suitors). Telemachus says he has done so but would never force his mother to go against her will. The unruly suitors break out in wild laughter. Strange omens

should warn them: blood keeps oozing from their meat. Moreover the seer Theoclymenus predicts their doom. All they do is jeer and berate Telemachus for having dreadful guests. Outside the door Penelope hears every dastardly word the suitors speak.

The axes are set up for the bow contest; Penelope herself brings out the famous bow of Odysseus. Telemachus tries the bow and fails three times, but he might have succeeded if Odysseus had not intervened on his son's fourth attempt. The first suitor to try the bow (he disapproves the behavior of the others) says he would rather die than hang around with no chance of winning Penelope. While the contest proceeds Odysseus, accompanied by his loyal shepherd and swineherd, slips out. Now Odysseus reveals his scar to them; they weep and kiss and embrace him. He promises them they will be treated as brothers once this ordeal is over. Go tell the women to stay in their rooms and lock the windows. Then come back separately and lock the doors behind you. And you, Eumaeus, bring the bow to me after the others have failed.

When Eurymachus the second in command fails, Antinous suggests that they put off the game until tomorrow, to which they all agree. But crafty Odysseus, after agreeing with Antinous's idea, asks permission to try the bow. Antinous turns on him contemptuously, but Penelope argues that it would be a disgrace to bar the guest of her son from trying his hand. Telemachus bids her to go to her room, while Eurycleia instructs the women to pay no attention if they hear shouts and groans coming from the hall. Eumaeus sets out to bring the bow to Odysseus but freezes in his tracks at the uproar from the suitors. Telemachus speaks up, amid laughter from the suitors, and orders Eumaeus to proceed.

Now the gates are locked. Odysseus tests the bow as the suitors mock. Zeus sends a sign, a bolt of thunder. Right from where he sits Odysseus shoots an arrow straight through the axes. Appalled, the suitors blanch in terror. Odysseus coolly says, let the feast proceed. Meanwhile Telemachus has fastened his sword at his side and holds his bronze-tipped spear at the ready.

Well-mated spouses.

The suitors have had their last mock. Over and over Homer shows them at their worst, especially Antinous. On the other hand, we are shown how well-mated Odysseus and Penelope are: the same wit and resourcefulness, the same constancy of purpose, the same longing for each other. The good people form a little community of love, cooperation, and courage; the bad are in competi-

Character tells.

tion, heedless of common courtesy, and deeply dishonorable toward Penelope and her absent husband. What could we say as an advocate for the suitors? Well, Penelope is apparently irresistible. Since it would be a miracle if Odysseus returned after all this time, why let his riches, seemingly endless, go to waste? Besides, Penelope needs a husband. And that boy Telemachus needs (or did need) a guardian. One trouble is that none of them will give in. If only they had devised a contest of their own agreeing to let the winner take all! Obviously, Zeus had hardened their hearts, or most of them. The longer they spent their days in riotous drinking and feasting the worse they got. Eumaeus and Eurycleia, among a few others, show how slaves can be far superior morally to their so-called betters. We get the impression that under different circumstances—say in some "just" war—most of the suitors might have acquitted themselves with honor. As it is, they are just plain wicked.

Before Antinous knew what hit him an arrow pierced his neck and the blood came spurting out mixed with food. All except Eurymachus were struck dumb with fear. He claimed that Odysseus had every right to kill Antinous, the ringleader in crime, but the rest of them would be glad to make reparations handsomely, paying back for all they had done. Odysseus would have none of it. Negotiations having failed, Eurymachus turned to his companions and said let us fight. He tried to rush Odysseus but got an arrow in his liver and fell to the floor writhing. When a suitor almost reached his father, Telemachus stepped in and stabbed him in the back. Then he ran to the storeroom to get armor for his father and to summon the loyal servants to battle. But one of the suitors had run there, too. Odysseus feels his knees quake. He and his loyal servants jump the man Melanthus and bind him up, hoist him to a rafter and leave him twisting in the wind.

Athena makes sure that the spears of the suitors fall short while those of Odysseus and his faithful allies always find their mark. A seer pleads for his life, saying he took no part in crime. Odysseus cuts his head off. But Telemachus intervenes on behalf of the herald and the bard. They do get off. All the rest are dead. There is no bloodier scene in the *Iliad*. When Odysseus seemed ready to pause, Athena blazed out at him egging him to be again the warrior he was in Troy. So he fought on to complete the bloodbath.

When Eurycleia arrives on the scene, sent for by Odysseus,

> She found Odysseus in the thick of slaughtered corpses splattered with bloody filth like a lion that's devoured some ox of the field and lopes home, covered with blood, his chest streaked, both jaws glistening, dripping red—a sight to strike terror.

Is Eurycleia terrified? Not a bit of it. She wants to raise a cry of triumph, but Odysseus stops her. "Rejoice in your heart,/old woman—peace! No cries of triumph now./It's unholy to glory over the bodies of the dead." They were condemned by the gods and by their own indecent acts. Next he inquires of Eurycleia which maids were unfaithful. She names a dozen. Their fate is sealed. Bring them out, he says, and make them carry out the corpses, scrub down the tables and chairs, and clean out all the bloody filth. That done, they are herded into a courtyard and hung till their necks snap. They kick up their heels, Homer remarks, but not for long. The good maids come down and kiss him. He weeps, knowing each one "deep in his heart."

Odysseus's many faces never used for evil purposes.

When acting as a warrior inspired by Athena, Odysseus can be merciless; yet he spares the herald and the bard. He condemns the whoring maids to a nasty punishment, but he weeps on greeting the others. In peacetime he would seem to be the most fatherly of monarchs (always praised for his kindliness). One would imagine that he must have been about the same age as his son is now when he left for Troy, yet his subjects act as though he had reigned for some time. Odysseus has many faces, but the man behind the masks remains consistent. He never wavers in his longing for Penelope and home. His clever ruses, his easy fictions, are never designed for evil purposes. Homer makes him a master story teller of most of his own adventures until he arrives in Ithaca. Others speak admiringly and affectionately of him when he is not on the scene. He has brain to match his brawn.

When Eurycleia brings the news of the slaughter of the suitors, Penelope is overjoyed but still finds herself doubting whether Odysseus is really home. "No, it must be a god who's killed our brazen friends—" She descends to the court and sees Odysseus all bloody and in rags. Alternately he seems to be and not to be her husband. But once washed and oiled and dressed in a cloak and tunic, Athena beautifies him, making him taller with massive shoulders and hyacinthine curls thick on his head. Still Penelope does not rush into his arms, though she denies she has the hard

heart Odysseus charges her with. When Odysseus tells her of the bed he made around an olive tree stump, she can doubt no longer. She flings her arms around her husband and they dissolve in tears. Before they go to bed she must hear him tell his tale, including the prophecy of Tiresias that after making a sacrifice to Poseidon in a strange land, he will die at home peacefully, surrounded by friends.

Athena does them one more great favor—she holds back the dawn so the happy couple can enjoy a longer night. Their pillow talk continues far into the night, but not so far as to prevent their lovemaking.

Here the story might well end if this were a comedy, but comedy has not yet been invented. No, this homecoming epic would not be complete if it did not include all the family. Old Laertes has lost his wife and would be glad of death himself, but he still tends his farm away from the city. Odysseus must see him too.

Four of them set out for the farm: father and son and two faithful servants. Odysseus comes upon his father spading a sapling. He is dressed in rags and leggings and gloves and a skullcap. Odysseus stops under a pear tree and weeps. Tempted to rush up and embrace his father, being Odysseus he delays for another test. Odysseus compliments the old man on being such a good farmer but is puzzled that he is so poorly dressed.

> I have eyes: you look like a king to me. The sort entitled to bathe, sup well, then sleep in a soft bed. That's the right and pride of you old-timers. Come now, tell me—in no uncertain terms—Whose slave are you? Whose orchard are you tending?

We get another lengthy tale by Odysseus before the father answers weeping, ye, this is Ithaca, ruled by lawless men. Odysseus feels a sudden surge in his nostrils. No longer resisting, he embraces his ancient father. Old Laertes is overcome but also wants proof. Odysseus shows him the scar and is also able to enumerate the trees planted when he was a boy. Now belief is complete and Laertes faints from the shock of recognition.

But there is more to tell. Soon an avenging army for the suitors appears. Athena makes Laertes godlike, and he boasts how he would have fought the suitors if he had had Odysseus at his side. She questions Zeus as to what she should do next. Do as you like, he says, but what you should do is make peace. She does so, and a pact is drawn up guaranteeing the continued reign of Odysseus for life.

With this *deus ex machina* the epic ends. The suitors have met

their just desserts, and their ghosts are greeted by Agamemnon in the Land of the Dead. Achilles, we learn, had a proper funeral conducted by his mother Thetis. The two epics are joined, as they frequently are throughout the *Odyssey*. The end of one hero is death; the end of the other is life rejuvenated. Except for Thersites, presented as scum who deserves the beating he gets from Odysseus, aristocrats rule the roost in the *Iliad*. Helen, as different from Penelope as Odysseus is from Achilles, is the cause of strife; Penelope is the magnet drawing our hero to final peace (though hardly won over the dead bodies of the suitors). If we judge by their actions, the gods are for the most part cruel and uncaring, with the notable exception of Athena. Zeus may be in favor of justice, but he does little to ensure triumph. As for Odysseus, sacker of cities and liar in excelsis, he is hardly a knight gentle and pure—he is too mature for that—but if you want a man for all seasons and extreme circumstances, he is your man.

Epilogue

From the Greek dramatists to Joyce and Kazantzakis the character of Odysseus has continued to fascinate. Perhaps never since Homer has he seemed both so grand and so human. He has been condemned as being a deceiver (*Philoctetes*), as a man of low morals (*Iphigeneia in Aulis*), and along with Homer in general as betrayer of reality (Plato); the Romans usually preferred Troy and the Trojans. Dante condemned him as an overzealous adventurer, whereas Shakespeare saw him as a wise counselor. Leopold Bloom has been seen by some as a degraded specimen of the type, but actually Leopold has a kindness and, when necessary, a firmness of character that qualify him as a modest hero of sorts. Kazantzakis makes him an oversized Everyman exploring the spiritual as well as physical possibilities of modern experience. Heroes are generally not known for their pragmatism or braininess, and these qualities have often degenerated into opportunism or trickiness.

Regarding the new edition of the *Odyssey* that has occasioned this rereading, one should mention the excellent introduction by Bernard Knox as well as his extensive notes. It also is good to have the pronouncing glossary of names.