***The Odyssey***

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**Author:** Homer  
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**Book I**

*Andra moi ennepe Mousa, polutropon …* (1.1)  
Sing in me, Muse, and through me tell the story  
Of that man skilled in all ways of contending,  
the wanderer … (Fitz. 1–3)1

The first word of the *Odyssey* is *andra*: man. Its precursor, the *Iliad*, had sounded a different theme in its first word: *menis*, rage. The word *menis* is typically reserved for divine rage; it is not an emotion that merely smolders, but manifests with violent consequence in the world of action. It is also an emotion that alienates the demigod hero—Achilles—from everything human. The *Iliad*sings the birth and resolution of Achilles' superhuman rage.

The *Odyssey*, however, will sing of *andra*—man. The word is unyoked, at first, to any sort of limiting article or demonstrative, so it is ambiguous: The Greek could equally mean *the* (specific) man, *a* man, or even, more sententiously, Man. The first descriptive epithet that limits this generic, nameless man is *polytropon*—a word on which Fitzgerald lavishes a line and a half of verse. The prefix *poly-*means much or many, and *tropos* means "way" or "turn." Odysseus is the man of many ways, many devices, and the man of many turns, many wandering diversions. So the first characteristic that defines our hero is precisely his adaptability, his fluidity. If in the *Iliad* a hero is a simple, unified beam of action and exposition, the *Odyssey* presents a/the man as something more liquid and shapeless.

The *Iliad* announced its hero's name and patronymic in the very first line: the rage of Achilles, son of Peleus. The *Odyssey*'s hero is unnamed until the twenty-first line. The proem of the *Odyssey* is structured like an *ainigma*, a riddle. And the first descriptor, the first hint, of our hero's identity is his *polytropy*: precisely the characteristic that allows for his constant self-concealment and disguise. The Trojan War is over; the simple values of a warrior's life are irrelevant; the commerce of martial *kleos* is closed. And now Odysseus, wandering the margins of the civilized world, will need new abilities to stay alive and find his way home: he will lie, hide, disguise himself, and endure long stretches of anonymity—like the proem itself.

The narration of our story begins with a meeting of the gods on Olympus. Poseidon, "raging cold and rough | against the brave king," is at the earth's verges, absent from the council on Olympus. Zeus begins with a meditation on the story of Aegisthus and Orestes. Aegisthus had seduced Clytemnestra, wife of Agamemnon, while the warrior fought in Troy. On the day of his return, his duplicitous wife conspired with Aegisthus to kill him. Orestes, Agamemnon's son, when he had come of age, avenged his father and killed Aegisthus. Zeus reflects:

My word, how mortals take the gods to task!  
All their afflictions come from us, we hear.  
And what of their own failings? Greed and folly  
Double the suffering in the lot of man. (Fitz. 48–51)

This is the first of multiple references to the bitter *nostos* (homecoming) of Agamemnon. It sets up clear foils to characters in Odysseus' story: Faithful and prudent Penelope is contrasted with the deceitful Clytemnestra; more subtly, Odysseus' strategies of forethought and disguise oppose Agamemnon's open and incautious arrival; and the young and impotent Telemachus is contrasted with Orestes, who valiantly avenged his father. Telemachus has watched for years the suitors devour his patrimony and disgrace his home; will he remain passive, or take up arms, like Orestes?

Moreover, Zeus' speech introduces the theme of human and divine justice, which will relate to the fate of the suitors. It is not the gods who are to blame; humans have both agency and responsibility, and it is their own recklessness (*atasthalia*) which causes them to suffer beyond fate (*hyper moron*). *Atasthalia* implies a voluntary violation of the laws of the god or of men (as opposed to *hamartia*, which is ignorant or involuntary). Odysseus' shipmates, Aegisthus, and ultimately the suitors are all killed by their *atasthalia*—arrogance that incurs recompense.

Athena responds that Aegisthus was indeed justly avenged, and then reminds him of the suffering and detainment of Odysseus. She convinces him that it is time the gods effect his *nostos*, or homecoming, and suggests that Hermes be dispatched to Ogygia to inform Calypso, Odysseus' captor, of the gods' decision, while she goes to Ithaca, to put strength in Telemachus and rouse him to call an assembly of islanders.

Athena comes to Ithaca disguised as Mentes, an old guest-friend of Odysseus. Telemachus is prompt in welcoming her, giving her a share of the feast. Telemachus' kind hospitality contrasts to the wantonness of the suitors around him, who consume the property of an absent man without permission. Athena remarks on Telemachus' resemblance to his father. This invites the rueful reflection:

Were his death known, I could not feel such pain—  
If he had died of wounds in the Trojan country  
Or in the arms of friends, after the war.  
They would have made a tomb for him, the Akhaians,  
And I should have all honor as his son.  
Instead the whirlwinds got him, and no glory.  
(Fitz. 281–286)

The pain of Telemachus is the pain of ignorance—that he knows nothing of his father—and of his anonymity—that he may never be known again. The death of a Homeric hero is not mute; it punctuates and closes the life. To die in battle, with a visible tomb to mark that death, assures a well-shaped life and the survival of memory. Instead, thinks Telemachus, Odysseus will not escape the oblivion of an ocean perishing.

Athena tells Telemachus that she has heard that Odysseus is still alive, though detained on an island. She promises he will return soon. Telemachus, hardened by years of unanswered hope, is incredulous. She reminds Telemachus of Orestes, the shining example of a son coming of age by avenging his father, to incite him to bravery. She then suggests to Telemachus a course of action: Call a public assembly to challenge the outrages of suitors, and set off by ship in search of news of his father. As Athena leaves, Telemachus marvels and suspects that Mentes was a god's masquerade.

Among the reprobate suitors, Phemius, the "famous minstrel," begins to sing of the bitter homecomings (*lugroi nostoi*) of the Achaeans. Penelope appears, draped in a full line of epithets, the proper regalia for this epiphany. The descriptive adjective is *periphron*—wise, prudent, circumspect. With tears in her eyes, she requests that Phemius stop that harrowing song. She calls poetry a*thelkterion* (337)—a mode of enchantment. The same word is used for the magic of Circe, Calypso, and the Sirens. Song seduces, allures, beguiles, exercises illicit powers, and here causes Penelope to grieve her absent husband. Telemachus rebukes her: why begrudge the minstrel? he asks. "Poets are not to blame." The allocation of *aitia* (blame or cause) is a concern of this first book of the *Odyssey*: Odysseus is exculpated in the proem, Zeus denies that gods are to blame, and Phemius is not responsible for Penelope's pain.

Telemachus, newly emboldened by the divine visitation, announces to the suitors that their days of irresponsible and profligate feasting are over. The suitors are stung, though remain condescending. The two ringleaders, Antinous and Eurymachus, both reply, skirting the question of their unanswerable conduct.

Telemachus retires, invigorated by new hope, and ponders the path Athena has shown him.

**Book II**

The form or structure of a literary work can itself be a vehicle of meaning. The events of the *Odyssey* could have been arranged more simply and chronologically, beginning with the sack of Troy by the ruse of the Trojan horse and ending with the completion of Odysseus' *nostos*. But Homer chose to abandon his hero for several books in the beginning, to give earlier episodes nested in songs of other bards, and to let Odysseus himself narrate his fabulous adventures. Homer plunges us *in medias res*, so the story begins in the tenth year of the span it describes (symmetrically to the *Iliad*). Why is the *Odyssey*arranged in this manner?

The first four books of the *Odyssey* are referred to as the Telemachy, because they tell of Telemachus' travels and coming of age. The boy begins irresolute and unassertive before the egregious abuses to his home and name, and then emboldened by Athena, challenges them and goes out to trace his father's footsteps. The Telemachy achieves several important things placed before Odysseus himself is introduced. It establishes the situation at home—that his wife has been faithful, his home is being rapined by men who take him for dead, and his son is maturing so that he may assist him. This is the situation to which Odysseus returns, and would have had to be introduced obliquely and hastily if not narrated in the Telemachy. Several tales are told of Odysseus in the first four books, as we will see, relating to his role in ending the Trojan War, and other heroes give reminiscences of his character. All of these magnify his stature and our expectations before we finally meet him, weeping on a beech, detained by a goddess.

The overarching structure of the Odyssey—beginning *in medias res* on Ithaca, following Odysseus on his final return, and ending again on Ithaca—also has an important emotional effect, noticed by H.D.F. Kitto: Homer "discounts surprise" because he is "concerned with that serious aspect of human existence in which law prevails, in which offense will incur disaster, in which the very nature of things will have the last word."2 Homer repeatedly foreshadows and hints at the various outcomes of the plot, and this persuades us that the outcomes are natural, and indeed inevitable, because "offense incurs disaster." The supposed "romanticism" of the Odyssey, in his magical wanderings and connubial reunion, is "colouring only," and not "structure and substance." Romanticism depends on pursuing the unknown, and leaving behind all the comforts of the known. Odysseus is impelled by his nostalgia (a desire to return home, make a *nostos*), not by curiosity. The *nostos* is the negation of the adventurous romantic; it is the triumph of the already known.

Book II begins with one of Homer's characteristic and recurring metaphors: dawn spreading her rosy fingers over the sky. Telemachus rises and calls the herald to summon an assembly. When the Ithacans have gathered themselves, Lord Aigyptos, old and sage, leads off with an inquiry into the audacious summoner. No assembly had convened since Odysseus set off for Troy, nineteen years prior.

Telemachus announces that he convened them, and hotly complains of the shameful plundering of his house, perpetrated by men present at the assembly. He is militant and threatening. He begs by Zeus and by Justice that vengeance visit them, and in anger he throws his staff on the ground. Achilles makes an identical gesture in the first book of the *Iliad*: when he defies Agamemnon he "throws his scepter to the ground" (*Il.* 1.245). Both are impetuous and public moments of anger, in the *agora* (meeting-place or assembly).

A silence follows this impassioned and just diatribe. Finally Antinous responds, slyly transferring the responsibility to Penelope. If she would not tarry and delay, the suitors would stop consuming his home. Antinous tells of Penelope's trickery: She agreed to marry one of the suitors, but insisted that she be allowed to finish a funeral shroud for Laertes, Odysseus father. She wove by day, but unraveled by torchlight at night. It took three years for the suitors to uncover this ruse. Dismiss your mother, demands Antinous, or make her marry.

Telemachus says he could never banish his mother against her will; he will not comply. At this, Zeus sends a frightful omen. Two eagles fly above the assembly, wheeling and glaring down up the men, and tear at each other's cheeks and necks with their talons. Halitherses, a man skilled in reading birdflight, interprets the omen: he foretells that Odysseus is near, and he will arrive unrecognized, plotting destruction for those plundering his house. Eurymachus, another suitor, dismisses Halitherses' warning: he refuses to recognize or understand the sign (*sema*). Indeed, the suitors will repeatedly be characterized by their*meconnaisance*: they fail to detect Penelope's ruse, they fail to understand the bird-signs and omens, and finally, fatally, they fail to recognize the disguised Odysseus.

Telemachus petitions the assembly for a ship. Mentor rises to speak; to him Odysseus had given control of his house during his absence. Odysseus was like a gentle father, he reminds the gathered men, how can you perpetrate this revolting insolence? And how can the rest of the citizens passively sit by, in tame content?

Leocritus rises and dismisses Mentor, confident that should Odysseus return, he could never single-handedly best the suitors, who greatly outnumber him. But, he says, let Halitherses and Mentor prepare a ship.

The assembly dissolves, and Telemachus ambles down by the ocean, washing his hands in the water. He prays to the god of yesterday, in despair. Athena answers, and appears in the guise of Mentor. "The son is rare who measures with his father," (ii.292) she reflects. You get provisions ready, she suggests, while she chooses an able ship.

Heeding her, Telemachus returns home to the mocking jeers of the suitors. He escapes to the storeroom to begin provisioning. His trusty nurse Eurycleia aids him, and he demands that his mother not be informed of his plan. Athena weighs down the eyes of the wine-saturated suitors, so that they wander home to bed, and wakes Telemachus to send him on his way.

Book II offers a glimpse into a nascent political institution that will be the hallmark of Greek democracy. For a Greek political thinker like Plato or Aristotle, a sovereign assembly, to which all citizens are entitled to attend, is the foundation of the democratic *polis*. Discussing history in Homer is made difficult by the various strata of Greek history that are combined in his poems. The *Iliad*and *Odyssey* are a kind of haphazard amalgam of customs and practices of several hundred years of Greek society. But the assembly scene, though surely not democratic, shows in embryonic form commitment to oratory and persuasion that would characterize later Greek political institutions.

**Book III**

Another image of dawn begins this book. The sun springs up from the "flawless, brimming" sea, into a "brazen heaven," to shine upon "grain-giving earth." The previous book began with the image of dawn's rose-red fingers moving over the horizon. Homer's metaphors of dawn are among the most popular and memorable to new readers. There is certainly, in these images, a freshness, a majestic simplicity, which is surpassing. No amount of quarreling between professional Homerists about whether formulae are "intentionally meaningful" or "original" could efface their beauty. Homer speaks to that nucleus of childhood within, which no amount of commerce with the world can smother. A critic has written, "An excess of childhood is the germ of a poem." Nowhere else is the energy of childhood so abundant as in Homer.

Telemachus and his men arrive at Pylos, against this auroral backdrop. They sacrifice many bulls to the earth-shaker, Poseidon. Athena approaches Telemachus, who has held back in disembarking, and encourages him: No shyness now, ask for tidings of your father.

They come upon Nestor, enthroned in his palace among family and retainers. Nestor was the oldest and wisest of the Greeks who set out for Troy. To his seasoned judgment the Greeks directed their most vital decisions. Nestor asks Telemachus and Athena to join in their libations to Poseidon.

They all feast their fill before Nestor asks their stories: Who are you, *xenoi*? Are you here on some business? Or are you marauding pirates, wandering over the sea?

Before Telemachus answers, Homer inserts an interesting parenthetical remark:

"Athena gave Telemachus confidence in his mind, so that he could ask about his absent father, and have good *kleos* (fame) among men" (76–78). *Kleos* is the attainment of the Homeric hero that expands him (or her)3 beyond the limits of life; it is for *kleos aphthiton*—imperishable fame—that Achilles chooses a short lifetime over a safe return. Telemachus' small voyage, by Athena's design, will initiate him into this economy of *kleos*. One critic has argued that simply exposure to Pylos and Sparta, and to the old heroes of the Trojan War, will give Telemachus *kleos*. But in addition to acquiring *kleos* by osmosis, as it were, Telemachus' search for news of his father will begin his own quest of revenge: if Odysseus lives, he can wait to avenge the suitors together with him; if he has died, he will shoulder the burden alone, like Orestes.4

Telemachus tells Nestor that he is the son of Odysseus, and that he has come for news of his father. Not knowing how or where his father died, Telemachus feels the bitterness of ignorance:

As to the other men who fought that war,  
We know where each one died, and how he died,  
But Zeus allotted my father death and mystery.  
(Fitz. 94–96)

Odysseus' unknown and unseen death lacks the clear meaningfulness of a heroic death. Achilles died on the battlefield, and his crematory fires radiated an appropriate consummation of a heroic life. In the first book of Herodotus, Solon reminds Croesus that one cannot judge a life until its end in death. A death of anonymity threatens to swallow Odysseus in eternal meaninglessness, like an unfinished sentence.

Nestor reminisces on the miseries the Achaeans endured in Troy. After Troy had fallen, Menelaus and Agamemnon, two brothers, quarreled over when to leave for home, the latter urging that they delay so as to sacrifice to Athena. The Achaeans thus were divided in their various *nostoi*. Odysseus had left with Nestor, we learn, though he decided to put back, in order to please king Agamemnon. Nestor briefly charts the *nostoi* of a catalogue of heroes, ending with the sad fate of Agamemnon, and the just revenge of his son.

Telemachus responds that Orestes will indeed have "broad *kleos* and be a song to future generations" (204), and if the gods granted him the *dynamis*—the potency—he would avenge the arrogant suitors.

Telemachus asks for more information on the slaying of Agamemnon, and more precisely, why did his brother, Menelaus, not protect him? Nestor explains that he had begun his homeward voyage with Menelaus, who split off when grounded to bury a crewman who had died suddenly. Menelaus was blown by a tempest down to Egypt, where he tarried, accumulating money in sea traffic. He was in Egypt for the perfidy of Aegisthus and Clytemnestra. Nestor urges Telemachus to visit Menelaus in Lacedaemon, as he may have more information on his father.

Athena urges all to turn their thoughts to bed. More sacrifices are made to Poseidon, and Nestor insists that his *xenoi* stay in beds in his palace. Athena declines, and her sudden disappearance convinces all onlookers that she is immortal. Telemachus agrees to spend the night.

Another rosy-fingered dawn appears, and then an elaborate description of a sacrifice. Telemachus and Peisistratus, Nestor's son, set off in a chariot furnished by Nestor. They reach Lacedaemon on the second day, after sundown.

**Book IV**

They find Menelaus hosting a double wedding feast, marrying off his daughter to the heir of Achilles, and his tall scion, Megapenthes, to Alector's daughter. In happiness they feast, while a minstrel harps and sings, and acrobats tumble and flip around. The two strangers at the door are met by Eteoneus, a squire of Menelaus. Should we receive them? he asks, or make them move on?

Menelaus gently reprimands him: You are talking like a foolish child, he says. "Could we have made it home again … if other men had never fed us, given us lodging?" (iv.36–38) The safety and very possibility of travel depends on the hospitality of strangers. As Menelaus warmly welcomes Telemachus, an exemplar of *xenia*, two perversions of *xenia* motivate the action of the epic: the suitors, guests in the palace of Odysseus, uninvited, plunder and abuse the opportunities of the house. Meanwhile Odysseus himself is marooned on an island, the *xenos*of a goddess who craves him for her own. She has detained him against his will.

Telemachus and Peisistratus enter the palace and are stunned by the glittering wealth on display. Maidservants bathe and clothe them, and they sit beside Menelaus. Their plates are heaped high with food, and their cups brimmed with wine.

When they have eaten their fill, Telemachus marvels to Peisistratus that with endless treasure aglow, the halls of Zeus himself must look like Menelaus'. Menelaus overhears; he wisely reminds the young Telemachus that no mortal can vie with the gods. "What pleasure can I take, then, being lord | over these costly things?" Death cuts short the life of every mortal; man is an ephemeral creature, "the dream of a shadow," as the lyric poet Pindar will phrase it in two centuries. How, Menelaus continues, can he enjoy these earthly possessions when his brother was so foully murdered? He would give them up to see his friends safe home from Troy. There is one companion he misses more than the others: Odysseus, man of woe. He is pained by this absence, and by his own consequent ignorance. He does not even know if he is alive.

At this, Telemachus cannot beat down the pangs for his unknown father, and his weeping behind his cloak betrays him to Menelaus. Helen enters, with her train, and immediately comments on the likeness of Telemachus and Odysseus. When Peisistratus confirms that they have indeed discerned correctly, Menelaus ebulliently recalls his love for Odysseus, with a poignancy that brings all to tears:

A twinging ache of grief rose up in everyone,  
And Helen of Argos wept, the daughter of Zeus,  
Telemakhos and Menelaos wept,  
And tears came to the eyes of Nestor's son …  
(Fitz. 196–199)

The scene is a motif in Homer: raw grief cedes to a meal. Menelaus says: "Come, we'll shake off this mourning mood of ours | and think of supper." (iv.228–229) Just as we are moved by the universality of grief, so also are we moved by the simple, pleasurable universal of eating. Battered by bereavements, distanced from a will to live, food is the instrument that reengages us to life.

As a meal is spread before them, Helen slips into the wine a drug, a *pharmakon*, to quiet grief, and bring "sweet oblivion" from painful memory. The opiate was supplied her in Egypt. The later books of the *Odyssey* will explore the necessary cognitive kinship that underlies love, and call in *homophrosyne*— like-mindedness. This quality finds its apotheosis in Odysseus and Penelope. Helen's*pharmakon*, which induces forgetfulness, and so suppresses the function of the mind, indicates some tension or illness that needs to be artificially softened. Perhaps the mental wounds inflicted by Helen's legendary infidelities can never be healed, only numbed.

Helen and Menelaus reminisce, exchanging stories about Odysseus. Helen recalls Odysseus' brilliant disguise, when, in the tattered clothes of a beggar, he entered Troy unnoticed to scout it out. She alone recognized him—though in his cunning he avoided her. Finally, unmasked, he slaughtered many Trojans on his departure. While the women wailed, says Helen, she rejoiced inwardly: for she "repented | the mad day Aphrodite | drew me away from my dear fatherland …" Helen has given a rather bleak depiction of love, or, more precisely, *eros*. Eros is a form of *ate*: madness and blindness.

Menelaus tells all that no man could rival Odysseus for steadiness of heart. While all the Greek heroes were hidden, packed inside the Trojan horse, Helen walked round it, calling out to all the fighters in the voice of their wives. Odysseus fought all down, despite their longing to reply, and clamped his hand over the weak mouth of Anticlus before he could betray them. Telemachus is saddened that these valors could not protect his father from death.

The heroes awake as another rosy-fingered dawn brightens the earth. Menelaus asks Telemachus why he rode "the sea's broad back" to Sparta. Telemachus tells of the situation in his home—his mother besieged by arrogant men consuming his patrimony—and asks for news of his father.

Menelaus narrates his own story: Being too scant in sacrifices to the gods, he was detained in Egypt. Becalmed and starving, he asks advice of Eidothea, who is the daughter of Proteus, the Old Man of the Sea. She explains how to subdue and question her father, who knows all things. From Proteus Menalaus hears of the *nostoi* of other heroes. Ajax arrogantly taunted the sea, and was crushed by Proseidon's violent waters. *Hubris* against the gods incurred disaster. Menelaus first learns of the death of his brother, Agamemnon, whom treacherous Aegisthus tricked: he lay out a feast when the great king returned, only foully to do him in, "like an ox felled at the trough." The simile captures the indignity of this death, which does not befit so great a hero as Agamemnon. Proteus then tells of Odysseus, marooned at sea, detained by the goddess Calypso.

Last of all Menelaus learns his own destiny. He has married a daughter of Zeus, so he gains admittance to the Isle of the Blest. Proteus describe the happy fate:

… the gods intend you for Elysion  
with golden Rhadamanthos at the world's end,  
where all existence is a dream of ease.  
Snowfall is never known there, neither long  
Frost of winter, nor torrential rain,  
But only mild and lulling airs from Ocean  
Bearing refreshment for the souls of men …  
(Fitz. 599–605)

A critic named William Anderson has questioned whether this Elysian future is really desirable. Menelaus has told Telemachus that a life among his Olympian possessions, a life of sensuality, cannot give him happiness—he is already living, miserably, in a human Elysium. The story each spouse tells of Troy, moreover, is in conflict with the other. The ostensible subject of Helen's story is Odysseus, but it is really about herself. She recognized him; she rejoiced; she repented what she had done. And we can hardly believe her plea of repentance: she would still have another dalliance with Deiphobus, and would aid the Trojans in the very story that Menelaus tells. We can only imagine the rage and frustration of Menelaus, pent up in the Trojan horse, as his wife tries to seduce out all of the heroes. "The two conflicting memories of Troy expose the smouldering emotions that threaten the outward calm of this prosperous scene in Sparta."5 The easy night in Sparta is dependent upon a drug to hide their past. "Against this background in Sparta, Elysium is not so enticing."6 In fact, Elysium has similarities to Ogygia, where Odysseus is detained: both are loveless yet sensual eternities.

The narrative shifts back to Ithaca, to the suitors blithely competing, gaming away the time. In the *Iliad*, games are a temporary diversion from meaningful heroic action. By contrast, lazy gaming is the suitors' primary activity. Noemon, who had lent Telemachus his ship, unwittingly reveals to the suitors that Telemachus has gone voyaging. They convene, baffled and hostile. Antinous conspires to trap and kill him at sea.

Medon, who had heard the suitors conspiring, runs up to tell Penelope. Her knees go slack with grief. She cries; she is unable to speak. After a long while she forces out: "Why did he go? Must he, too, be forgotten?" (iv.761). Once again the pain of death is a matter of amnesia.

Eurycleia, her trusty nurse, advises her to bathe and pray to Athena. The suitors, meanwhile, load and arm a ship. They moor it offshore.

While Penelope sleeps, Athena sends her a dream messenger, in the guise of Iphthime, Penelope's sister. The dream-vision assures her that Telemachus will return unharmed, and that Athena is by her side. Penelope asks about Odysseus; there is no reply.

The suitors wait in ambush for Telemachus.