***The Odyssey***

**Date:** 700 B.C.,   
**Author:** Homer  
**From:** *The Odyssey*, Bloom's Guides.

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**Book V**

The most straightforward approach is this: The Greeks had a tragic conception of life. They understood both the immense potential of the human, and the inevitable gloom of mortality. Locked in this circumstance, the Homeric hero will compete for the only immortality available to him: *kleos aphthiton*, imperishable fame. That is a consolation and bulwark against the horror of death. Immorality of this kind is intellectual, metaphorical: the hero will not breathe, or think, or sense. In the absence of the reality of immortality, a hero will settle for its metaphor.

This is contradicted by Odysseus: when Calypso offers him literal immorality, the life of a god, he chooses the metaphor over the truth. He chooses death and figural immortality (his song), *kleos aphthiton*, over its reality. He chooses humanity— with its imperfections, limitations, and tragedy.

*Nostos*, his return; *gyne*, Penelope, his wife; Ithaka, his homeland, son, aging father faithful companions; and then *thanein*, to die. These are all those things toward which Odysseus' power to love, his nostalgic desire, and his *pothos* yearn because he has wearied of Kalypso and has refused a non-death that is also a non-life.7

Immortality could only be purchased by relinquishing his family, his name, his memory, and all of his epic achievements; so, he refuses it.

Dawn arises from her couch, and the gods convene on Olympus. The assembly of the gods that begins Book V resembles very closely the assembly of Book I. Critics who would cheerfully apply the Analyst scalpel to Homer point to this needless repetition as evidence that the Telemachy is a later interpolation, while the *Odyssey* proper begins here. This opinion neglects two general points about Homer: First, questions of composition notwithstanding, the Homeric poems were intended to be delivered orally. The magnitude of the poems necessitates that performances be divided. We can easily imagine that the Telemachy is a convenient segment for a day's performance, and that picking up the thread again in Book V required some re-introducing of themes and characters. Second, Homer never employs the narrative nuance of giving simultaneous events. Synchrony is not in his repertoire; instead, he is constantly linearizing. We should not expect Homer to introduce the Odysseus strand in a massive "meanwhile" construction.

Athena reminds Zeus that Odysseus continues to grieve in thralldom to the nymph, Calypso, with no means of faring homeward. Zeus commands Hermes, the messenger of the gods, to announce to Calypso that the gods have resolved to effect the hero's *nostos.* Hermes courses over the sea to Ogygia, and finds Calypso by a fragrant fire, weaving and singing. Around her, buds, greenery, and springs abound in idyllic splendor. Odysseus sits apart, groaning.

Hermes tells Calypso of the gods' decision. Calypso effuses her grief, hating the gods for their jealousy, that immortal and mortal flesh should mingle. Broken, she complies.

Calypso goes to find Odysseus, who sits scanning the sea through teary eyes. There is an important nuance in the Greek description of Odysseus that comes here, often overlooked in translation: "His sweet life was ebbing away, as he grieved for his return, for the nymph no longer pleased him" (152–153). The word *ouketi*—"no longer"—implies that she once did please him, and, indeed, pleased him enough that the thought of his unappeased *nostos* did not sting. Ultimately, this pleasure and isolation began to undermine the self he had fought so long to attain.

Calypso tells Odysseus he is free, but offers him immortality with her. Immortality had long before lost its appeal with his extinguished sensuality. She has offered not eternal life, but an eternal death-in-life, in which all of his past achievements, loves, and aspirations lose their meaning. He declines.

Odysseus builds a ship, and in five days is on the open sea, navigating by the stars. After seventeen days of solitary seafaring, Scheria is visible, like a "rough shield of bull's hide of the sea" (Fitz. 291).

But his easy passage is foiled. Poseidon spots him, and conjures a tremendous storm. Odysseus is battered by gales and foaming surges. He laments that he soon will be swallowed by the ocean, and wishes a soldier's death. We have seen the sea function as a trope for the forces of anonymity; in this light, the simile quoted just above assumes fresh meaning: land and civilization are a "shield," a defense, against the endless sea.

A Nereid, a sea-nymph, Ino, visits Odysseus, giving advice and a protective cloak. Odysseus at first disobeys, following a course that to his discernment seems best, but circumstances compel him to follow the nymph. Athena quiets the winds, but for two days and two nights he drifts on the swollen waves. Then he spots land:

What a dear welcome thing life seems to children  
whose father, in the extremity, recovers  
after some weakening and malignant illness:  
his pangs are gone, the gods have delivered him.  
So dear and welcome to Odysseus  
the sight of land, of woodland, on that morning.  
(Fitz. 411–416)

His elation is short-lived; he soon hears the roar of sea on rock. He clasps a crag as a billow launches him forward; its ebb tears him away, scraping off skin from his hands. He spots an inlet stream and floats into the quiet water. He prepares a bed among the leaves:

A man in a distant field, no hearthfires near,  
will hide a fresh brand in his bed of embers  
to keep the spark alive for the next day;  
so in the leaves Odysseus hid himself,  
while over him Athena showered sleep  
that his distress should end, and soon, soon.  
In quiet sleep she sealed his cherished eyes.  
(Fitz. 513–519)

**Book VI**

An island that offers nothing but the monotony of sensuality, that grants a possibility of *kleos*-conferring competition, and that shields hardship, is both a grave and a womb. Calypso's island can be likened to eternal death: the very name "Calypso" comes from the Greek *kalyptein*, which means to cover or conceal, and is a common Homeric metaphor for death ("a cloud of death covered him"). But Ogygia can also be a pre-natal oblivion. As Odysseus leaves this island, where he exists without identity, he undergoes symbolic birth. Odysseus emerging naked from his cocoon of leaves, where he spent the night like a *sperma pyros*, "the seed of a fire," reinforces our sense of birth.

With birth inevitably comes hardship, but without hardship there is no manner of assuming an identity. The identity of the Homeric hero is *agonistic*—that is, based on competition. In the motionless torpor of a life on Ogygia, where he cannot strive to be best, the hero is not alive. There is a pun on Odysseus' name in Book V that will aid our understanding of this. When Ino first speaks to Odysseus, she says:

O forlorn man, I wonder  
why the Earthshaker, Lord Poseidon, holds  
this fearful grudge … (Fitz. 350–353)

The verb of Poseidon's anger is *odyssein*, "to be wroth against." Autolycus, Odysseus' grandfather, named him from this verb (see Book XIX). To render the effect cumbersomely in English, we might say: Poseidon is "odysseusing" Odysseus. The god of the sea is wroth against him, he is battering him on the sea, sending him woes, and impeding an easy *nostos*. But Odysseus, symbolically born after leaving the womblike comforts of Ogygia, is *becoming Odysseus*. Poseidon "odysseuses" him: sends him trouble, and gives him back his name.8

As Odysseus sleeps among the olive trees, Athena appears to the beautiful young princess of Scheria named Nausicaa. Nausicaa is like a goddess in looks, prudent and virginal: the ideal *parthenos* (unmarried maiden). Athena announces to Nausicaa that her maidenhood must end; she must bring her linens down to the fresh springs to wash in the morning.

Nausicaa and her attendant maids wash their clothes and bathe in the clean water. Then they eat a picnic lunch and play at ball. An errant toss rouses Odysseus, slumbering nearby. Odysseus leaves the bush, covering himself with an olive branch, "like a mountain lion … with burning eyes—who prowls among the herds or flocks, or after game…" (vi.140–143). While her maids scatter into hiding, frightened of the burly and brine-covered visitor, Nausicaa stands to meet him. Odysseus ponders—do I grasp the maidens knees in supplication? Or just use "honeyed" speech? He decides on the latter, and devotes the famed Odyssean intelligence to flirtatious banter. "Mistress, please: are you divine or mortal?… Never have I laid eyes on equal beauty | in man or woman. I am hushed indeed…. I stand in awe so great | I cannot take your knees" (Fitz. 161–181).

When Nausicaa and her attendants begin to play they throw off their veils: this is an ambiguous gensture, since the veil in Homer is the emblem of modesty and chastity. Odysseus, when he awakes, compares their voices to nymphs: seductive and sexualized creatures. They are also compared to Artemis and her attendants, enternally chaste virgins. This confused symbolism exposes a confused drama of sexual awakening in Nausicaa: "the poet suggests the confusion attendant upon adolescent sexuality between innocent modesty and a certain forwardness which is only dimly recognized, if at all, by Nausicaa herself."9 With its sexual suggestions, the moment is threatening to both Nausicaa and Odysseus: young maidens blithely playing are traditional targets of rape in Greek literature,10 and the stranger has just been compared to a hungry lion. For Odysseus, meanwhile, Nausicaa threatens to stagnate or end his quest for home, like Circe and Calypso, the other seductive females he has encountered.

Nausicaa offers him food, drink, and bath. He wanders off to bathe, insisting that his nakedness not besmirch the eyes of young *parthenoi*. He rinses off and anoints himself with oil, and Athena lavishes beauty on him, making him seem massive and glowing. At his reappearance the *parthenoi* are all aflutter, admiring his godlike visage. They offer food, which he eats ravenously, having fasted on the open sea for two days.

Nausicaa offers Odysseus passage to the town, and to the palace of her parents. But she tells him to tarry behind her wagon, lest ogling townsmen think they are to be married, shamefully flouting her parents. This is her subtle flirtatious rejoinder to Odysseus' flattery. As they make their way toward town, Odysseus prays to Athena that he may find love and mercy among the Phaeacians. Athena hears him, though Poseidon "smolders on."

When Odysseus first speaks to Nausicaa, tempering coquettishness with a worldly wisdom, he tells her: "The best thing in the world [is] a strong house, held in serenity, where man and wife agree." The best thing is a home where man and wife are *homophron*, literally, "with the same mind," or "sympathetic." The word denotes generally a kind of psychic harmony that prevails in the well-ordered *oikos* (household). It presents love in marriage as the joint possession of a single composite mind. Odysseus' long absence has fractured this consonance, and the *telos* of his voyage home is to reestablish this broken *homophrosyne*. In the end, a *nostos* is the attainment of a psychological state, not a phenomenal one. The pain of the separated family is ignorance: not knowing the location, the health, or the fidelity of the loved one. Odysseus' nostalgia is made painful by his ignorance; and the real threat to his *nostos* is amnesia, the forgetting of his voyage home. We will see later that the Lotus flower, and the song of the Sirens, are all fundamentally cognitive threats: they threaten *lethe*, forgetfulness of home. Returning home, Odysseus will repair his broken knowledge, and memory will triumph over amnesia. Then he may attain the psychical state of being home.

**Book VII**

As instructed by Nausicaa, Odysseus delays and prays in the grove. As he enters the city, Athena showers a mist upon him, so that none see him. Athena disguises herself as a small girl, who leads Odysseus to the palace, giving him a brief account of the royal lineage. She praises Queen Arete for her equity, and the respect she commands.

Odysseus gazes upon the resplendent palace, and the fecund vineyards and orchards that surround it. Entering the great hall, sliding unnoticed past the feasters within, he grabs Arete's knees in supplication. Echeneus, the eldest of the Phaeacians, "understanding the wisdom of old," speaks up: Give the man a seat of honor; respect your *xenos*. Odysseus joins the feast. Eying his visitor's aspect, Alcinous broods that this man might be a god.

No, not a god, Odysseus assures Alcinous. All earth and mortal. And now my belly bids me eat.

Arete, noticing Odysseus' clothing, asks where he got it. We may infer there is some suspicion in that question. Odysseus tells of his detainment on Ogygia, cold lover of the immortal nymph. "In my heart I never gave consent." He was wracked by Poseidon, he explains, and he first met Nausicaa. She, beautiful yet prudent, had offered him clothing.

Alcinous, sensing nobility in his visitor, and reflecting that he is surely not of mean descent, offers Odysseus Nausicaa's hand, and a rich kingdom on Scheria. Should he not desire this, Alcinous promises conveyance home the next day. Odysseus prays exultantly. All retire to bed.

A common opinion among Attic comedians and philosophers, and among Alexandrian critics, was that Odysseus was an indulgent glutton. It did not befit a hero to answer to the base urgings of his offals; no hero is more sensitive to the mandates of belly than Odysseus. Pope called the Odyssey the "eatingest of epics," and, indeed, almost every narrative situation involves a meal.

When Alcinous suggests that Odysseus may be a god, Odysseus is quick to assure him that he is human. "I [am] all of earth and mortal nature." And, as if to verify his humanity, to give the watchword of his mortality, Odysseus manifests cravings of belly (*gaster*):

"You will indulge me if I finish dinner—?…  
There's no part  
of man more like a dog than brazen Belly,  
crying to be remembered—and it must be—  
when we are mortal weary and sick at heart;  
and that is my condition. yet my hunger  
drives me to take this food, and think no more  
of my afflictions. Belly must be filled.  
(Fitz. 330–337)

W. B. Stanford has argued that there is no better indication of Odysseus' unconventionality as a Homeric hero than his attitude toward food. An episode in the *Iliad* clarifies this unconventionality. After Achilles agrees to rejoin the fighting, having redirected his rage toward Hector with the death of his close friend Patroclus, he is ferally eager for slaughter. He is so crazed for war that he refuses food and drink, and commands the assembled Achaeans to do the same. Odysseus objects; he is far more prudent, reminding all that to fight on an empty stomach is disadvantageous. Achilles' rejection of food is something superhuman. Odysseus' insistence is simply good sense.

Odysseus has human attachments. The other great Homeric heroes die unhappily, living short, fiery lives with a young death. Achilles, raging and mourning his friend, refuses food as a rebellion against his very mortality. Achilles, as he neglects food, is tragic but deceived about his condition as human, though there is a certain consoling sublimity in that deception. Odysseus is frank and realistic; he would never be so childish as to pout at mortality. But his realism requires both an acquiescence in the belly, in death, and the realization that food has an important physiological function.

Sublime heroism disregards belly, but even the fieriest hero of all returns to food as he reengages to human life. In Book XXIV, Achilles and Priam share a meal which emblemizes their shared grief, shared humanity, and healing. Odysseus shares many meals in his "eatingest of epics," and all remind us of that pleasant physiological necessity which attaches him to earth.

**Book VIII**

Alcinous, beneath dawn's fingers, calls an assembly, and commands the best seamen to ready a ship. The elders, meanwhile, should make ready more a day of feasting.

The assembly dissolves and processes into the great house of Alcinous. A herald leads in the blind bard, Demodocus,

…The man of song  
whom the Muse cherished; by her gift he knew  
the good of life, and evil—  
for she who lent him sweetness made him blind.  
(Fitz. 67–70)

The man, robbed of his eyes, who thereby gains a second inner, or spiritual, sight is a common motif in Greek literature. The bard Demodocus is the earliest extant specimen in that trend; he may also be the archetype for later imaginings of what Homer may have been.

When hunger and thirst are appeased in the gathered feasters, the Muse moves the minstrel to sing the glorious deeds of men. He sings of a quarrel between Odysseus and Achilles, at which Agamemnon smiles inwardly, knowing it is a harbinger of an imminent Greek victory. We never learn the cause or details of the clash from Homer.

The quarrel sung by Demodocus is a reminder of a larger thematic clash that rings through the whole poem: who is the best of the Achaeans, *aristos Akhaion*? Odysseus or Achilles? The Greeks never awarded a silver or bronze at the Olympic Games; there is only one who is *aristos*. Odysseus and Achilles exemplify two different modes of *agon* (competition). Odysseus competes with his *metis* (mind), while Achilles competes with his *bie*, strength.

Who are their opponents? Though ostensibly the Homeric hero vies with other soldiers, the real opponent of their *agon* is death itself. The Homeric poems present man's various attempts to subdue or outwit death, or at least the apprehension of death, whether by spear, by song, or by clever ruse. Achilles, in his rage, is the sublime apotheosis of the warrior; he nonetheless goes down to death young. Rebelling against death with one's *bie* is self-destructive. Odysseus is the hero of *metis*; he lives a long life and dies in the comfort of his fatherland. He also deals death the sharpest blow it can receive: he rejects immortality, and willingly invites its sting. The injustice of death is its blind inevitability; Odysseus outwits it, overcomes it in mind, by accepting its centrality in human meaning.

In more practical affairs as well, it is ultimately the guile (*metis*) of the Trojan horse, authored by Odysseus, that wins the Trojan War, and not force (*bie*).

As Demodocus sings the quarrel of heroes, Odysseus draws his cloak over his brow to hide his tears. His tears flow unnoticed by all except Alcinous, who relieves Odysseus by cutting off the bard and encouraging all to go to the fields to compete in boxing, wrestling, jumping, and running.

Odysseus lays low amid the athletics, until a contentious and impetuous youth challenges and insults him. He grabs the heaviest discus and hurls it well beyond the nearest competitor. He shouts out a general challenge.

Alcinous calms the situation, diverting all to Demodocus and his harp. The bard plucks and intones the dalliance of Ares and Aphrodite, or the forbidden mingling of lust and war, and their apprehension by Hephaestus. The song begins in indirect speech, but melts gradually into direct speech. Homer's song, at that moment, is in limbo between a detached retelling and the literal assumption of Demodocus' song.

Alcinous requests that the wealthiest Phaeacian lords bring gold and fresh-laundered tunics to send off their distinguished guest. All make ready for the evening feast.

Odysseus is lavishly bathed and clothed by the serving-women, and then joins the festivity. As he sits to eat, he carves a piece of meat for Demodocus: "All men owe honor to poets." Odysseus tells Demodocus that his vivid eloquence gives the impression that he was physically present at the sufferings he describes. Odysseus clearly privileges presence as a source of vividness. Demodocus, however, is blind. His physicality of description is a mode of representation, since his only sight is the inside.

Demodocus sings of the ruse of the Trojan horse, and the sack of Troy. Again Odysseus wraps his cloak over his eyes, to shield from sight his tears. He weeps, Homer tells us,

the way a wife mourns for her lord  
on the lost field where he has gone down fighting…  
At the sight of the man panting and dying there,  
she slips down to enfold him, crying out;  
then feels the spears, prodding her back and shoulders,  
and goes bound into slavery and grief.  
Piteous weeping wears away her cheeks:  
So did Odysseus let fall pitiful tears …  
(Fitz., slightly modified, 562–570)

Here is an instance of a Homeric simile that takes on a narrative momentum in its elaboration, until intersecting again with the main narrative. The simile is somewhat unexpected: comparing Odysseus, a brawny warrior, to a weeping woman? Homer always seems to concern himself with what is most universal in the human: to conjure Odysseus' overwhelming grief, common experience to all, he will not confine himself to narrow categories of analogy.

Alcinous, noticing the weeping again, more forcefully inquires his name. Now Odysseus will spin his own narrative, and hold his listeners spellbound as he recounts his wanderings. But Alcinous gives a final reflection: "Gods fashion destruction, so that it might be a song for men to come." Song is self-justifying, and so justifies the grief that inspires it.