

## Lecture on Homer's *Odyssey*- Part II Living in the present

Readings : The *Odyssey* of Homer (Harper, trans. Lattimore), **PART I** -Books I, V, VI, VIII (line 445-end), IX, XI, XII (lines 1-126), **PART II**- XIII, XIV (lines 1-190, 360-456), XVI (lines 1-320), XIX, XXI (lines 1-142, 269-434), XXII, XXIII, XXIV (lines 453-548).

### Introduction

➤ **We've all heard the many myths around Odysseus, and they are simply great!**

( Troy's **wooden horse**, the **tossing of the storms** for almost 3 years, the lethargic **Lotus-Eaters**, the **Cyclopes**, the cannibalistic **Laistrygones**, the witch-goddess **Circe**, **the Edge** of the Western World where the dead live, the captivity of **Kalypso** for 7 years, the **Sirens**, the six-headed monster **Skylla** and the whirlpool **Charybdis**, and finally the return home... )

➤ **But what do these myths mean?** How to interpret these long travels and wanderings that kept Odysseus away from his loved ones and his home Ithaka for so long?

-Odysseus's **main characteristics** are, from least to most important :

- 1) His physical strength and courage
- 2) His intelligence, cunning wisdom, and resourcefulness (  $\mu\eta\tau\iota\varsigma$  = "metis" )
- 3) His will for home ( bolstered by moral virtues such as patience, restraint, faithfulness )

-The return of Odysseus is a **nostos** : a homecoming or homeward journey ( From ancient Greek νόστος return home )

### I- Homer

➤ We believe that Homer was a **blind poet and performer** from Smyrna or Chios ( a blind singer existed there ). He lived around the 8<sup>th</sup> or 9<sup>th</sup> century B.C.

-It was the **beginning of literacy** for the Greek world. It was a period of renewal ( demographic, economic, political, and cultural ).

### II- The Story

- 1- **The Telemachy or the adventures of Telemachos** : The story starts in the 20<sup>th</sup> year of absence of Odysseus. Athene herself descends on earth, in Ithaka, to find Telemachos, Odysseus' son. He explains to her how during Odysseus' absence, his wife Penelope has been using all her tricks to postpone her decision about remarrying, yet the young suitors are draining their resources, and plotting against Telemachos. Athene convinces him to go look for his father.
- 2- **The Homecoming of Odysseus** : Meanwhile, Odysseus appears to be captive of the nymph goddess Kalypso. But now, the gods have sent their messenger Argeiphontes to her, and they demand that she sets Odysseus free immediately. He can finally board on his ship again, and this time the storms take him to the island of the Phaiakians, where is welcomed in King Alkinoös' home.
- 3- **The Great Wanderings** : To entertain his hosts, Odysseus starts to tell the story of all his voyages and charms everyone with his adventures.
- 4- **Odysseus in Ithaka** : Finally, Alkinoös fills a boat with gifts for him, and sends Odysseus back home to his wife and son Telemachos. Once in his homeland, he makes himself known, and with the help of his men and Telemachos, upon his return, he attacks the suitors, destroys them, and is reunited to his loved ones.

- The **main characters** in *The Odyssey*, part 2 in Ithaka, are the characters from the palace : Odysseus, Penelope, Telemachos, the swineherd Emaios, the nanny Euryklea, as well as the other servants, the suitors, led by Antinoös, and their fathers ( with Eupheites father of Antinoös ), and finally Laertes ( father of Odysseus ).

### III- The Quest

#### A. Reminder from Part I

- The narrator first offers a macroscopic view, a view from heavens, on the lives of humans and the human adventures. Zeus ( God of gods maintaining Justice and Order in the Cosmos ) and his daughter Athene, are having a conversation about our hero in Mount Olympus where the Gods of the Greeks live.

-*The Odyssey* is a story of transformation of Odysseus from a bold warrior to a wise man.

- **When Odysseus first appears in Book V, he is tormented and lamenting over his fate in Kalypso's island :**

"So spoke powerful Argeiphontes, and there he left her,  
while she, the queenly nymph, when she had been given the message  
from Zeus, set out searching after great-hearted Odysseus,  
and found him sitting on the seashore, and his eyes were never  
wiped dry of tears, and the sweet lifetime was draining out of him,  
and he wept for a way home, since the nymph was no longer pleasing  
to him." ( **Book V**, l. 148-54 )

- In this passage, Odysseus is finally able to choose an earthly happiness over all the godly gifts of Kalypso, immortality, beauty, and youth.

- **We can then go back in time, with Odysseus' departure from Troy, as he tells his story to king Alkinoös and the Phaiakian people who shelter him :** The Story of the voyage of Odysseus properly starts in Book 9 and ends when he reaches Ithaka at last in Book 12.

-During these voyages, there were temptations of strength ( ex : Cyclopes, Charybdis,... ) and temptations of desire ( ex : Sirens, Skylla,... ).

- *The magical island of Kalypso was too inhuman.*

- *The uncivilized world of the Cyclopes could not satisfy Odysseus' mind, for it was disordered.*

- *The chant of the Sirens was too morbid.*

- *All the other worlds along his way had defects.*

#### B. Fate and Free will

- In what measure did Odysseus decide of his own path ? Was his fate already decided by the gods ?

- **When Odysseus, without knowing it, has finally reached the coast of Ithaka, Athena appears in front of him taking many shapes, and says :**

" It would be a sharp one, and a stealthy one, who would ever get past you  
in any contriving ; even if it were a god against you.

[ ... ] and yet you never recognized

Pallas Athene [ ... ]

Always you are the same, and such is the mind within you,

and so I cannot abandon you when you are unhappy,

because you are fluent, and reason closely, and keep your head always.

Anyone else come home from wandering would have run happily

Off to see his children and his wife within his halls [ ... ] " (**Book XIII**, l. 291-334 ).

- Even though at some point he might seem tossed and turned by the storms of Poseidon without much control on his destiny, we come to understand that he is at least partly responsible for his fate.

### C. Heroism and Coming of age of Telemachos

- **Once Odysseus gets back in Ithaca, he is not a “nobody” anymore ; he has earned the honors at war, and deserved the recognition of his pairs.**

- Telemachos on the other hand is still young. He has never seen his father before. He belongs to the new generation. Like all the other young suitors, he has not been in Troy, but has grown up listening to the stories sung everywhere, about the glorious warriors of Troy. He is the first one to learn about Odysseus’ real identity, yet since it involves a transformation by Athena from a beggar to a handsome man, he is confused... Is it a God facing him ? **Odysseus scolds him a little :**

“ Telemachos, it does not become you to wonder too much at your own father when he is here, nor doubt him. No other Odysseus than I will ever come back to you. But here I am, and I am as you see me, and after hardships and suffering much I have come, in the twentieth year, back to my own country.”

( **Book XVI**, l. 203-7 )

- During his great wanderings, the recognition Odysseus got was mostly due to his physical appearance. For example, in the land of the dead, he was recognized by the ghosts of king Agamemnon and warrior Achilles, his companions in Troy, both regretting the double-edged sword of glory and honor that led them to die at war.

- He is definitely looking for something more meaningful than anger, war, and revenge. Will he be able to transmit this to Telemachos, who still has to prove himself ?

### D. Truth and disguise

- **The most important scene is perhaps when Penelope faces her husband after so many years.** Seeing him for the first time, disguised as a beggar, she says to him:

“I waste away at the inward heart, longing for Odysseus. These men try to hasten the marriage. I weave my own wiles.”

( **Book XIX**, l. 136-7 )

- Does she recognize him immediately ?

- **Odysseus, disguised as a stranger, is also able to weave his wiles as Penelope does.** He proceeds to tell his own tale, fully invented, and he holds her spellbound:

“As she listened her tears ran and her body was melted, as the snow melts along the high places of the mountains when the West Wind has piled it there, but the South Wind melts it, and as it melts the rivers run full flood.” ( **Book XIX**, l. 204-7 )

- Are they knowingly testing each other ?

- **The next recognition is when Eurykleia, the nanny, recognizes his scar, as she is asked to bathe Odysseus, but he forces her to keep silent.**

- Penelope then refuses to recognize Odysseus even when he won **the bow contest** that she organized ( **Book XXI** ) knowing that only him could string that bow.

- Has she given up ? It is only at the last moment that she finds the strength and wisdom to test him again and asks him a final trick question relating to their wedding bed : she asks the maid and nanny Eurykleia to move their wedding bed to another room and set it for Odysseus alone.

- **Odysseus knows that their bed cannot be moved because one of its legs is a live olive tree.** He gets angry and asks what has happened to his bed :

“So he spoke, and her knees and heart within her went slack as she recognized the clear proofs that Odysseus had given ; but then she burst into tears and ran straight to him, throwing her arms around the neck of Odysseus, and kissed his head”

( **Book XXIII**, l. 205-8 )

- With those tears, we know that Odysseus has finally reached his home : the place where he can be in the here and now, with no remorse nor regrets, nor hope for anything better in the future than his island.

- **Finally, at the end of Book 23, Odysseus and Penelope go to bed, this same bed that served as a test :**

“Now Dawn of the rosy fingers would have dawned on their weeping,  
had not gray-eyed goddess Athene planned it otherwise.

She held the long night back at the outward edge, she detained  
Dawn of the golden throne by the Ocean, and would not let her  
harness her fast-footed horses who bring the daylight to people :  
Lampos and Phaeton, the Dawn’s horses, who carry her.”

( **Book XXIII**, l. 241-246 )

- Through love, Odysseus and Penelope live a moment of eternity here on earth.

### **E. Chaos and Order**

- One thing remains unsettled : what will happen when all the people realize that Odysseus and his men have slaughtered all the suitors after the bow contest ? The fathers of these noble young men from all the surrounding islands will certainly try to get back at Odysseus and his clan.

- The suitors have offended the gods by trying to seduce Penelope and by abusing her hospitality.

- Hospitality is the law of Zeus, contributing in establishing alliances between men.

- Order must be restored on the island of Ithaka.

- **The people of Ithaka are fighting bravely against the armies of the fathers of the suitors and Homer says :**

“And now they could have killed them all, and given none of them  
homecoming, had not Athene, daughter of Zeus of the aegis,  
cried out in a great voice and held back all the company”

( **Book XXIV**, l. 528-30 )

- For comparison, consider the ending of *The Epic of Gilgamesh*. On one hand, Gilgamesh, having slain giants and monsters and been to the end of the world, got back to Uruk because it was a convenient solution ( best of two choices ). On the other hand, Odysseus had witnessed a violent crisis, threatening the human order and the divine order. He faced these problems with his will for home as a guide, even if the actions he had to undertake could only be settled from the present.

- ***The Epic of Gilgamesh* ends on magnificent funerary rites performed for the godlike hero Gilgamesh, whereas the prophecy that Tiresias had uttered in the Land of the dead is not accomplished in *The Odyssey* :**

“ Death will come to you from the sea, in  
some altogether unwarlike way, and it will end you  
in the ebbing time of a sleek old age. Your people  
about you will be prosperous. All this is true that I tell you.” ( **Book XI**, l. 134-37 )

### **IV- Conclusion**

These are the final elements of Odysseus’ quest and the final lessons he has learned :

- 1) Odysseus found his place in the cosmos ( the ordered, just, and beautiful universe of the Greeks ).
- 2) He learned to live in the present moment and refuse immortality of the gods.
- 3) He let go of his attachments to glory and wealth, knowing that his heroic actions at war will be nothing in the face of death.
- 4) In his island, he even got a glimpse of the eternal through his love for Penelope as he has finally reached a certain wisdom.