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A COLLECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS

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The Untypical Hero

by W. B. Stanford

There is nothing freakish about Odysseus' personality in the Homeric poems. In the *Iliad* Homer endows him with the normal qualities of an Achaean hero—princely birth, good physique, strength, skill in athletics and battle, courage, energy, and eloquence.¹ But in most of these Odysseus is surpassed or equalled by some of his colleagues at Troy. The Atridae and Aeacids are of more illustrious lineage. Agamemnon and Menelaus are of more impressive stature. Achilles and Ajax surpass him in strength and force of arms. Diomedes is more gallant and dashing in battle. Even in oratory he is not unrivalled.

The fact is, of course, that Odysseus is not the chief hero of the *Iliad*. Achilles, and after him Ajax, Hector, Diomedes, and the Atridae, are

"The Untypical Hero." From *The Ulysses Theme* by W. B. Stanford. Copyright © 1955 by Basil Blackwell & Mott, Ltd. Reprinted by permission.

¹ For studies of Odysseus' general characteristics in Homer see especially Alexander Shewan, *The Lay of Dolon* (London, 1911), chapter twenty (containing a survey of older views); W. D. Geddes, *The Problem of the Homeric Poems* (London, 1878) (subject to Shewan's corrections); and A. Lang, *Homer and the Epic* (London, 1893), chapter eight; besides the less discursive surveys in Pauly, Wissowa, Kroll, *Real-Encyclopädie der classischen Altertumswissenschaft* (Stuttgart), and W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexicon der Griechischen und Römischen Mythologie*, vol. iii (Leipzig, 1897-1902), s.v. *Odysseus* (by J. Schmidt). Shewan, p. 150, quoting Wolf and Mure, argues effectively against Wilamowitz's early view that it is foolish to talk of a single Homeric Odysseus. Mure remarks elsewhere (*Critical History of the Language and Literature of Ancient Greece* [London, 1854-67] I, 412) "Like the fabulous Lycian sphinx, which combined the nature of the lion and serpent with its own proper body of Chimaera, Ulysses, whether the king, the beggar, the warrior, or the traveler, is still in word and deed Ulysses": cf. R. Hole, *An Essay on the Character of Ulysses as Delineated by Homer* (London, 1807), pp. 143-4: "the more minutely it [Ulysses' character] is examined, the more evidently we find that the design, however bold, is exceeded by the happiness of the execution."

Since this was written I have seen two other notable discussions of Homer's conception of Odysseus: Hubert Schrade, *Götter und Menschen Homers* (Stuttgart, 1952), pp. 225-59, in which Odysseus is characterized as the first *uomo universale*, a prototype in some respects of the Sophists, but differing from them in his all-pervading piety; and E. Beaujon, *Acte et passion du héros* (Geneva, 1948), in which some new symbolical interpretations of Odysseus are examined.

more prominent.² Not that the *Iliad* presents Odysseus as a minor hero: he has his triumphs in the council and in the assembly, on the field of battle and in the athletic contests. But his unique personality is not allowed to divert attention from the *Iliad's* main themes, the wrath of Achilles and the death of Hector. On the other hand, in the *Odyssey* he, "the man of many turns," is the main theme, and his personal qualities become specially luminous against the sordidness of his environment, as he makes his way among foolish shipmates, ruthless monsters, and greedy usurpers. Yet here, too, Odysseus meets his equals at times. Eumaeus the swineherd shows a loyalty and gentle courtesy quite as fine as his, and Penelope is wily enough to outwit him in their final recognition scene.

By endowing Odysseus with a share of the normal heroic qualities Homer avoided any suggestion that he was an eccentric figure or a narrowly limited type. But at the same time Homer, especially in the *Iliad*, skilfully succeeded in distinguishing Odysseus by slight deviations from the norm in almost every heroic feature. In his ancestry there was the unique Autolycean element. In physique he had the unusually short legs and long torso described by Antenor and Helen in *Il. III*, 190ff. He reminded Helen of a sturdy ram, she said, as he marshalled the Achaean ranks. Any hint of the ludicrous in this comparison is removed by Antenor's subsequent description of Odysseus' imposing presence. But there is something a little unaristocratic, or at least non-Achaean, in this portrait, contrasting with the tall, long-limbed stature of the other heroes.³

² Odysseus admits inferiority in martial valor to Achilles (*Iliad XIX*, 217ff.) while claiming superiority in intelligence, which he tactfully attributes to his greater age. (See additional note below.) The common soldiers rated Ajax, Diomedes, and Agamemnon as fighters next to Achilles (*Il. VII*, 179-80). Hyginus, 114, gives statistics of the "kills" recorded by the Greek champions: Achilles leads with 72, followed by Teucer (30) and Ajax (28). Odysseus is second last with 12 to Menelaus' 8. Lang (*Anthropology and the Classics* [Oxford, 1908], pp. 60-61; cf. *The World of Homer* [London, 1910], p. 250) holds that it "would not be hard to show that Odysseus is really the hero of the *Iliad*, as well as of the *Odyssey*, the man whom the poet admires most . . ." (one may admit the second view without agreeing with the first: a poet's hero is not necessarily the same as his poem's hero). Against this see also Werner Jaeger, *Paideia*, English edn., vol. i (Oxford, 1939), p. 7, where Achilles is viewed as the golden mean between the rigid Ajax and the slippery Odysseus, and M. H. van der Valk on "Ajax and Diomedes in the *Iliad*," *Mnemosyne* v (1952), 269-86. But taking the two poems together Homer certainly merits the title φιλοδοσοσέβης, which Eustathius (on *Odyssey XIX*, 583) gives him.

³ Athene's other great favorite, Tydeus, was also a low-sized man (*Il. V*, 801). Other details of Odysseus' appearance in Homer: he had the normal fair or auburn (ξανθός) hair of an Achaean hero, but possibly with a dark beard (see Eustathius on *Od. VI*, 230, and *XVI*, 176, and my note on *Od. XVI*, 175-6), darting, lively eyes (*Od. IV*, 150), expressive eyebrows (*Od. IX*, 468; *XII*, 194; *XXI*, 431), large, fine thighs, broad shoulders and chest, powerful arms (*Od. XVIII*, 67-9). See additional note below. Roscher, col. 639, gives details of post-Homeric descriptions. Many of them present a despicable conception of a hero, e.g. suggestions by Tzetzes and Isaac Porphyrogenetos that he was potbellied and Philostratus' that he was snub-nosed: but we can probably attribute carica-

Napoleon would have looked like that beside Wellington; or Cuchulain, that "short, dark man," among the taller champions of the Red Branch Knights. Possibly Homer meant to imply something more than a personal peculiarity here. It may be intended as an indication of some racial difference between Odysseus and the other Achaeans. Perhaps—but it is a pure guess—Homer regarded Odysseus as being partly a survival of the pre-Greek stock in Greece, an "Aegean" or "Mediterranean" type.⁴ At any rate, the physical difference serves to mark Odysseus out as exceptional, without giving an impression of ugliness, oddity, or deformity.⁵

One finds the same distinction in a quite different kind of trait—in Odysseus' unusually frank and realistic remarks on the importance of food in human life. All the Homeric heroes were hearty eaters and drinkers. But, whether by accident or convention, none of them except Odysseus had anything notable to say about eating. Perhaps it was regarded as a plebeian subject, unfit for high-born Achaeans; or perhaps they simply were not interested in it as a subject for conversation. It was typical of the average Homeric hero that he was prepared on occasion to ignore the need for food, both for himself and for others. The contrast with Odysseus' attitude is well illustrated in a scene between him and Achilles in *Iliad* XIX. Achilles, now equipped with new armor and ready for battle, is impatient to launch a general attack against the Trojans to take vengeance for Patroclus' death. Odysseus objects. The Greek soldiers have been kept awake all night in lamenting Patroclus and in preparing his body for burial. The Trojans, on the contrary, have been able to enjoy a quiet supper and a night's rest. Odysseus, not being blinded by personal feeling like Achilles, knows that unless soldiers get a good meal first they will not be able to fight all day: even if they are eager to continue the battle, "yet their limbs are treacherously weighed down as hunger and thirst overtake them, and their knees fail them as they go." There is both compassionate understanding and Napoleonic common sense here: the spirit may be willing, but the flesh is weak; an army marches on its stomach. Odysseus adds some further remarks on the strengthening and cheering effect of food and wine, and ends by demanding that the army should have a full meal before being ordered to attack.

Achilles' reply to Odysseus' reasonable objection is characteristic: "You go and busy yourselves with food: I shall not touch a morsel until Patroclus is avenged. And, let me tell you, if I were in supreme command,

tures like this to general anti-Ulysean prejudice. Lycophron's description of him as "the dwarf" (*Alexandra*, 1242ff.) is a good example of propagandist distortion of a Homeric description. See also Tzetzes, *Homericorum* 382-3, 626-30, 672-3.

⁴As in Patroni's elaborate but insubstantial theories on Odysseus before Homer. Patroni believes that there is even some surreptitious anti-Achaean propaganda in the Homeric poems, Homer, too, being of Mediterranean race.

⁵Contrast Homer's indication of the positive ugliness of Thersites (*Il.* II, 216-19) and Dolon (*Il.* X, 316).

the whole army would have to fight fasting, too, till sunset. Then, with vengeance achieved, we should have a great supper." What is one to call such arrogant confidence as this—with no thought of fatigue or death, no consideration for himself or for others? Is it heroic, or is it schoolboyish? Is it superb singleness of purpose or callow rashness? Odysseus in his reply deftly and gently suggests that youthful heedlessness is partly, at least, to blame. Addressing Achilles with great deference as "Much the mightiest of the Achaeans" he admits his own inferiority to him in martial valor. But he claims definite superiority in thinking things out. Then after an appeal to Achilles to listen patiently for a moment (Odysseus clearly wants to avoid provoking Achilles' wrath again in any way; but he insists on making his point about the need for food), he emphasizes the danger of fatigue in war, and mildly ridicules Achilles' notion that fasting is a good way for warriors to mourn those slain in battle. Bury the dead with pitiless heart, bewail them for a day, yes—but those who survive must eat to get energy for punishing the enemy. Odysseus is trying to persuade Achilles to eat with the others. If Achilles fights fasting against a well-fed Hector, even Achilles may be conquered. Odysseus' arguments fail, as in the Embassy scene, to overcome Achilles' passionate resolve. But, significantly, Athene intervenes later, at Zeus' request, and feeds Achilles with nectar and ambrosia "so that," the poet remarks, "joyless hunger should not reach his knees." Thus obliquely Homer, Athene, and Zeus agree with Odysseus' advice.

But the typical Homeric hero would probably have admired Achilles' intransigence more than Odysseus' more practical policy. One does in fact find an indication elsewhere in the *Iliad* that Odysseus had already got a reputation for being too much interested in the pleasures of eating. In *Iliad* IV, 343-6, Agamemnon accuses Odysseus and the Athenian Menestheus of being quick to hear invitations to a feast, but slow to answer the call to arms. Odysseus emphatically denies any reluctance to join the fight, but he passes over the accusation of unusual alacrity in coming to feasts. Probably he thought it beneath contempt. Yet, as in Agamemnon's accompanying accusation of evil deceitfulness, it may well be that Homer intends us to catch a glimpse here of a general tendency to regard Odysseus as rather more partial to good fare than a hero should have been.

This is uncertain. But there is no uncertainty about the attitude of post-Homeric writers. Attic comedians, fourth-century philosophers, Alexandrian critics, late classical chroniclers, agree in accusing Odysseus of greed and gluttony.⁶ They based their slanders chiefly on some of his

⁶For references to Odysseus' appetite in Attic comedy see Johannes Schmidt, "Ulixes Comicus," *Jahrbücher für Class. Phil.* Suppl. vol. 1888, 361ff. For philosophical criticism see n. 7 below. Alexandrian depreciations will be discussed in chapter nine. Among late writers Athenaeus accuses him bluntly of gluttony and greed (*Deipnosophists* 412 b-d).

actions and remarks in the *Odyssey* which, considered out of their contexts, certainly do give a bad impression. Thus in *Od.* VI, 250, Odysseus eats "greedily." In *Od.* VII, 215-18 he asks Alcinoüs to let him go on with his supper without interruption, remarking that there is no more shameful compulsion than that of "the abominable belly" which compels even a mourner to eat and forget his grief for a while. In *Od.* IX, 1ff., after the Phaeacians have given him a splendid banquet, Odysseus pronounces that he knows of no more beautiful consummation in life than a feast with good food, good wine, good song, and general good cheer. Later, after his arrival in Ithaca, when still in his beggar's disguise, Odysseus returns to the theme of hunger and appetite. He tells Eumaeus that it is for the sake of "the accursed belly" that vagabonds are compelled to suffer all the hardships of wandering from place to place (*Od.* XV, 344-5). Later he tells Eumaeus again (*Od.* XVII, 286-9) that in his opinion it is impossible to conceal the "accursed belly" when it is in its full fury: it brings many evils to men, and for its sake men sail the barren seas to attack their enemies. Soon afterwards (vv. 473-4) he attributes a violent assault by Antinous to the promptings of his "baneful accursed belly." In the following book he pretends that he wants to attack the rival beggar, Irus, at the behest of "the evil-working belly" (XVIII, 53-4), but repudiates a suggestion by a suitor (XVIII, 362-4) that he was good for nothing but gross eating (XVIII, 376-81).

If one remembers that no other hero in the *Iliad*, nor any Homeric heroine in either poem, even uses the word for "belly" and still less discusses its effects, it is clear that Odysseus is an untypical hero in this respect. And it is obvious how easy it was for comic writers to portray him as a glutton, courtly critics as a crudely indelicate eater, and philosophers as a confirmed voluptuary, by concentrating on a few passages out of their contexts. Thus Plato was shocked at Odysseus' praise of banquets, as being one of the finest "consummations" in life.⁷ But surely

and 513 a-d), alleging that even Sardanapalus would not have made Odysseus' remark in *Od.* VII, 219ff., "But my belly ever bids me eat and drink and makes me forget what I have suffered and bids me fill it up." Athenaeus ignores that fact that Odysseus is speaking of the effect of extreme hunger, not of any Sardanapalan cravings. Lucian (*Tragodopodagra* v, 261-2) alleges that Odysseus died of gout as the result of over indulgence. Cf. Eustathius on *Od.* XVIII, 55, and the scholia on *Od.* VII, 216.

⁷ *Republic* 390b. Probably what most provoked philosophers in Odysseus' praise of banquets was his use of the word *τέλος* which later came to mean something like the *summum bonum*. Even Heraclitus Ponticus, that staunch champion of Homer against Platonic carpings, felt that Odysseus' remark could only be justified on the grounds that he was not himself but only "the remnant (*λείψανον*) of Poseidon's wrath" when he said it (*Homeric Allegories*, 79). With Plato's view cf. Lucian, *De parasit.* 10, where he takes Odysseus' remarks as praise of the parasite's life. According to Athenaeus 513a, Odysseus' remarks were explained by Megacleides, the fourth century Homeric critic, as a venial piece of opportunistic flattery based on Alcinoüs' earlier remark on the Phaeacians' love of music and feasting (*Od.* VIII, 248)—which is the most sensible explanation, cf. VIII, 382-4, where Odysseus praises the Phaeacians' skill in dancing.

the effusive remarks of an after-dinner speaker at a royal banquet are not to be judged as a solemn philosophical pronouncement. Besides, should not Odysseus' more sober aphorisms on the harmful effects of appetite in human life be weighed against this? And should it not have been remembered to Odysseus' credit how he had rejected the temptation of the Lotus-fruit and had resolutely held out against eating the Cattle of the Sun? When he eats "greedily" after his reception in Alcinoüs' palace, should we not bear in mind that (apart from a snack from the remains of Nausicaa's picnic in Book VI) he had not eaten for three days and had suffered terrible physical and mental agonies in Poseidon's long storm? ⁸ Indeed, he had shown supreme self-control during his first supplication to Nausicaa: he had never mentioned food, but modestly asked only for a scrap of clothing and for information about the city. One almost loses patience with armchair critics who censure the conduct of a ravenous shipwrecked mariner for not conforming with the court etiquette of Alexandria or Versailles, and with moralists who demand the scruples of the confessional in the speeches of the banquetting-hall.

Odysseus' remarks on food in the second half of the *Odyssey* were less criticized, because he was obviously playing up to his role as a beggar in all of them. Further, as the Cynics noticed, he was a philosophical beggar. He showed that he understood the effects of appetite on men in general: how it drives men to war as well as to trade; how it moves the languid fingers of the courtier as well as the clutching fists of the starveling outcast. Yet he never suggested, as the more cynical Cynics did, that the belly was lord of all, and that he and his dog Argos were equally its slaves. He simply accepted it as one of the inescapable elemental forces in human life. Heroes like Agamemnon, Ajax, and Achilles, who had, as far as we know, never been compulsorily deprived of food in their lives, could nonchalantly disregard its demands. But Odysseus, by the time of his return to Ithaca, had become painfully familiar with the effects of involuntary hunger. Homer himself, if he was a bard wandering from audience to audience "for the sake of the accursed belly," may well have made Odysseus his own spokesman here. He, too, if we can deduce his personal feelings from the vivid description of the blind bard Demodocus in *Od.* VIII, 62ff., appreciated the comfort of having a basket of food and a cup of wine within reach to take "whenever his spirit prompted him."

The contrast here between the conventional hero's insouciance, or reticence, on the subject of food and Odysseus' frequent attention to it is one of the best illustrations of Odysseus' unconventionality as a hero.

⁸ There is a choice modern example of this out-of-context criticism in a recent (1948) study of the Homeric poems: Odysseus' voracity in *Od.* VI and VII is explained as a "propitiatory rite." Is it unreasonable to insist, in the light of both common experience and Odysseus' own reiterated statements, on a simpler explanation—that extreme hunger compels men to eat grossly?

But Homer, perhaps for fear that his less philosophical hearers might fail to appreciate this kind of example, also exemplified Odysseus' uniqueness in a small matter that all warriors would notice. It is frequently emphasized in the *Odyssey* (and also mentioned in *Iliad* X) that Odysseus had unusual skill as an archer. His triumph over the Suitors at the end of the *Odyssey* depended on this. But only a few, and those not the most illustrious, of the other heroes at Troy show any interest in the use of the bow. Indeed, there are some indications that archery was despised as plebeian or unmanly,⁹ much as a medieval knight of the sword and lance scorned to assail another knight with arrows. Perhaps Odysseus was merely old fashioned in his military technique. Or perhaps it was because the plot of the *Odyssey* demanded a triumph by means of the bow. But the trait does also serve to distinguish him from the other chief heroes. Another feature is far more peculiar. It is once mentioned in the *Odyssey* that Odysseus possessed, and so he presumably used, poisoned arrows.¹⁰ This, however, like his Autolyca ancestry, is never referred to in the *Iliad*.

Though Odysseus' Homeric speeches were the admiration of every age of classical rhetoric, their excellence is not that of an orator among tongue-tied men. Oratory was a recognized part of heroic training. Thus in the Embassy scene Achilles' reply is fully as powerful and eloquent as Odysseus' pleadings. At times, too, Nestor's speeches in council are as wise and as cogent as Odysseus'. The difference is not one of skill. It lies more in the fact that, when the other heroes speak, their minds are obsessed with conventions and prerogatives or weakened by passion and self-concern. Achilles' wrath and Nestor's tendency to garrulous reminiscences tend to make their orations more effective as expressions of prejudices and personal feelings than as instruments of policy. In contrast, Odysseus' speeches are strictly functional,¹¹ as a rule. When he shows passion or introduces a personal touch it is almost always because it will help to achieve his aim—to quell Thersites and to rebuke the wavering Agamemnon or an insolent prince of Phaeacia. Those who

⁹ This is the view of D. B. Monro, ed., *Homer's Odyssey*, Bks. XIII-XXIV (Oxford, 1901), p. 305, and others. Shewan (pp. 168-9) questions it, citing Teucer, Philoctetes, Meriones, and Apollo, as reputable bowmen and concluding, "That the bow was in common use as an auxiliary weapon is certain . . . and that it was held in contempt is not proved." Wilamowitz suggested that *Telemachus* (Far-fighter) was named from Odysseus' skill in archery. For the use of the bow by Homeric heroes see H. L. Lorimer, *Homer and the Monuments* (London, 1950), pp. 299ff.

¹⁰ Odysseus' poisoned arrows are referred to in *Od.* I, 260-1. Eustathius and a scholiast on *Od.* I, 259ff. suggest that they were necessary for the ultimate slaying of the suitors, to make every wound fatal (as Heracles killed Nessus with an arrow dipped in the blood of the Hydra). Or they may have been intended for hunting. Gilbert Murray, in *The Rise of the Greek Epic* (Oxford, 1934), p. 130, claims to find traces of the use of poisoned arrows in war in some phrases of the *Iliad*.

¹¹ Cf. Eustathius on *Il.* II, 157 and 337.

consider passionate self-esteem an essential quality of the genuine heroic type may find this kind of self-possession mean or machiavellian. But, as Sophocles indicates in his *Ajax*, it is the faculty that maintains justice and humanity among passionate men.

Besides this functional difference between Odysseus' speeches and those of other heroes, Homer signalizes his oratory by a peculiar personal trait. In Antenor's speech, as already mentioned, there is a description of Odysseus' curious habitual pose before beginning an important speech. He would stand with his eyes fixed on the ground, his body and gestures stiff "like an ignorant fellow's." His voice, Antenor adds, was of great power. But he seems to have controlled this Gladstonian organ with the deftness of a Disraeli: his words came smoothly, lightly, continuously, flake after flake like falling snow—perhaps in the quiet, level tone characteristic of adepts in the art of plausibility. The general effect, we are told, was overwhelming. Homer corroborates this impression in several scenes in the *Odyssey*, where he describes how Odysseus could hold an audience spellbound "like a skilled bard." Homer could hardly have paid a higher tribute to his oratory.¹² Once again he identifies Odysseus' powers with his own.

In the later tradition Odysseus was often accused of cowardice. The charge was based less on incidents mentioned by Homer than on others first recorded in the post-Homeric tradition, Odysseus' attempt to evade conscription, for example, and in later versions of his conduct with Palamedes and Philoctetes. There is nothing of that kind in the Homeric poems. But one ambiguous incident in *Iliad* VIII¹³ left a shadow on his reputation for courage. The circumstances are these. A general rout of the Achaeans has begun. Agamemnon, the two Ajaxes, and Idomeneus retreat rapidly. Nestor is left behind in grave danger. Hector rushes forward to cut him down. Diomedes sees the danger and calls to Odysseus for help in rescuing the old king. "But," Homer records, "Odysseus did not hear (or listen to) his call, and sped on to the Achaean ships." The crucial verb is capable of two interpretations. It was left open to Odysseus' defenders in post-Homeric controversies to argue that Odysseus had

¹² See on *Il.* III, 216ff., in chapter two, and Leaf and Bayfield for the "level tone." "Habitual" is implied by Homer's use of the frequentative or iterative forms *στράσκει*, *ἴδασκε*, *ἐχέσκει*. Odysseus' power of holding an audience is emphasized in *Od.* XVII, 518-21; XI, 334; XIII, 2. Tributes to Odysseus' oratorical powers by later rhetoricians are very frequent, see Roscher, col. 640. The BT scholia on *Il.* III, 216, note that Odysseus' oratory was "firm" or "robust" (*πικρός*), the ideal kind, resembling that of Demosthenes, while the styles of Menelaus and Nestor are compared to those of Lysias and Isocrates respectively.

¹³ Shewan, pp. 165-7, has refuted the allegations of Geddes and others that Odysseus is deliberately vilified here and in *Il.* XI, 414ff., by the poet of "the Achilleid"; cf. J. A. Houben, *Qualem Homerus in Iliade finxit Ulixem* (Trier, 1869), pp. 3ff. Note also Odysseus' firm and effective opposition to Agamemnon's proposal to retreat in *Il.* XIV, 64ff. For post-Homeric tributes to his courage see Roscher, col. 639.

simply not heard Diomedes' cry in the confusion of the general retreat. But his detractors could take it as a deliberate ignoring of a comrade's cry for help. Homer's own intention is hidden in the ambiguity. However, no matter what he meant here, he soon makes it clear that none of his heroes attached any blame to Odysseus for his conduct. On the contrary, Odysseus' prestige is at its highest in the next three books.

If one considers the whole of Odysseus' career, a general accusation of cowardice is plainly absurd. In *Iliad* XI, 395ff., he stands valorously alone against the whole Trojan host. His bravery in the Doloneia is incontestable. Similarly it took the highest courage to vanquish the Cyclops, to resist Scylla, to overthrow the horde of suitors. Yet Homer does seem to hint occasionally, not at cowardice, but at a kind of tension between prudence and boldness. Thus in Odysseus' brief spell as supreme champion of the Greeks in *Iliad* XI, he pauses for a moment to wonder whether it would not be wiser to retreat with the rest. He immediately reminds himself of his heroic duty, and, with a touch of fatalism, unusual in him, fights on. There is obviously no cowardice in this. On the contrary, the man who fully foresees danger and then goes on to meet it is more truly courageous than an insensate Ajax or a furious Achilles. The best illustration of this tension between prudence and heroic valor is found in Odysseus' attempt to avoid conscription by feigning madness, to be discussed in a later chapter. Unfortunately it is not certain that Homer knew the legend.

A commentator on Euripides' version of the Cyclops incident has seen something of a Hamletesque figure in Odysseus as portrayed there. This was possible in the atmosphere of the late fifth century. But Homer's Odysseus is obviously no indecisive princeling "sicklied o'er with the pale cast of thought." His decisive boldness is made clear both at the beginning of the *Iliad* in his handling of the Thersites affair, and at the outset of his Odyssean adventures when he sacks Ismarus like any Elizabethan buccaneer or Spanish conquistador. He is "the great-hearted," "the sacker of cities," as well as the prudent and resourceful Odysseus. Yet in both these bold deeds his prudence is not entirely in abeyance. While he faces Thersites uncompromisingly, he coaxes, amuses, and flatters the other Greeks. Again in the sack of Ismarus he orders a withdrawal as soon as a counter-attack seems likely. His comrades refuse, with disastrous results. Odysseus calls them "great fools" for not obeying his prudent command. But when he first gave it, they, for their part, may well have thought his prudence was mere timidity.

The fact is that, even though no real cowardice was involved, Odysseus' gift for anticipating dangers and his readiness to avoid them when it best served his purpose, did separate him from the normal hero of his time. Whether one admires it or not, a certain mulish stubbornness in the manner of Ajax, a reckless *élan* like that of Diomedes, a readiness to let everything be turned upside down for the sake of some point of honor

in the manner of Achilles, was more characteristic of the early heroic temperament than a prudent resourcefulness. When the typical hero found his path to fame and glory blocked, his instinct was to batter his own or someone else's head against the obstacle until something broke. The gentle Hector and the tough Ajax were alike in this intransigence. Odysseus was no less determined to gain his purpose; but he was far less intransigent. He was prepared to undermine an obstacle or to look for another path, to imitate the mole or the fox rather than the rhinoceros.

In the later tradition, admirers of the simpler, prouder kind of hero will despise this quality, calling it cowardly or opportunistic. Homer suggests no such disapproval. On the contrary the *Odyssey* implies that some such resourcefulness is necessary to overcome the trials of human life in general. Almost all Homer's more intransigent heroes die unhappily, Agamemnon murdered by his wife, Ajax killed by his own hand, Achilles slain by a cowardly arrow. Odysseus, like Nestor and Menelaus, returns home at last to live in peace and prosperity.

Odysseus was also the "much-enduring" man. Among the other Homeric heroes only Nestor, whose life had extended over three normal generations, shared this epithet with him. Why? After all, many of the rest showed great endurance in battle. The answer seems to lie in a special implication in Homer's use of epithets in *poly-* meaning "much." As has been suggested elsewhere,¹⁴ it seems to imply variety rather than degree, especially in its active compounds. The other heroes were "much-enduring" in their own special forte, namely, fighting. But Odysseus and Nestor were men who had shown their endurance in an unusual variety of circumstances: Nestor because of his abnormally long life, Odysseus because of his enterprising nature. Here once again a clash between Odysseus' qualities and the typical heroic temperament emerges. Ajax or Achilles would never have been willing to undergo some of Odysseus' experiences—his three adventures in beggar's disguise, for instance, and his ignominious escape from the Cyclops' cave by hanging under a ram's belly (which was a kind of Trojan Horse stratagem in reverse). In the later tradition Odysseus is accused of ignobleness, even cowardice, for his readiness to employ disguise or stealth when necessary to achieve his purpose. Undoubtedly one can detect an element of Autolykanism here. But what was often forgotten was that these various examples of combined resourcefulness and endurance were generally used *pro bono publico*.

We shall see all this argued out in the later tradition. Here it need only be emphasized that without this quality Odysseus could never have been so serviceable to the Greek cause. This serviceability varied from

¹⁴ See the article cited in n. 2 to chapter two. The A scholia on Odysseus' epithet *πολυμήχανος* in *Il.* VIII, 93, give a long list of his various accomplishments as ploughman, shipwright, carpenter, hunter, steersman, and so on. Homer clearly admires this kind of versatility.

such an ordinary task as that of pacifying the indignant Chryses in *Iliad* I to the final triumph of Ulysses cleverness in the ruse of the Wooden Horse. But it is the common fate of serviceable men to be despised by their more self-centered associates.

All these deviations from the heroic norm are exemplified in the *Iliad* as well as in the *Odyssey*. The next quality to be considered has little or no scope in the restricted Iliadic milieu. It needs the more expansive background of the *Odyssey*. It is a quality that points away from the older Heroic Age with its code of static conventions and prerogatives, and on to a coming era, the era of Ionian exploration and speculation.¹⁵ This is Odysseus' desire for fresh knowledge. Homer does not emphasize it. But it can be seen plainly at work in two of the most famous of Odysseus' Odyssean exploits. It becomes the master passion of his whole personality in the post-classical tradition, notably in Dante, Tennyson, Arturo Graf, and Kazantzakis.

This eagerness to learn more about God, man, and nature is the most characteristic feature of the whole Greek tradition. To quote a recent commentator¹⁶ on Dante's conception of Ulysses:

To be a Greek was to seek to know; to know the primordial substance of matter, to know the meaning of number, to know the world as a rational whole. In no spirit of paradox one may say that Euclid is the most typical Greek: he would fain know to the bottom, and know as a rational system, the laws of the measurement of the earth. . . . No doubt the Greek genius means many things. To one school . . . it means an aesthetic ideal. . . . To others, however, it means an austere thing, which delights in logic and mathematics; which continually wondering and always inquisitive, is driven by its wonder into philosophy, and into inquiry about the why and wherefore, the whence and whither, of tragedy, of the State, indeed, of all things.

This eagerness to learn is not, of course, entirely a Greek quality. Every child, scholar, and scientist, shares it. But it can hardly be denied that the Greeks were endowed more richly with intellectual curiosity than any other ancient people. More conservative cultures like the Egyptian and the Roman judged the Greek spirit of experiment and inquiry either childlike or dangerous. But, for good and ill, it has been the strongest force in the development of modern European civilization and science.

Odysseus is alone among Homer's heroes in displaying this intellectual curiosity strongly. There is an obvious reason for this. A spirit of inquiry would naturally get more stimulus from the unexplored territories of Odysseus' fabulous wanderings than from the conventional environment

¹⁵ Jaeger, p. 98, describes Odysseus as "not so much a knightly warrior as the embodiment of the adventurous spirit, the explorer's energy, and the clever practical wisdom of the Ionian," and cf. p. 20, "the cunning storm-tossed adventurer Odysseus is the creation of the age when Ionian sailors wandered the seas far and wide."

¹⁶ Sir Ernest Barker, *Traditions of Civility* (Cambridge, 1948), p. 6.

of the *Iliad*. But it was hardly accidental that Odysseus should have had these special opportunities for acquiring fresh knowledge. To him that hath shall be given: adventures are to the adventurous. One may well doubt whether an Ajax or a Nestor would have shown as much alert curiosity even in the cave of the Cyclops or near the island of the Sirens if they had been there instead of Odysseus. Odysseus' personality and exploits are indivisible: he has curious adventures because he is Odysseus, and he is Odysseus because he has curious adventures. Set another hero in Circe's palace or in Phaeacia and you may have some story like *Innocents Abroad*, or a *Childe Harold's Pilgrimage*, or an *Aeneid*, but not an *Odyssey*.

Odysseus' desire to know is most clearly illustrated in the episodes with the Cyclops and the Sirens. He himself asserts that his original motive for landing on the Cyclops' island was to see whether its unknown inhabitants were "violent, savage and lawless, or else hospitable men with god-fearing mind"—almost as if, in modern terms, he wanted to do some anthropological research. It is more the motive of a Malinowski approaching the Trobriand Islands,¹⁷ than of a pirate or a conquistador. But his crew did not share this zeal for knowledge. When they entered the Cyclops' cave, the Companions felt a presentiment of danger and begged him to withdraw. Odysseus refused, still eager to see what the giant was like. In describing the consequences Odysseus admits his folly here in the strongest words of self-denunciation that he ever uses (*Od.* IX, 228-30). As a result of his imprudence six of his companions were eaten. It becomes clear later, in the Sirens incident, when Odysseus meets a similar temptation to dangerous knowledge, that he had learned a lesson from his rash curiosity, for he takes great care to prevent any danger to his companions from hearing their deadly song.

But Odysseus' motives in the Cyclops episode were not unmixed. He admits that his second reason for wanting to meet the ogre was a hope of extracting some guest-gifts from him—acquisitiveness as well as inquisitiveness. The post-Homeric tradition was inclined to censure Odysseus for unheroic cupidity here and elsewhere. But other Homeric heroes were quite as eager to receive gifts as he.¹⁸ It was a normal part of heroic

¹⁷ A friend has asked me to reconsider this view, claiming that Odysseus' motive for visiting the island of the Cyclops was simply a desire to get information on his whereabouts (as in *Od.* X, 190ff.). But the phrasing of *Od.* IX, 174-6 still seems to me to imply a special kind of curiosity.

¹⁸ See the Homeric lexicons at δῶρον. Aelian, *Var. Hist.* 4, 20, observes that both Menelaus and Odysseus resembled Phoenician merchants in the way they acquired wealth on their travels: cf. the young Phaeacian's taunt against Odysseus in *Od.* VIII, 161-4. Comments on Odysseus' love of gifts will be found in the scholia on *Od.* VII, 225; XIII, 103; and in Eustathius on *Od.* X, 571. Plutarch, in *How to study poetry*, 27, explains why Odysseus need not necessarily be convicted of avariciousness in checking his Phaeacian gifts so carefully on his arrival in Ithaca (*Od.* XIII, 215ff.): he may simply have wished to see if the Phaeacians were honest and truthful men; or for rejoicing at

etiquette; and in general the Greeks always had a flair for trade as well as for science. Odysseus' fault lay not in his hope of getting gifts but in his allowing that hope (combined with curiosity) to endanger the lives of his companions. Homer left it to others to draw a moral.

But there is a deeper difficulty in this incident. To anyone who has followed Odysseus' career from the beginning of the *Iliad* up to his encounter with the Cyclops, Odysseus' general lack of prudence and self-control in it must seem quite uncharacteristic of his usual conduct, especially his foolhardy boastfulness¹⁹ after his escape from the Cyclops' clutches (*Od.* IX, 49off.). By this last imprudence, despite his companions' entreaties, he nearly brought disaster on them all from the monster's missiles. Perhaps the explanation is that this particular episode retains much of its pre-Homeric shape and ethos. It may have been fairly fully worked out before Homer incorporated it into his poem.²⁰ Its outline is almost pure folklore. Homer's additions seem to consist mainly of vivid descriptions of scenery and the motivation of Odysseus' conduct. In order to fit Odysseus into the traditional plot, and also in order to make him incur the wrath of Poseidon, Homer may have had to strain his own conception of Odysseus' character more than elsewhere. So while in one way the victory over the Cyclops was Odysseus' greatest Autolycean triumph—especially in the typically Autolycean equivocation of his No-man formula—it was also his greatest failure as the favorite of Athene. And, significantly, by provoking Poseidon's enmity it was the main cause of his losing Athene's personal protection for nine years. In other words, in this episode Odysseus relapses for a while nearer to his original character as the Wily Lad than anywhere else in the Homeric poems.

To return to Odysseus' intellectual curiosity: it is presented in a much purer light in his encounter with the Sirens. Here no greed for gain, or indifference to his companions' safety, intrudes. Circe (who in Athene's absence takes her place for a while in advising Odysseus) has warned Odysseus of the Sirens' fatal attractions, telling him of "the great heap of men rotting on their bones" which lies in the flowery meadow beside

Penelope's receiving of gifts (*Od.* XVIII, 281-2): he may merely have been glad at the suitors' over-confidence. But both excuses are rather weak. It is better to admit that Odysseus, like the other heroes of his time, delighted in acquiring wealth: see A.-Ed. Chaignet, *Les Héros et les Héroïnes d'Homère* (Paris, 1894), pp. 271-4, and Bruno Snell, *The Discovery of the Mind*, Eng. trs. T. C. Rosenmeyer (Oxford, 1953), pp. 156-7.

¹⁹ The scholiast ad loc. admits that this was "over quarrelsome" (*φιλονεικότερον*) but adds that it would give some consolation to the injured feelings of the Greeks.

²⁰ A far-reaching problem opens up here; and a greater emphasis on Homer's debt to his predecessors would demand a quite different view of the characterization of Odysseus in *Od.* IX-XII. But I must leave it to the others to explore this line of interpretation. See D. L. Page, "Odysseus and Polyphemus," *Latin Teaching*, 1949, 8-26, and, more generally, D. Muelder in *Hermes* xxxviii (1903), for possible signs of imperfectly digested material in the Cyclops incident. C. C. van Essen in *Mnemosyne* lviii (1930), 302-8, suggests an Etruscan origin for the Cyclops and Odysseus.

them. Better not to hear their seductive song at all; but if he, Odysseus cannot resist a desire to hear it—and Circe knows Odysseus well enough to expect that he cannot resist it—he must fill his comrades' ears with wax and have himself bound tightly to the mast.

What happens in the actual encounter became one of the most famous stories in European literature and a rich source of allegorical and symbolical interpretations. Its significance for the present study lies in the nature of the Sirens' temptation. This was not based on any amorous enticements. Instead the Sirens offered information about the Trojan war and knowledge of "whatever has happened on the wide, fertile earth." To put it in modern jargon, the Sirens guaranteed to supply a global news-service²¹ to their clients, an almost irresistible attraction to the typical Greek whose chief delight, as observed in the Acts of the Apostles (xvii. 21) was "to tell or to hear some new thing."

As Homer describes the incident, the attractions of the Sirens were primarily intellectual. Merely sensual pleasures would not, Homer implies (and Cicero²² later insists), have allured him so strongly. He had resisted the temptation to taste of the fruit of the Lotus. But one must not overlook, with Cicero, the effect of their melodious song and their unrivalled voices. Music for the Greeks was the most moving of the arts. Besides, as Montaigne observes in his essay on *Glory*, there was a subtle touch of flattery in their first words:

Deca vers nous, deca, O treslouable Ulysse,
Et le plus grand honneur dont la Grece fleurisse.

And perhaps their subtlest flattery was in recognizing Odysseus' caliber at once and in appealing only to his intellect. If an Agamemnon or a Menelaus had been in his place, they might have changed their tune.

For some reason Odysseus' intellectual curiosity, as displayed in his encounter with the Sirens, was not much emphasized in the earlier classical tradition. Presumably so typical a quality of the early Greeks (as distinct from the Achaean heroes) was taken for granted. But the later allegorists, both pagan and Christian, made it a favorite theme for imaginative moralization, as will be described in a later chapter.

It might rashly be concluded from the preceding analysis that Homer's Odysseus was a man distracted by psychological conflicts and distressed by social tensions. The general impression derived from the Homeric poems suggests nothing of the kind. The inner and outer tensions are skilfully

²¹ For the Sirens as a kind of "poetical gazette" see T. W. Allen, *Homer, the Origins and Transmission* (Oxford, 1924), p. 142, n. 1, who quotes Sextus Empiricus, *Adv. math.* 1, 11.

²² Cicero, *De finibus* 5, 18: see further in chapter nine. For the view that the Sirens appealed especially to those ambitious for ἀρετή see Xenophon, *Memorabilia*, 2, 6, 11.

implied, but the total portrait is that of a man well integrated both in his own temperament and with his environment. As Athene emphasized, he was essentially "self-possessed," fully able to control conflicting passions and motives. His psychological tensions never reach a breaking-point. They serve rather to give him his dynamic force. As a result his purposefulness is like an arrow shot from a well-strung bow, and his energy has the tirelessness of coiled springs. Resilience, elasticity, concentration, these are the qualities that maintain his temperamental balance. In contrast the Ajax-like hero was superficially firm and strong. His code of conduct and his heroic pride encased his heart like archaic armor. Once this psychological carapace was pierced by some violent shock the inner parts were as soft as any crustacean's. Odysseus' strength and self-possession did not depend on any outer armor. He could be as firm and enduring in the role of a beggar or in the cave of a Cyclops as in full battle-dress at Troy. This was the quality that the Cynic and Stoic philosophers were most to admire later.

Such was his inner harmony and strength. His conduct in matters of major importance shows a similar purposeful integrity. He had a remarkable power of taking the long view, of seeing actions in their widest context, of disciplining himself to the main purpose in hand.²⁸ Thus while other heroes at Troy are squabbling like children over questions of honor and precedence, Odysseus presses on steadily towards victory. And why? Not, Homer implies, for the sake of triumph and plunder, but in order to return to his beloved Ithaca as soon as possible. Here Odysseus' efforts for the Greek cause are integrated with his fundamental love

²⁸ Cf. H. Fraenkel, *Dichtung und Philosophie des frühen Griechentums* (New York, 1951), pp. 123-4. Chaignet, p. 193, sums up his impression of Odysseus in the Homeric poems thus: *au fond Ulysse est un idéal de la vie morale en même temps qu'un représentant de toutes les qualités de sa race. C'est le type non pas le plus sympathique, le plus noble, mais le plus complet du héros grec.*

ADDITIONAL NOTE: The evidence for Odysseus' age in the Homeric poems is inconclusive. Antilochus, in *Il.* XXIII, 790-91, describes him as being "of an earlier generation and of earlier men" and also as *ἀπογέρον*. The last term is ambiguous: it could denote a person in the early stages of old age, or an active old man, or one who is prematurely aged. Considering that Odysseus' only son was then barely ten years old and that Laertes was still active ten years later, he can hardly have been far advanced in years. Antilochus was a very young man and to such even the moderately middle-aged often seem old. If Odysseus was in his late thirties and Antilochus was eighteen or nineteen, he might loosely be described as "belonging to an earlier generation." This would place him in the late twenties when he left Ithaca and in the late forties on his return home, which seems to fit the general implications of the poems best. On the other hand, the flagrant inconsistency in the implied ages of Neoptolemus (see commentators on *Il.* XIX, 326ff.) warns against assuming chronological consistency in matters of this kind. If *ἀπογέρον* meant having a prematurely aged look, as some ancient commentators held, it would be in character for a man like Odysseus; and Idomeneus (whose brother Odysseus pretends to be in *Od.* XIX, 181) is described as "half-gray" in *Il.* XIII, 361. But the description of Odysseus in *Od.* XIII, 430-34, seems to preclude any premature ageing in his appearance.

of home; *pro bono publico* is ultimately *pro domo sua*. Similarly his loyalty to the Companions during the fabulous voyages, and his patience with their infuriating alternations of rashness and timidity, were part of the same enlightened egotism: he needed a crew to sail his ship home. His love for Penelope, too, was, as has been suggested already, not based entirely on *eros* or *agape*, but also contained that *philia*, that attachment to one's normal and natural social environment which underlies so much of Greek happiness. And his piety is the piety of one who wishes to keep on good terms with the gods.

Such mixed motives may seem impure or ignoble to those who take their ideals from self-sacrificing patriotism, or from self-effacing saintliness, or from self-forgetting romanticism. But these are post-Homeric concepts. Within the context of the Heroic Age and perhaps of the Homeric Age, too, this identification of one's own best interests with the general welfare of one's kith, kin, and comrades, with one's *philoï* in fact, was a saving grace for both the individual and society. All the Homeric heroes are egotists; but Odysseus' egotism has sent its roots out more widely into his personal environment than that of Agamemnon, Achilles, or Ajax.

One other aspect of Odysseus' Homeric character needs to be kept in mind at the last. In a way it is the most important of all for the development of the tradition. This is the fundamental ambiguity of his essential qualities. We have seen how prudence may decline towards timidity, tactfulness towards a blameworthy *suppressio veri*, serviceability towards servility, and so on. The ambiguity lies both in the qualities themselves and in the attitudes of others towards them. Throughout the later tradition this ambiguity in Odysseus' nature and in his reputation will vacillate between good and bad, between credit and infamy. Odysseus' personality and reputation at best are poised, as it were, on a narrow edge between Aristotelian faults of excess and deficiency. Poised between rashness and timorousness, he is prudently brave; poised between rudeness and obsequiousness he is "civilized"; poised between stupidity and overcleverness he, at his best, is wise.

Homer was large-minded enough to comprehend a unity in apparent diversity, a structural consistency within an external changefulness, in the character of Ulysses. But few later authors were as comprehending. Instead, in the post-Homeric tradition, Odysseus' complex personality becomes broken up into various simple types—the *politique*, the romantic amorist, the sophisticated villain, the sensualist, the philosophic traveler, and others. Not till James Joyce wrote his *Ulysses* was a successful effort made to recreate Homer's polytropic hero in full. Similarly after Homer judgments on Odysseus' ethical status became narrower and sharper. Moralists grew angry in disputing whether he was a "good" man or not—good, that is to say, according to the varying principles of Athens, or

Alexandria, or Rome, or Florence, or Versailles, or Madrid, or Weimar. Here is another long Odyssey for Odysseus to endure. But Homer, the unmoved mover in this chaotic cosmos of tradition, does not vex his own or his hero's mind with any such problems in split personality or ambivalent ethics. He is content to portray a man of many turns.

Ulysses

by Robert Graves

To the much-tossed Ulysses, never done
 With woman whether gowned as wife or whore,
 Penelope and Circe seemed as one:
 She like a whore made his lewd fancies run,
 And wifely she a hero to him bore.

Their counter-changings terrified his way:
 They were the clashing rocks, Symplegades,
 Scylla and Charybdis too were they;
 Now they were storms frosting the sea with spray
 And now the lotus island's drunken ease.

They multiplied into the Sirens' throng,
 Forewarned by fear of whom he stood bound fast
 Hand and foot helpless to the vessel's mast,
 Yet would not stop his ears: daring their song
 He groaned and sweated till that shore was past.

One, two, and many: flesh had made him blind,
 Flesh had one pleasure only in the act,
 Flesh set one purpose only in the mind—
 Triumphs of flesh and afterwards to find
 Still those same terrors wherewith flesh was racked.

His wiles were witty and his fame far known,
 Every king's daughter sought him for her own,
 Yet he was nothing to be won or lost.
 All lands to him were Ithaca: love-tossed
 He loathed the fraud, yet would not bed alone.

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