

H O M E R

A COLLECTION OF CRITICAL ESSAYS

Edited by
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and
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Foreword

What we offer here is not intended as a manual of critical governance. It is a book based entirely on the principle of delight. It seeks to conjoin the reader to the great company of those who, like himself, have found in Homer one of the prime mirrors and windows of the soul. It is a collection of lively encounters between Homer and some of the more perceptive and articulate of his modern readers.

We make no claim to inclusiveness. In particular, we have made no attempt to offer a representative selection of Homeric scholarship. (Any such would have to include large sections on Homeric archeology and philology. These vital topics, moreover, are dealt with, in the light of the best modern scholarship, in the long-awaited and recently published *Companion to Homer*, edited by F. H. Stubbings and the late Professor A. J. B. Wace.)

We have, however, tried to exemplify the startling diversity of modern critical methods. And while restrictions in length have forced us to omit the famous, controversial essay by Simone Weil, the reader will find here many modes of approach ranging from the Marxist to the philosophic and the allegoric. He will see the artist, the scholar, the anthropologist, the critic, each seeking his own path to the fact of Homer. None has a monopoly of truth or insight. Criticism is always partial; only the work of art is whole. But the variousness of critical effort points to the greater miracle—to the truth that Homer, after some twenty-seven hundred years, continues to be as alive, as challenging, and as crucial to our imaginings as he was to the ancient Greeks. Even as he will continue to invite criticism, so he will survive it.

G. S., R. F.

Nearing Again the Legendary Isle

by C. Day Lewis

Nearing again the legendary isle
Where sirens sang and mariners were skinned,
We wonder now what was there to beguile
That such stout fellows left their bones behind.

Those chorus-girls are surely past their prime,
Voices grow shrill and paint is wearing thin,
Lips that sealed up the sense from gnawing time
Now beg the favor with a graveyard grin.

We have no flesh to spare and they can't bite,
Hunger and sweat have stripped us to the bone;
A skeleton crew we toil upon the tide
And mock the theme-song meant to lure us on:

No need to stop the ears, avert the eyes
From purple rhetoric of evening skies.

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The Sirens and the Temptation of Knowledge

by Gabriel Germain

As in the case of all the episodes that come after the stay with Circe, the adventure of the Sirens is first foretold to the hero and fulfilled shortly thereafter. Nevertheless it remains sketchy. Set between the prominent episode of the descent into the Underworld and the sanguinary tales of how the Achaeans come to total ruin, it arrests our attention only slightly; one passes by as swiftly as the vessel itself passes the flowery mead of the Sirens. Yet this incident contains a meaning worth clarifying and which distinguishes it from a simple mariner's yarn.

The first thing that needs saying is precisely the fact that the Sirens of the *Odyssey* have no trait in common with the mermaids that dwell in the brine; to the modern reader the name of the Sirens evokes the image of mermaids but the latter are a recent invention. As is shown by the dual number applied to them grammatically, there are two Sirens, and they inhabit an island or, more precisely, a field sown with flowers. This isle cannot be very far from the land of Circe; it appears that the ship reaches it shortly after setting sail.

The isle of the Sirens is marked by "a shoreline of rotting human bones and flayed skins shrivelling around the spot." These are the remains of mariners whom the voice of the Sirens has entranced and held back from their voyage, aided by an unearthly calm which a *daimon*, a supernatural power, casts designedly on the waves. The epic tells us nothing further regarding the isle and its inhabitants. Though he is within earshot, Odysseus doubtless passes too far off-shore to get a close look. For him, as for us, the Sirens remain voices, at once "piercing" as is Circe's, and dulcet as honey.

Thus the nature of the Sirens remains ill defined. The most plausible conjecture is that the poet conceived of them in human guise; he never bestows speech on bestial shapes. Their habitation is already fairly remote from Death's shore; along the axis of Odysseus' travels the Siren

"The Sirens and the Temptation of Knowledge." From *Genèse de l'Odyssee* by Gabriel Germain. Translated by George Steiner. Copyright 1954 by Presses Universitaires de France. Reprinted by permission.

isle lies in the latitudes of life. Yet plainly it is a place of destruction. But how did those men perish whose bones can be seen rotting? All guesses are possible: starvation after shipwreck or, as the ancients claimed, a sudden death such as poison brings. We may extend the list: drowning, the fang-mark of these ogres of the sea, the direct impact of their spell. On the evidence of their parched skin and of the sea-calm of the blazing Noon—the hour of the Dead—it has even been argued that the mariners died of sunstroke. In fact, the text of the *Odyssey* gives no more support to one guess than to another.

It is natural that one should think of the Sirens as winged spirits of the Dead, such as we find them frequently depicted on graves or placed inside tombs in the form of terra cotta figurines since the very dawn of Greek art. But if the Sirens of the *Odyssey* had wings, why should they not use them to assail their intended victims or, at least, to engage them at closer quarter? It is evident, on the contrary, that they endeavor to draw their prey to themselves. In their sea-girt lair, they remind one also of the Nereids who often act as "conveyors of souls to the Blessed Isles." But these are benevolent deities and one of them, Thetis, has bestowed immortality on Peleus. Moreover, being at home in the water, Nereids would presumably swim toward Odysseus. Again, one could imagine that the Sirens resemble the fabled Sphinx, that they are "spirits avid of blood and sensual lust." But one cannot assert that any such traits are clearly discernible in the account given by the *Odyssey*. On the whole, therefore, the text, with its narration of a complete stillness of wind, might accord best with the notion of rather anonymous and shapeless Demons of High Noon. This takes us back to our starting point: the Homeric Sirens have no exact mythological shape or nature.

What remains certain is that they embody a mortal danger to Odysseus and his crew, and that this danger is conveyed by means of their song. Does this song affect only the senses or does it seek direct access to the mind? To judge by the case of Odysseus, it would seem that the Sirens are not magicians whose power would lie in the exact pronouncement of a magic spell, but that they are *tempters*. Their temptation has a root meaning which must be put into right focus; little attention has been paid to it.

The Sirens promise knowledge; *who has heard them leaves "knowing more."* To Odysseus, whose name they know without having questioned him, they would speak willingly of the heroes of Troy, but they also have knowledge "of all that comes to pass on the fruitful earth." Thus the bait they hold out to a circumspect mind is that dread fruit of knowledge for the sake of which our first parents lost Eden. Whatever the blandishments to which the Sirens may resort when dealing with mariners of a coarser breed, *it is this alone by which they seek to ensnare Odysseus.* In restoring its full significance to this temptation *through knowledge*, we remove this brief narrative from the sphere of naive parables and

relate it to a body of myths of which we have just cited the clearest and best known.

The temptation of a hero by some evil power which seeks to make him betray his essential destiny, seems to be an ancient Sumerian theme. We find it twice in the epic of Gilgamesh. Istar had wanted to make of Gilgamesh her lover, but he had scorned her, knowing that he would otherwise be degraded and finally destroyed. Lacking self-mastery, the uncouth Enkidu yields to the wiles of a courtesan and loses the privilege of living in brotherhood with the creatures of field and forest. In both instances, however, the snare is as brutal and palpable as it can be.

The more subtle theme of temptation through knowledge has come down to us only via *Genesis*. Owing to Christian theology, it has become a pillar of religious faith for a significant portion of mankind. Here, however, we must examine the Biblical story in its historical context.

We must note first that the "tree of knowledge of good and evil" is set in Eden next to "the tree of life." Prototypes of the latter can be found in Sumerian tales of remote antiquity. Gilgamesh, notably, has gone seeking out in the depths of the sea "a plant with a flower similar to the hawthorn and whose needles sting like a viper." This plant is called "the old man grows young." Whoever possesses it would be assured of eternal youth. The grass of generation which appears in the myth of Etana is no doubt also a tree of life, "aiding birth and rebirth."

It seems more and more certain, furthermore, that in the clay tablet of Nippur, first published by Langdon and re-examined lately by S. N. Kramer, the disobedience of Uttu to the orders of Enkidu is of the same nature as that of Eve. There can be no doubt as to the place of origin of the entire story. And it is certain that the text contains a list of plants whose fruit Uttu is allowed to eat, and that he is damned for having eaten others.

In the first chapter of this section we have already noted, among Egyptian beliefs, "the lofty sycamore beneath which sit the gods, the tree of life from which they draw their sustenance." The dead shall light on it in the guise of a bird and he too shall eat of its fruit. That is what is enjoined to him by the *Book of the Dead* in one of the chapters thought to be most ancient. Moreover, this chapter is entitled with striking clarity: "that which gives to the dead divine knowledge." The trees of life and of knowledge are conjoined as in *Genesis*.

To explain *Genesis* one is led to look much further into the past than the date at which the Pentateuch was set down, toward myths widespread in the classic Orient.

Finally, one must attempt to be precise about what kind of knowledge the Biblical tree bears in its fruit. This problem has given rise to subtle argument. Are we dealing solely with moral discernment, of which Adam and Eve would, at one stroke, receive the gift? Despite the literal mean-

ing of the text, this is implausible. Verse 22 of Chapter III shows plainly that after his first disobedience man can become godlike by merely tasting of the fruit of life and thus conquering immortality. What knowledge, unless it be a capacity for *absolute* knowledge, could be set beside immortality as attribute of God?

Doubtless this is what the text says. Every object, every deed, every living being can be easily labelled as good or evil in a vision of the world at once simple and rigorous. To know good and evil—whether by knowing individually all good and all evil things, or whether by having a touchstone of ethical judgment which identifies the nature of all things as they arise—is, in the last analysis, to have complete knowledge of a universe in which everything must be either good or evil.

Certain turns of phrase in *Genesis* suggest not so much a detailed mode of knowledge but rather a sovereign intuition, transforming at one stroke Adam's and Eve's vision of the world: "then your eyes shall be opened"; "And the eyes of them both were opened"; "the woman saw . . . a tree to be desired to make one wise." The sights of the world had no *meaning* as yet for Adam and Eve. Suddenly, they are illumined and the mind ascends from brute sensation to an organized, articulate vision of things. This, at least, is what is implied in modern terms by this brusque "opening up" of intelligence.

The Sirens do not indulge in metaphysical speculations; but they also "know *everything* that comes to pass on the fruitful earth," and it is no less than a large bestowal of that universal knowledge that they declare themselves ready to give.

By yet another way these mysterious beings lead us toward a remote past.

Many etymologies have been proposed for the name: *Siren*. On the Greek side, the word has been linked to *σείριος*: burning. This would suit them well in so far as they are demons of a southern latitude. The actual shape of the word has suggested the name of a people, or in any event makes one think of a term belonging to "an ancient Mediterranean word-stock" rather than to the Hellenic foundations of Greek.

It seems difficult to separate this word from the common name *σειρήν* which signifies in Aristotle a species of wild bee. Moreover, a semitic scholar, Mr. Marcel Cohen, has suggested that the name of the Sirens can be explained by the Biblical word *sir'â* which the Septuagint renders as *σφηκία*: wasp, swarm of wasps (wasps' nest in classical Greek), and which Syriac translates to mean: bee. At three places in the Bible, God declares to His people that He will send or has sent these wasps or bees against His foes to put them to rout. "Even if we have here only a metaphor signifying panic, this metaphor presupposes a popular belief in the daemonic power of these insects." The relevant passages give a distinct

impression that the terror of a broken, fleeing host is embodied in the insect.

A semantic fact can help us see the popular imagination at work. The Latin words *vespa*, *vespula*, *vespillo* meaning "undertaker" (with a slang, morbid overtone of "body-snatching"), are obviously of popular derivation. Mr. Benveniste has very plausibly related these words to *vespa*, the wasp, "by virtue of the carnivorous nature of this insect." Similar observations and interpretations may elsewhere have transformed the wasp into a ravening monster.

The entire pre-Hellenic eastern Mediterranean, furthermore, yields discernible traces of the veneration—if not always of the formal cult—accorded to the bee. In Egypt the bee is a symbol of the Pharaoh. In Sumerian writing it also furnishes a symbol of royalty. The most famous of Hittite myths, that of the disappearance of the god Telepinu, confides to the bee the task of finding the deity once the eagle has failed. The Great Goddess instructs her messenger thus: "Take wax and cleanse him. Make him pure, make him holy, and bring him unto me." From this it would appear that the bee possesses powers of purification in addition to that "piercing spirit" attributed to it by the God of the Storm. The bee also is represented on Phoenician religious monuments. Hence one can suppose that it is not by mere chance that the prophetess Deborah carries a name signifying "bee."

Whether in the form of a bee with furled wings or of a woman whose body tapers into that of a bee, a sacred figurine gives evidence that some such bee-cult existed in the Aegean from the time of pre-Hellenic Crete, that it existed throughout the Cyclades (VIth century jewel found at Thera) and in Rhodes (Camiros pendant). At Ephesus, sacred bees are depicted in the foundations of the archaic Artemis shrines and the insect adorns the coinage of the city; it appears again on the vestment of the statue of Artemis in the Hellenistic period.

It is possible that the priestesses cloistered in the temple of Artemis and wearing the ritual garb of a bee-goddess may have borne the title *μέλισσαι* ("bee" or "wild bee"). What is known for certain, at this same shrine, is the name *Ἐσσηγες*, derived from the noun meaning "king" (we would say "queen") "of the bees." Likewise, the name *μέλισσα* was used to describe the priestesses of Demeter and Persephone. The priestess of the oracle was called by Pindar *Ἀελφίς μέλισσα*, a name analogous to that of Deborah. And though the actual word is not used, it is to bees that the *Hymn to Hermes* compares the prophetic Fates, the Three Daughters of Zeus who dwell on Parnassus. According to Philostrates, "the Muses guide mariners in the shape of bees."

The association of this insect with priestesses—derived perhaps from an idea that both are diligent and pure—must be very ancient as the name Melissa is borne by the mythical votaries of diverse gods: it applies

to a Cretan, the first priestess of the Earth Goddess, Rhea; to a Corinthian woman initiated into the mysteries by Demeter herself and slain by her compatriots for not having revealed the secret rites; to a sister of Amaltheia, who was also a Cretan and daughter of king Melisseus, and who helped nourish the young Zeus by giving him honey while Amaltheia brought milk. Bees allegedly repulsed from Zeus' grotto on Mount Ida a party of marauders who were then changed into birds. All these traditions point toward the Aegean. The Artemis of Ephesus, on the other hand, leads back to the Asiatic world.

In Greece lastly, in speculative writings which may, to be sure, be of a late date, the bee passes for a symbol of the renascent soul.

It is understandable that, to those who observed them, the habits of the bee should have conveyed a lofty notion of its supernatural "powers"—an ambiguous notion which can induce fear as well as admiration. The association of bees with the spirits of the dead can be found equally in northern India, among the Mordves—a Finnish people of the Volga basin—and among the Angami of Burma for whom bees incarnate wicked souls. In China, an ancient text, the *Chanhai King*, "notes the existence of a bird similar to a bee: if this bird stings an animal, the latter dies; if it stings a plant or a tree, these wither."

One should like to conjecture that in inheriting from some Mediterranean language the word *σείρη*, the Greek world preserved an archaic double meaning: "bee" (applied to some savage people) and "supernatural being" conceived originally as having the shape of a bee. Here also *μέλισσα* would have acquired favourable connotations, making one forget the primitive links between Sirens and insects. Need we underline the fact that the Master of the *Odyssey* was no longer cognizant of these links, for it is evident that he gives to his tempters a human visage? Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that on every hand a study of the Sirens leads outside the confines of the classic world.

We can judge that the very spirit of the Homeric episode points to an alien provenance. Its root meaning, as we have sought to bring it to light, does not seem in accord with the consistent tendencies of the Greek spirit. In the *Odyssey* itself, it is curiosity which impels the Achaeans to taste of the lotus plant, which draws Odysseus into the cavern of the Cyclops and makes his companions enter the dwelling of Circe. Such is, indeed, the normal attitude of the race. A truly Greek hero, in some poem of a purely local origin, would have landed among the Sirens at the risk of perishing.

To abstain in the face of divine temptation is the mark either of a man of primitive mistrust, such as Adapa who refuses the food of immortality, or of a superhuman sage. Thus, the Buddha will soon reject the empire of the world and the three daughters of Mara—Concupiscence, Unquietude and Voluptuousness. Similarly, Zoroaster will reject the tem-

poral realm offered him by Anra Mainyu, while Christ will refuse, in His turn, the gift of universal dominion tendered by Satan. Greek heroes are as remote from Adapa as they are from Christ.

To sum up: though we cannot hope to locate the homeland of the Sirens, it does appear, at the least, that the motif of the *Odyssey*, thus interpreted, is more ancient than a first reading would have led one to suspect. Once again, the Singer seems to transpose into a form which may justly be called "rationalistic"—which we may even find somewhat bleak—a motif much more ancient than himself and doubtless of an alien origin. Seeing how little stress he puts on it, we may ask ourselves whether he grasped its full value.