THE ODYSSEY

An introduction by **David Adams Leeming**

If the world was given to us to explore and master, here is a tale, a play, a song about that endeavor long ago, by no means neglecting self-mastery, which in a sense is the whole point. Electronic brains may help us to use our heads but will not excuse us from that duty, and as to our hearts—cardiograms cannot diagnose what may be most ill about them or confirm what may be best. . . . Nor do I suppose that the pleasure of hearing a story in words has quite gone out. Even movies and TV make use of words. The* Odyssey *at all events was made for your pleasure, in Homer's words and in mine.

—Robert Fitzgerald

The Odyssey

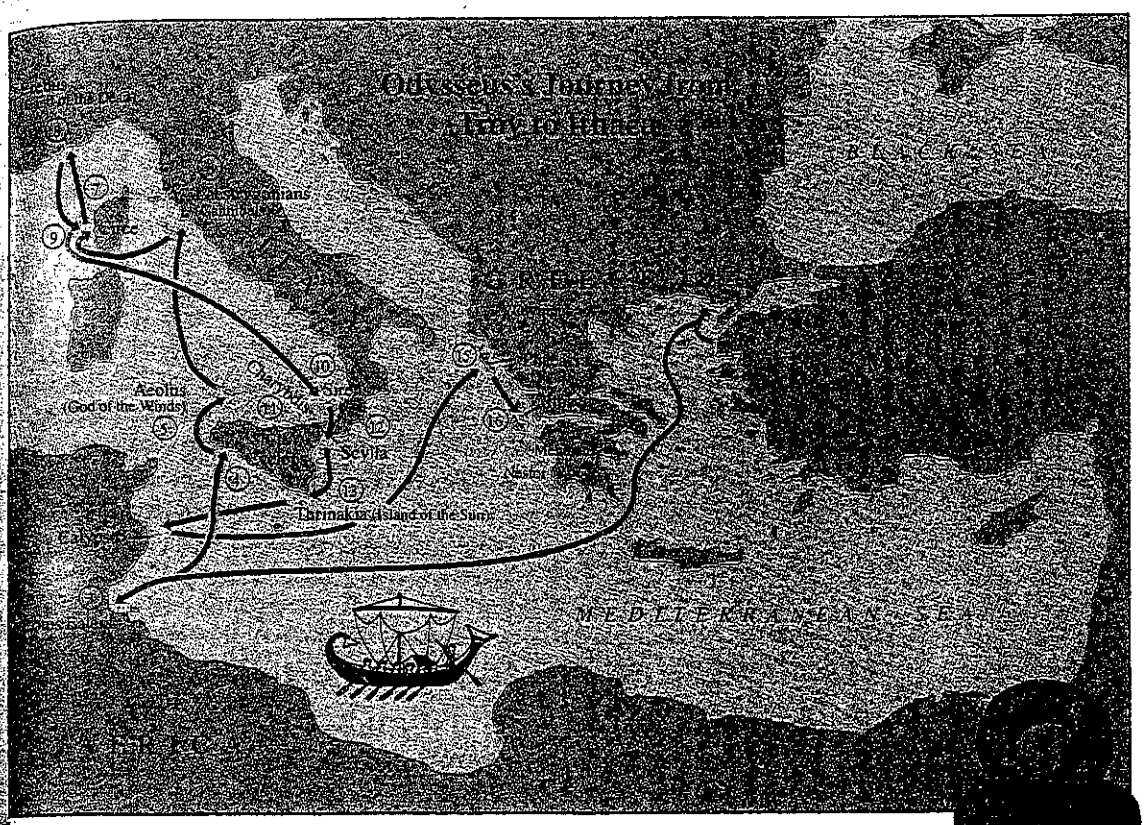
"These real battles would have taken place as early as 1200 B.C.—a time that was at least as long ago for Homer's audience as the Pilgrims' landing at Plymouth Rock is for us."

The world's most famous epic poems—Homer's *Iliad* and *Odyssey*—were composed between 900 and 700 B.C. The poems describe legendary events that probably can be traced to real historical struggles for control of the waterway leading from the Aegean Sea to the Sea of Marmara and the Black Sea. These real battles would have taken place as early as 1200 B.C.—a time that was at least as long ago for Homer's audience as the Pilgrims' landing at Plymouth Rock is for us.

Homer's first epic was the *Iliad,* which tells of a ten-year war fought on the plains beyond the walls of Troy (a city also known as Ilion). The ruins of Troy can still be seen today in what is now western Turkey. In Homer's story, the Trojan War was fought between the people of Troy and an alliance of early Greek kings (at this time, each island and area of the Greek mainland had its own king). The *Iliad* tells us that the cause of the war was the world's most beautiful woman, Helen. Helen had left her Greek husband, King Menelaus, and had run off with a man called Paris, who was a prince of Troy. The *Odyssey,* Homer's second epic, is the story of the attempt of one Greek soldier, Odysseus, to get home after the Trojan War. All epic poems in the Western world owe something to the basic patterns established by these two stories.

What Is an Epic?

Epics are long narrative poems that tell of the adventures of heroes who embody the values of their particular civilizations. The Greeks for centuries used the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* in their schools to



teach Greek virtues. And so it is not surprising that later cultures, while admiring the Homeric epics, created their own epics that imitated Homer's style but conveyed their own value systems.

Still, for all the epics that have been written since Homer's time and for all the ones that might have been composed before it, when we think of the word *epic* we think primarily of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey.* Rome's *Aeneid,* France's *Song of Roland,* Italy's *Divine Comedy,* the very ancient Sumerian tale of Gilgamesh, India's *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*—all are great poems that happen to be in the epic tradition. But to discover the heart of that tradition, we need to examine Homer's epics.

The *Iliad* is the primary model for the epic of war. The *Odyssey* is the model for the epic of the long journey. The theme of the journey has been the more basic one in Western literature—it is found in Homer, in fairy tales, and in such later stories as *Huckleberry Finn, Moby-Dick,* and *The Hobbit.* Thus, it is the *Odyssey* that has been the more widely read of Homer's two great stories.

A mask used in a festival honoring Dionysos. First half of first century A.D.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1972. (72.118.98)

The War-Story Background

You will find the background for Odysseus's story in the *Iliad*—the war epic. The action of the *Iliad* is set in the tenth and final year of the Trojan War. According to the *Iliad,* the Greeks had originally attacked Troy to avenge the insult suffered by Menelaus, king of

Greek helmet (6th century B.C.). Bronze.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Dodge Fund, 1955. (55.11.10)

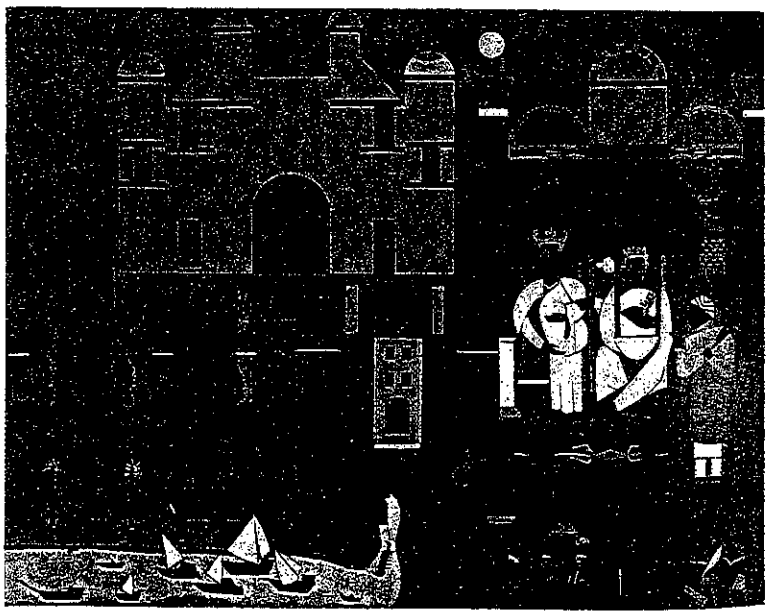
Sparta, when his wife Helen ran off with Paris, a young prince of Troy. The Greek kings banded together under the leadership of Agamemnon, the brother of Menelaus and the king of Mycenae. In a thousand ships, they sailed across the Aegean Sea and mounted the siege of Troy.

The audience of the *Odyssey* would have known this war story. They would have known that the Greeks were eventually victorious and that they burned Troy to the ground. They would have known all about the greatest of the Greek warriors, Achilles, who was fated to die young in the final year of the war. The audience would probably have heard other epic poems (now lost) that told of the homecomings of the various Greek heroes who survived the war. They would especially have known about the homecoming of Agamemnon, the leader of the Greek forces, who was murdered by his unfaithful wife upon his return from Troy.

Finally, Homer's listeners might well have been particularly fascinated by another homecoming story—this one about a somewhat unusual hero, known as much for his brain as for his brawn. In fact, many legends had already grown up around this hero, whose name was Odysseus. He was the subject of Homer's new epic, the *Odyssey*.

The *Odyssey*'s Hero

In Homer's day, **heroes** were thought of as a special class of aristocrats. Their station in life and their general attitudes placed them somewhere between the gods and ordinary human beings. These heroes might experience pain and death, but they were always sure of themselves, always "on top of the world."



Penelope and Odysseus Reunited by Romare Bearden (1977). Collage.

Reprinted courtesy of Cordier and Ekstrom Gallery, New York, and the Estate of Romare Bearden.

The *Odyssey* is a portrait of a hero in trouble. We can relate to this hero because we share with him a sense of being somehow lost in a world of difficult choices. Like him, we have to cope with unfair authority figures. Like him, we seem always to have to work very hard to get what we want.

The *Odyssey* is a poem marked by melancholy and a feeling of what might be called "postwar disillusionment." Odysseus is a soldier whose military prowess is scoffed at by the fairy-tale monsters that populate the world of his wanderings. Even the people of his home island, Ithaca, seem to lack respect for him. It is as if society were saying to the returning hero, "You were a great soldier once—or so they say—but times have changed. This is a difficult world, and we have more important things to think about than your heroics."

In the years before the great war, Odysseus had married the beautiful and ever-faithful Penelope, one of several very strong women in the "man's world" of the Greek epic. (One critic, Robert Graves, was so impressed by the unusual importance of women and home and hearth in the *Odyssey* that he believed Homer must have been a woman.)

Penelope and Odysseus had one son, Telemachus (tə·lem'ə·kəs). He was still a toddler when Odysseus was called by Agamemnon and Menelaus to join them in the struggle against Troy. Rather untypically for a Greek hero, Odysseus was a homebody. He preferred not to go to war, and even though he was obligated under a treaty to go, he tried draft-dodging. It was said that when Agamemnon and Menelaus came to fetch him, he pretended to be insane and acted as if he did not recognize his visitors. Instead of entertaining them, he dressed as a peasant and began plowing a field. But the "draft board" was smarter than the wily Odysseus in this case. They threw his baby, Telemachus, in front of his oncoming plow. The hero revealed his sanity by quickly turning the plow aside to avoid running over his son.

The Wooden-Horse Trick

Once in Troy, Odysseus performed extremely well as a soldier and commander. It was he, for example, who thought of the famous wooden-horse trick that would lead to the downfall of Troy. For ten years, the Greeks had been fighting the Trojans, but they were fighting outside Troy's massive walls. They had been unable to break through the walls and enter the city. Odysseus's plan was to build an enormous wooden horse and hide a few Greek soldiers inside its hollow belly. After the horse was built, the Greeks pushed it up to the gates of Troy and withdrew their armies, so that their camp appeared to be abandoned. Thinking that the Greeks had given up the fight and that the horse was a peace offering, the Trojans brought the horse into their city. That night, the Greeks hidden inside the wooden body came out, opened the gates of Troy to the whole Greek army, and began the battle that was to win the war.

Draped warrior (late 6th century B.C.). Bronze.

The Wadsworth Atheneum, Hartford. J. Pierpont Morgan Collection.

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The Ancient World and Ours

The world of Odysseus was a harsh place, a world in which violence was all too familiar. In a certain sense, Odysseus and his men act like mere pirates on their journey home. They think nothing of entering a town and carrying off all its worldly goods. The "worldly goods" in an ancient city might well have been such things as pots and pans and cattle and sheep. The "palaces" the Greeks raided might have been little more than elaborate mud and stone farmhouses. Yet, in the struggles of Odysseus, Penelope, and Telemachus in their "primitive" society—a society that has little in common with the high Athenian culture that would develop several centuries later—there is something that has a great deal to do with us.

Odysseus and his family are people searching for the right relationships with each other and with the people around them. They want to find their proper places in life. It is this theme that sets the tone for the *Odyssey* and determines the unusual way in which the poem is structured.

Instead of beginning at the beginning with Odysseus's departure from Troy, the story begins with his son, Telemachus. Telemachus is now twenty years old, threatened in his own home by powerful men who want to rob him of his inheritance, of his mother, and of his self-respect. He is a young man who yearns for the support of a father.

Meanwhile, we hear that Odysseus is stranded on an island, longing to find a way to get back to his wife, child, and home. It is ten years since his sailing from Troy, twenty years since his original departure from Ithaca. If Telemachus is in search of the inner strength represented by the wished-for presence and approval of his father, Odysseus is in search of a way out of what we might today call his "mid-life crisis." He is searching for a way to reestablish a natural balance in his life. The quests of father and son provide a framework for the poem and bring us into it as well, because we all are in search of our real identities, our true selves.

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The Gods in the *Odyssey*

This brings us to the mythic and religious questions in the *Odyssey*. **Myths** are stories that use fantasy to express ideas about life that cannot be expressed easily in realistic terms. Most myths are essentially religious because they are concerned with the relationship between human beings and the unknown or spiritual realm.

As you will see, Homer is always concerned with the relationship between humans and gods: Homer is religious. For him, the gods control all things. Athena, the goddess of wisdom, is always at the side of Odysseus in whatever he does. This is appropriate, because Odysseus is known for his mental abilities. In other words, in Homer's stories a god can be an **alter ego**, a spiritual or psychological reflection of a hero's best qualities. A hero's bad tendencies can also be mirrored by the divine beings. The god who works

> **"Homer is always concerned with the relationship between humans and gods: Homer is religious."**

against Odysseus is Poseidon, the god of the sea, who is known for arrogance and a certain brutishness. It might be said that to find inner peace or "a way home," Odysseus must find a means of reconciling brain and brawn in his own life. Only with Athena's help and with Poseidon's acceptance can he achieve his goal.

Readers have argued that Odysseus and Telemachus are not particularly admirable as heroes because everything they do depends on the help of the gods. But when you think about it, you realize that the religious person of today doesn't think any less of a heroic deed because it is seen as "God's will." We should see the relationship between Odysseus and the gods as a model for what the greatest of the ancient myth-makers saw as religious reality.

Who Was Homer?

Who exactly was this famous myth-maker? No one knows for sure who Homer was. The later Greeks believed he was a blind minstrel who came from the island of Chios. Some scholars feel there must have been two Homers; some think he was just a legend. But scholars have also argued as to whether a man called Shakespeare ever existed. It is almost as if they were saying that Homer and Shakespeare are too good to be true. On the whole, it seems most sensible to take the word of the Greeks themselves and to accept the existence of Homer at least as an ideal model for a class of wandering bards or minstrels later called "rhapsodes."

These **rhapsodes,** or "singers of tales," were the historians and entertainers as well as the myth-makers of their time. There was probably no written history in Homer's day. There were certainly no movies and no television, and there was nothing like a Bible or a book of religious stories. So it was that the minstrels traveled about from community to community singing of recent legendary events or of the doings of heroes, gods, and goddesses. It is as if the composer of the Book of Kings in the Bible, the writer of a book on World War II, and a famous pop singer were combined in one person. For Homer's people, there was no conflict between religion, history, and good fun.

How Were the Epics Told?

Scholars have found that oral epic poets are still composing today in Yugoslavia and other parts of the world. Work done by scholars on these poets suggests that stories like the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* would have been told aloud at first by and for people who could not read and write. The stories would have been composed orally according to a basic set story line. But most of the actual words would have been improvised—made up on the spot—in such a way as to fit a particular rhythm or meter. The singers of these stories would have needed a great deal of talent, and they would have had

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Bust of Homer. Marble.

Vatican Museum Pio Clementino.
Photo: Art Resource.

"The oral storyteller had a store of formulas ready in his memory. He knew formulas for describing the arrival and greeting of guests, for the eating of meals, and for the taking of baths."

Statuette of a veiled dancer (2nd century B.C.). Bronze.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art. Bequest of Walter C. Baker, 1971. (1972.118.95)

to work very hard. They would also have needed an audience used to listening closely.

We can see from this why there is so much repetition in the Homeric epics. The oral storyteller, in fact, had a store of formulas ready in his memory. He knew formulas for describing the arrival and greeting of guests, for the eating of meals, and for the taking of baths. He knew formulas for describing the sea (it is always "wine-dark") and for describing Athena (she is always "gray-eyed Athena").

Formulas such as these had another advantage: they gave the singer and his audience some breathing time. The audience could relax for a moment and enjoy a familiar and memorable passage, while the singer could think ahead to the next part of his story.

When we think about the audience that listened to these stories, we can also understand the value of the extended comparisons that we call **Homeric** or **heroic similes** today. These similes compare heroic or epic events to simple and easily understandable everyday events—events the audience would recognize instantly. For example, at one point in the *Iliad,* Athena prevents an arrow from striking Menelaus. The singer compares the goddess's actions to an action that every listener would have been familiar with:

> She brushed it away from his skin as lightly as when a mother
> Brushes a fly away from her child who is lying in sweet sleep.

Epic poets such as Homer would come to a city and would go through a part of their repertory while there. A story as long as the *Odyssey* (11,300 lines) could not be told at one sitting. We have to assume, therefore, that if the singer had only a few days in a town, he would summarize some of his story and sing the rest in detail, in as many sittings as he had time for. This is exactly what will happen in the selections from the *Odyssey* that are presented here. We will assume that Homer wants to get his story told to us, but that he has a limited time in which to do it. We will also assume that before retiring at the end of each segment of the performance, Homer's audience, of which we are now a part, will want to think about and talk about that set of stories. Like most audiences, this one will have many questions about the story: Why is Odysseus crying when we first meet him? How do the gods really feel about humans? What does this strange tale have to do with us?

A Live Performance

We can imagine what it would have been like at a live performance of the *Odyssey* because there are many instances in the epic itself in which traveling singers appear and sing their tales. In the court of the Phaeacian king, Alcinous (ăl·sĭn′ō·əs), in Book 8, for instance, there is a particularly wonderful singer who must make us wonder if the blind Homer was painting a self-portrait. Let's picture the setting of a performance before we start the story.

Imagine a large hall full of people who are freshly bathed,

rubbed with fine oils, and draped in clean tunics. Imagine the smell of meat being cooked over charcoal, the sounds of cheerful voices. Imagine wine being freely poured, the flickering reflections of the great cooking fires, and the torches that light the room. A certain anticipation hangs in the air. It is said that the blind minstrel Homer is in the city and that he has new stories about that long war in Troy. Will he appear and entertain tonight?

Characters in the *Odyssey*

The following cast of characters includes only those who take part in the sections of the *Odyssey* included in this book. Note that the Greeks in the *Odyssey* are often referred to as **Achaeans** (ə·kē′ənz) or **Argives** (är′gīvz). *Achaeans* is the most general term, which also includes the people in Ithaca, the island off the west coast of Greece where Odysseus ruled. The word *Achaeans* is taken from the name of an ancient part of northeastern Greece called Achaea. The name *Argives* usually refers to the Greeks who went to fight at Troy.

The People Home in Ithaca:

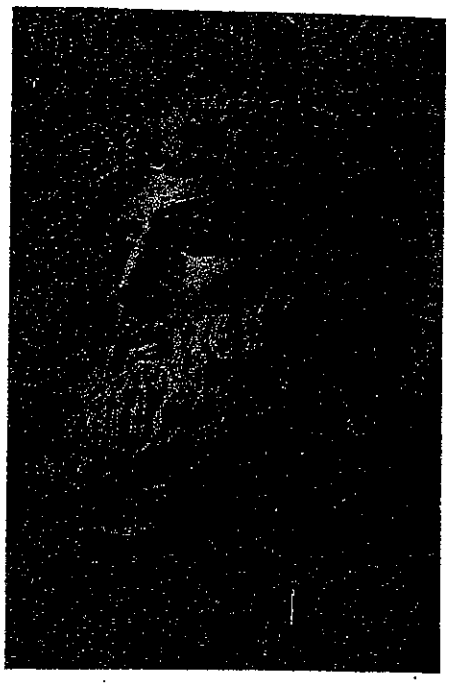
Antinous (ăn·tĭn′ō·əs): one of Penelope's leading suitors; an arrogant and mean young noble from Ithaca.
Argos (är′gäs′): Odysseus's old dog.
Eumaeus (yoo·mē′əs): a swineherd, one of Odysseus's loyal servants.
Eurycleia (yoo·rĭ·klī′yə): Odysseus's old nurse.
Laertes (lā·ûr′tēz): Odysseus's old father, who lives in the country.
Penelope (pə·nĕl′ə·pē): Odysseus's faithful wife.
Philoeteus (fĭ·loi′tē·əs): a cowherd, one of Odysseus's loyal servants.

The People and Places of Telemachus's Journey:

Helen: known as Helen of Troy, the beautiful wife of King Menelaus. Her elopement with Paris, a prince of Troy, started the Trojan War.
Menelaus (mĕn′ə·lā′əs): brother of Agamemnon, husband of Helen, and king of **Lacedaemon** (las′ə·dē′mən), also known as **Sparta.**
Nestor: the wise king of **Pylos,** and a hero of the Trojan War.

The People and Places of Odysseus's Wanderings:

Aeaea (ē·ē′ə): home of Circe, the witch-goddess.
Alcinous (ăl·sĭn′ō·əs): the king of Phaeacia, father of Nausicaa. Odysseus tells the story of his adventures to Alcinous's court.



Bust of Poseidon. Bronze.

The Athens Museum. Photo: Farrell Grehan, Photo Researchers.

"Imagine the smell of meat being cooked over charcoal, the sounds of cheerful voices. . . . It is said that the blind minstrel Homer is in the city and that he has new stories about that long war in Troy. Will he appear and entertain tonight?"

Hermes Running. Attributed to the Tithonos Painter (475 B.C.). Vase.

The Metropolitan Museum of Art, Fletcher Fund, 1925.

Calypso (kə·lĭp′sō): a beautiful goddess-nymph who lives on Ogygia. She keeps Odysseus for seven years.
Charybdis (kə·rĭb′dĭs): a female monster who sucks in water three times a day to form a deadly whirlpool. (Thought to be a real whirlpool in the Straits of Messina.)
Circe (sûr′sē): the witch-goddess who turns Odysseus's men into swine.
Cyclops (sī′klŏps): one of the **Cyclopes**, a race of brutish one-eyed giants who live solitary lives as shepherds, supposedly on the island now known as Sicily.
Erebus (er′ə·bəs): the Land of the Dead.
Nausicaa (nô·sĭk′ā·ə): the beautiful young daughter of King Alcinous and Queen Arete of Phaeacia.
Ogygia (ō·gī′·jə): Calypso's island.
Phaeacia (fē·ā′shə): an island kingdom ruled by King Alcinous. The Phaeacians are shipbuilders and traders.
Polyphemus (pŏl′ə·fē′məs): the Cyclops blinded by Odysseus; the son of the sea god Poseidon.
Scylla (sĭl′ə): a female monster with six serpent heads, each head having a triple row of fangs. (Thought to be a dangerous rock in the Straits of Messina.)
Sirens: sea nymphs whose beautiful and mysterious music lures sailors to steer their ships toward the rocks.
Teiresias (tī·rē′sē·əs): a famous blind prophet, from the city of Thebes. Odysseus meets him in the Land of the Dead.

The Gods:

Athena (ə·thē′nə): favorite daughter of Zeus; the great goddess of wisdom and of the arts of war and peace. She favored the Greeks during the Trojan War. She is often called Pallas Athena.
Hermes (hûr′mēz): the messenger god.
Olympus (ō·lĭm′pəs): the mountain home of the gods.
Poseidon (pō·sī′dən): brother of Zeus, god of the sea and earth. Called "Earth Shaker" because he is believed to cause earthquakes. Poseidon is an enemy of Odysseus.
Zeus (zoos): the most powerful god, whose home is on Olympus.