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## Reflections on Homer's Iliad and Odyssey

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## Reflections on Homer's Iliad and Odyssey

### **Cover Page Footnote**

This article is based on a lecture delivered at the The Greeks Institute, a series of lectures presented to secondary school teachers in the Bridgeport Public Schools during the spring of 1989. Co-sponsored by the Connecticut Humanities Council, Sacred Heart University, and the Bridgeport Public Schools, the purpose of the institute has been to provide teachers with an interdisciplinary exploration of classical Greece for the purposes of professional enrichment and curriculum development.

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***Reflections on Homer's Iliad and Odyssey***

Of the two Homeric epics, the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, the *Iliad* at first glance seems most inimical to contemporary values and taste. With one exception, which I'll mention later, women appear as either demi-goddesses or chattel. The origin of conflict — both the larger quarrel of the Trojan War and the specific conflict, Achilles' anger, around which the events of the *Iliad* itself are structured — is a warrior's rights over a stolen woman. The events themselves blur in the constant repetition of set-pieces of individual combat described in gruesome and bloody detail. The central hero, Achilles, acts in decidedly unheroic ways. Instead of subordinating his personal pride to the greater good of the Greek cause against the Trojans, he stubbornly sacrifices the lives of his friends to prove that his presence is indispensable in the war. He refuses all compromise or reason. He desecrates the body of his enemy, Hektor, and even refuses to return the remains to the dead man's father. The society depicted in the *Iliad* is patriarchal, aristocratic, militaristic, and imperialistic — hardly the reflection of a tolerant, pluralistic society dedicated to the equality of sexes and races.

Does this mean, then, that the *Iliad* should not be taught? In the first part of my discussion today I shall describe some of the most significant episodes in the *Iliad* and suggest that the alien world it presents to our contemporary eyes may be relevant to us and our students in unexpected ways. The world of the *Iliad* can be recognized as one in which a great civilization and city are disintegrating in the face of war and barbarism. Its heroes must choose between law and reason on the one hand and the morality of the street gang on the other. The consequences of actions ultimately affirm the values of compassion and reason, but at what price? Finally, I shall review the romance and adventure of Odysseus' travels in the *Odyssey* and remind you of portions of this appealing epic that are often overlooked, particularly its abrupt and unresolved conclusion.

"Sing, goddess, the anger of Peleus' son Achilles / and its devastation. . . ." The first words of the oral poet who sings and composes the *Iliad* invoke divine inspiration to narrate the central

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episode of the epic, the anger of Achilles, greatest hero of the Greeks, and the tragic consequences of that anger. Out of the twenty-four books of the *Iliad*, this central drama takes up only eight books (I, VI, IX, XVI, XVIII, XXII, XXIII, and XXIV), the very beginning and the very end of the poem. The structure of the action is tragic in the classical Greek sense of the word, and the plot resembles Greek tragedy in its inexorable development from conflict, to crisis, to climax, and resolution. Achilles is a tragic hero, caught up in a fatal sequence of events over which he has no control as the unintended consequence of an irrational action. (Greek tragedy develops centuries after the Homeric epics, but is influenced by them.)

When the action of the *Iliad* begins, the Trojan War has been going on for ten inconclusive years as the Greek army lays siege to the walls of Troy, on the coast of modern Turkey. The Greeks have sailed to Troy to avenge the kidnapping of Helen, the Greek wife of the Greek leader, Menelaos. Helen, "the face that launched a thousand ships" (in the memorable words of Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*), was the prize in the notorious Judgment of Paris. This young Trojan prince had to choose and award an apple to the most beautiful of three goddesses. Aphrodite, the goddess of love, promised Paris the most beautiful woman in the world and helps Paris win Helen's heart. Since Helen was already married to Menelaos, Paris' apple is aptly named the apple of discord.

The events of the *Iliad* constitute only a few months out of the ten years of the war, but they are decisive in the outcome and eventual destruction of Troy, through the agency of the famous Trojan Horse, a wooden structure within which Greek warriors hid. Troy itself does not fall within the story of the *Iliad*, but its doom is foreshadowed by the death of its most noble hero, Hektor, who is slain by Achilles. In turn, the eventual death of Achilles is foreshadowed even in the midst of his fatal duel with Hektor: "Then, dying, Hektor of the shining helmet spoke to him: / . . . 'Be careful now; for I might be made into the gods' curse/ upon you, on that day when Paris and Phoibos Apollo/ destroy you in the Skaian gates, for all your valor'" (*Iliad*, XXII, 355-60). Hektor thus prophesies Achilles' impending death in his own dying words.

A conflict between Agamemnon, the military leader of the Greeks, and Achilles begins the story. Agamemnon, forced to return a woman to her father in order to placate the gods, arbitrarily decides

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to take Achilles' woman in turn. Achilles is prevented from drawing his sword by the intervention of a goddess, Athene, the goddess of wisdom, but withdraws his participation in the war. The Greeks are thereby so weakened militarily that the Trojans drive them from the walls of Troy back to a defensive stockade around the ships. The Greeks panic and try to flee to the ships and desert the war. By the end of Book two, Agamemnon and the Greeks have thus been punished and taught a lesson for insulting Achilles.

Not until Book nine does a change in Achilles' position occur. In desperation because the Trojans have forced the Greeks back to their ships, Agamemnon apologizes and offers restitution to Achilles. Achilles refuses, however, to relent and return, a refusal that will in turn invite retribution from the gods. Patroklos, Achilles' best friend, persuades Achilles, if he will not return to battle, to at least loan Patroklos his armor and let Patroklos fight in his place, as if Patroklos were Achilles. Patroklos turns the tide of battle for the Greeks, pursues the Trojans to their city walls, but then goes too far. In single combat with Hektor, Patroklos is killed through the intervention of Phoibos Apollo, the sun god. Achilles is thus taught a lesson for his excessive self-involvement and punished by the death of the only person he loves, Patroklos.

Before Achilles can return to battle to avenge Patroklos' death, his divine mother, Thetis, must request divine armor from the god Hephaistos to replace the armor Hektor took from Patroklos' corpse. The shield Achilles receives contains a portrait of the world in miniature, a world of both war and peace. Achilles returns to battle, slays countless warriors, does battle even with a river, and, at last, in Book twenty-two finds himself face to face with his arch-foe, Hektor. Hektor is Achilles' alter-ego as well since he thinks of the welfare of others, his wife and child, before his own, just the opposite ethically of Achilles. In a famous, but puzzling, scene, Hektor appears to lose courage and runs away from Achilles, who pursues him three times around the walls of Troy. With the goddess Athene's help Achilles tricks Hektor into pausing to fight. Athene deflects Hektor's spear, but guides Achilles' home. Hektor dies vainly pleading that his corpse be given respectful burial, but Achilles ties the body to the back of his chariot and drags it around the walls of Troy in front of the eyes of Hektor's wife, mother, and friends. By desecrating Hektor's body Achilles offends against divine law again, and the

consequences will depend on how Achilles responds to Priam's plea for his son's body.

In the final book of the *Iliad* the gods intervene again in human affairs. Hermes disguises himself as a mortal man and guides Hektor's father, Priam, into the enemy Greek camp to supplicate Achilles for the body of Hektor. Achilles at first refuses, but, at last, when he suddenly realizes how much Priam reminds him of his own father, Achilles shows empathy and compassion for the first time. He declares a truce in the war so Priam can bury his son.

If we focus only on Achilles' story — his anger, his withdrawal, his refusal to return, the substitute who dies in his place, his triumphal "rise" again to glory — we may perceive a pattern of death and rebirth, absence and reappearance, which has led some readers to suspect the presence of myth behind the figure of Achilles, the presence of a young god who dies in winter and returns in spring.<sup>2</sup> It is the human dimension of Achilles and the intervention of the gods in the affairs of men that has most fascinated readers over the centuries, however. Helen of Troy tells Hektor that the gods have determined the actions and fate of her and Paris, or Alexandros, as he is also known — "Us two, on whom Zeus set a vile destiny, so that hereafter / we shall be made into things of song for the men of the future" (*Iliad*, VI, 357-58) — as if she foresees the future composition of the *Iliad* itself, the poem that immortalizes her story.

The gods intervene often, and such intervention, a defining characteristic of epic, functions in surprising ways. In Book one Athene checks Achilles' spontaneous gesture of anger:

And the anger came on Peleus' son, and within  
his shaggy breast the heart was divided two ways, pondering  
whether to draw from beside his thigh the sharp sword . . .  
Now as he weighed in mind and spirit these two courses  
and was drawing from its scabbard the great sword, Athene  
descended  
from the sky . . .  
The goddess standing behind Peleus' son caught him by the  
fair hair,  
appearing to him only, for no man of the others saw her.  
(*Iliad*, I, 188-98)

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Bruno Snell sees the gods as externalizations of psychological processes:

Whenever a man accomplishes, or pronounces, more than his previous attitude had led others to expect, Homer connects this, in so far as he tries to supply an explanation, with the interference of a god. It should be noted especially that Homer does not know genuine personal decisions; even where a hero is shown pondering two alternatives the intervention of the gods plays the key role. . . . Mental and spiritual acts are due to the impact of external factors, and man is the open target of a great many forces which impinge on him, and penetrate his very core . . . Homeric man has not yet awakened to the fact that he possesses in his own soul the source of his powers, but neither does he attach the forces to his person by means of magical practices; he receives them as a natural and fitting donation from the gods.<sup>3</sup>

Although Homeric man, as Snell asserts, may not know "genuine personal decisions," one of the most famous scenes in the *Iliad* occurs in Book six where Hektor must decide between returning to battle or staying with his wife and young son. There is great poignancy here. The meeting between Hektor and Andromache is one of the few realistic portraits of a woman in the *Iliad*, a woman who reveals herself as perceptive and loving, a person with a personal identity in strong contrast to the treatment of women as prizes of war. When Hektor leans over to kiss his infant son goodbye, the plume on his helmet frightens the child to tears, as if a portent of Hektor's impending death at the hands of Achilles. Hektor says to Andromache:

"For I know this thing well in my heart, and my mind knows it:  
there will come a day when sacred Ilion shall perish,  
and Priam, and the people of Priam of the strong ash spear.  
But it is not so much the pain to come of the Trojans

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that troubles me, not even of Priam . . .  
as troubles me the thought of you, when some bronze-  
armored  
Achaian leads you off, taking away your day of liberty,  
in tears; and in Argos you must work at the loom of another,  
and carry water from the spring Messeis or Hypereia,  
all unwilling, but strong will be the necessity upon you;  
And 'some day seeing you shedding tears a man will say of  
you:  
'This is the wife of Hektor, who was ever the bravest fighter  
of the Trojans, breaker of horses, in the days when they  
fought about Ilion.'

(*Iliad*, VI, 447-62).

A tragedy, Aristotle tells us in the *Poetics*, consists of scenes of pity and terror. The final meeting of Hektor and Andromache, a scene that prefigures so much to occur later, is a rare scene of pity, not encountered again until Priam pleads with Achilles for the body of his son.

Elsewhere in the *Iliad* scenes of savagery and terror abound. At one point in his return to battle Achilles descends down into a tangle of men and horses fighting in the Xanthos river to capture young men to sacrifice on the tomb of Patroklos:

But heaven-descended Achilles left his spear there on the  
bank  
leaning against the tamarisks, and leapt in like some  
immortal,  
with only his sword, but his heart was bent upon evil actions,  
and he struck in a circle around him. The shameful sound of  
their groaning  
rose as they were struck with the sword; and the water was  
reddened  
with blood. As before a huge-gaping dolphin the other fishes  
escaping cram the corners of a deepwater harbour  
in fear, for he avidly eats up any he can catch;  
so the Trojans along the course of the terrible river  
shrank under the bluffs. He, when his hands grew weary  
with killing,

chose out and took twelve young men alive from the river  
to be vengeance for the death of Patroklos, the son of  
Menoitios.

These, bewildered with fear like fawns, he led out of the  
water

and bound their hands behind them with thongs well cut out  
of leather,

with the very belts they themselves wore on their ingirt  
tunics,

and gave them to his companions to lead away to the hollow  
ships,

then himself whirled back, still in a fury to kill men.

(*Iliad*, XXI, 17-33)<sup>4</sup>

Everywhere in the *Iliad* we are reminded of the irrational rage of war that reduces its victims, men or women, to objects of fury, possessions, robs them of life and humanity. Out of the inhumanity of war come tragic death and only momentary examples of compassion, but these scenes of compassion confer humanity and individuality on the characters.

The vision of human existence the *Iliad* conveys to me is dark, tragic. Achilleus, Hektor, Andromache, all the central personages of the epic live their lives most intensely to the extent that they are conscious of living in the face of death. Achilleus' words to Lykaon, one of the sacrificial victims, are prophetic and revealing:

"So, friend, you die also. Why all this clamour about it?  
Patroklos also is dead, who was better by far than you are.  
Do you not see what a man I am, how huge, how splendid  
and born of a great father, and the mother who bore me  
immortal?

Yet even I have also my death and my strong destiny,  
and there shall be a dawn or an afternoon or a noontime  
when some man in the fighting will take the life of me also  
either with a spearcast or an arrow flown from the  
bowstring."  
(*Iliad*, XXI, 105-12)

It may be with relief that we turn from the *Iliad* to the sun-drenched verses of the *Odyssey* with its air of romance and adventure.

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If the myth behind the *Iliad* suggests a seasonal dying god who reappears after a period of death or withdrawal, the *Odyssey* suggests the myth of a god who disappears (or is held in bondage) for a period of time, only to return in disguise before revealing himself in full glory. The newly invigorated sun god shoots his rays as Odysseus casts off his beggar's clothes and shoots the suitors.

The first four books of the *Odyssey*, the *Telemachy*, in which Telemachos, the young son of Odysseus, overcomes obstacles in his search for his missing father, suggest an even more primitive myth, the initiation rite of a young man into full status as a member of his tribe.

The wanderings of Odysseus, the most famous part of the *Odyssey*, occupy relatively few of the twenty-four books of the epic, only books nine through twelve. In them, Odysseus, shipwrecked and wandering far from home, tells the story of his adventures to a princess, Nausikaa, and her father the king, Alkinoos, who is in a position to help him get safely home at last to his wife Penelope on the island of Ithaka — if Odysseus is able to establish his identity and move his audience to pity and admiration of his deeds. Odysseus for a time becomes the oral poet who composes the epic of which he himself is the hero. The adventures he recounts are unforgettable — each in its own way suggests a confrontation with the Underworld or death and the hero's successful return from the confrontation. In the middle of his adventures, of course, in Book eleven, Odysseus actually makes a voyage to the world of the dead to speak with the soul of the blind prophet Teiresias, his dead mother, the dead companions of his combat at Troy, and others, including Hercules.

Odysseus, the "singer of tales," begins his account of his travels in Book nine "I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, known before all men / for the study of crafty designs. . . ." In Book eight Odysseus had been forced to reveal his true identity when King Alkinoos noticed him weeping during the recital of a song about the heroes of the Trojan War. We may remember that Odysseus assumes several false names, disguises, and identities during the course of his wanderings; he is adept at inventing stories and playing roles. But we are asked to assume that in Books eight and nine, in which Odysseus is being entertained by Alkinoos, Odysseus reveals his true identity and tells an authentic account of his wanderings after the Trojan War up to the moment of his shipwreck, alone and naked, on the Phaiakian shore,

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from which he will sail at last to Ithaka and home.

Odysseus' account of his wanderings in Book nine consists of three episodes — examples respectively of combat, temptation, and clever stratagem — the raid on the Kikonians, the lotos eaters, and Polyphemos, the cyclops. The raid on the Kikonians is a miniature version of the *Iliad* story with a much different outcome. Odysseus and his men, mere pirates, sack a walled city by the sea, but through greed, foolishness, and self-indulgence fail to get away before other Kikonian warriors trap them on the beach and kill many. Bad luck, bad judgment, and rash actions plague Odysseus' progress home. Odysseus loses men to the lotos eaters, who inhabit an hallucinatory land (later beautifully evoked by Tennyson) where, after eating the tempting lotos, a person loses all desire to return home. Some readers perceive an allusion to a land of the dead in Odysseus' adventure in the land of the lotos eaters; Odysseus would have gone to a land of the dead, faced the temptation of "sweet oblivion," and, unlike his companions who eat the lotos and are unable to return to the living, escaped to resume his mortal life. Throughout his adventures Odysseus' return home is threatened by violence (storms, enmity of gods, combat, monsters) and temptations that are sexual, intoxicating, and magical.

No other episode in the *Odyssey* is as famous as Odysseus' escape from the cave of the cyclops. Odysseus and his men enter the one-eyed giant's cave to steal cheese and provisions. They are trapped when Polyphemos unexpectedly brings his sheep back into the cave and seals the door with a boulder. Odysseus appeals to the cyclops for hospitality according to the laws of gods and civilized men, but Polyphemos is a law unto himself and replies by seizing two men and eating them alive. Odysseus would like to murder the cyclops, but then would be unable to move the rock from the door. Instead, using his problem-solving intelligence inspired by the goddess Athena, his patron, Odysseus offers Polyphemos a bowl of wine the next morning. The cyclops offers him a present in return if Odysseus will tell him his name and give him more wine. Odysseus replies that his name is "nobody" and encourages the cyclops to drink until he passes out. Odysseus and his men then sharpen a wooden stake, like the mast of a ship, and drive it into the eye of the cyclops. No one comes to the cyclops' aid because when asked by his companions outside the cave who has blinded him, Polyphemos replies "nobody." Since the

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cyclops cannot see to kill Odysseus, Polyphemos runs his hands over the backs of his sheep when he lets them out of the cave in case any man tries to leave with them. Unfortunately for the blind one-eyed giant, Odysseus and his men are clinging to the bellies of the rams. Odysseus and his men escape to the ship, but Odysseus cannot resist risking his men's lives in a final act of bravado. He calls out to the cyclops, taunting him with his real name, and the cyclops senses the ship's position from Odysseus's voice, tears off a piece of cliff, and almost sinks Odysseus's ship with a lucky throw. Odysseus has used his crafty mind to escape death once more, but has committed a blunder that almost undid him.

Book ten consists of three episodes, Odysseus' misadventure with the bag of winds, the Laistrygones, and the famous temptress Circe. Odysseus visits Aiolos, the god of the winds, who gives him safe voyage home by tying the storm winds into a bag Odysseus takes on board ship. Just in sight of Ithaka, after a calm voyage, his men open the bag, thinking it contains gold, and Odysseus's ship is blown back to sea again. They next sail into strange fjords, where they are attacked by other giants, the Laistrygones, who hurl stones down from the cliffs onto the ships. After escaping this violence, they arrive off the coast of Naples at the enchanted island of Circe. She changes men into swine, but Odysseus, with the help of a magic herb, moly, given to him by the god Hermes, masters the sorceress, frees his men, and enjoys the bed and hospitality of Circe for many months. At last Odysseus discovers that he must make an actual voyage to the land of the dead to consult the blind prophet Teiresias about a route home again.

Odysseus' account of the land of the dead takes up all of Book eleven. He and his men sail to the edge of the known world (this land of the dead is not underground but at the border of the known world) and sacrifice sheep and oxen in order to attract the souls of the dead. The dead flock to the trough of blood Odysseus has prepared; they can only speak if they drink the blood. Although Odysseus sees the soul of his own mother, whom he had left alive when he went to war, he refuses to let her or any other drink until Teiresias appears and answers his questions. He even sees the soul of one of his own shipmates, Elpenor. Ritually, someone has had to die in Odysseus' place in order to enable him to go to the land of the dead and return, and Elpenor had "accidentally" fallen from the roof of Circe's palace

as Odysseus and his men prepared their voyage. Odysseus next speaks with former companions from the war at Troy. Achilles, who in life had chosen a short but glorious life over a long but obscure one, now wishes he were alive again; he would rather be alive and a slave than king of the dead. Agamemnon warns Odysseus to beware of his wife when he returns home; he himself has been murdered by his wife Klytaimnestra and her lover while he bathed on his first day back. Odysseus sees famous women and queens from the past, and, in a final vision, he sees the deified Hercules, whose twelve labors are a legendary counterpart to Odysseus' wanderings.

After leaving the land of the dead, Odysseus survives the temptation of the Siren's song by having his men plug their ears with wax and tie him to the mast of the ship. Teiresias had warned Odysseus not to let his men eat the cattle of the sun if they wanted to return home. Now in Book twelve, after Odysseus escapes the sirens and navigates between the whirlpool and rock of Skylla and Charybdis, he and his men find themselves stranded by contrary winds on the island of the sun, surrounded by herds of fat cattle, while their provisions run out. Foreseeably, his men finally give into starvation and eat the cattle. Only Odysseus escapes a storm at sea which leaves him washed up on the island of another immortal goddess, Kalypso, where he has remained until the opening moments of the *Odyssey* a melancholy guest, courted by an offer of immortality if he would renounce his desire to return to Penelope, his human wife, and marry Kalypso.

It is to Kalypso's island that Hermes comes in Book five to initiate Odysseus' final return home while Telemachos is still searching for his father at the palaces of Nestor and Menelaos. Odysseus leaves Kalypso on a raft, is sunk in a storm, and washes up on a beach where the princess of the country, Nausikaa, is playing ball with other maidens as they do the linen washing by the sea. Nausikaa brings Odysseus to her father's palace, where he is now concluding (as we return our discussion to Book twelve) the tale of his wanderings and receiving the admiration and hospitality of the Phaiakians. They will provide a ship for him to return to Ithaka, and make sure he is safely landed in secret on his home island.

Odysseus does not know what to expect when he returns home. The princes of the island are besieging Penelope asking her to make a choice to marry one of them since Odysseus has not returned.

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Odysseus decides to stay with a trusted servant, the swineherd, until he can plan what to do. He goes to his old palace disguised as a beggar. Only his old dog, Argos, and his nurse Eurycleia recognize him. He is mocked by the suitors and bullied. Penelope insists on speaking to him in private to see if he knows Odysseus's whereabouts. She is under pressure to choose a suitor. She had put off the choice until she finished weaving a burial shroud from Odysseus' father, but in secret she unwove at night what she wove by day. Now a faithless servant girl has betrayed her secret. Odysseus makes plans with his son and the swineherd to kill the suitors, but he does not yet reveal his identity to his wife. Penelope proposes a test to choose her suitor, a bow and arrow contest. No one can string Odysseus' old bow and shoot an arrow through a row of rings — no one, of course, until the old "beggar" tries. Then Odysseus cannot stop shooting until he has killed all the suitors, with the sole exception of the bard, the singer of tales. Odysseus and Penelope renew their marriage in bed, and Athena helps bring calm and peace to the island the next day.

For centuries the ending of the *Odyssey* and the unresolved fate of Odysseus have challenged the imagination of other writers and poets. In the land of the dead Teiresias had prophesied that Odysseus, after he returned home, would have to make a final voyage to an unknown land where Odysseus would have to walk inland until people mistook his ship's oar for a winnowing fan. We can read in Kerényi's *The Heroes of the Greeks* and Robert Graves's *The Greek Myths* the many alternative legends of Odysseus' death, including one version in which his unknown bastard son by Circe kills him without recognizing his natural father.<sup>6</sup> No one after Homer makes an original and lasting contribution to the Odysseus legend until 1300 A.D. when Dante Alighieri writes the *Divine Comedy*. In canto XXVI of the *Inferno* Dante encounters Odysseus among the evil counselors of the eighth circle of hell. He is punished along with Diomedes by being completely enveloped in a flame. When Odysseus (known as Ulysses by Dante, who had no direct access to the Homeric epics and had to rely on Latin prose paraphrases and Virgil and Ovid for his knowledge) tells the story of his last voyage, he speaks through the flaming tip of the double flame that encloses the two warriors who had proposed the stratagem of the Trojan horse. His words will later inspire Tennyson to write "Ulysses," a credo of nineteenth-century Romantic heroism, but, although Odysseus' words sound appealing

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to modern ears, Dante has condemned him to hell for his assertion of ego, his sinful refusal to subordinate his individual will to the will of God. Odysseus has usurped God's authority, in Dante's version, as if he were a god himself and could choose to create his own destiny and shape his own life: "Not fondness for my son, nor reverence / for my aged father, nor Penelope's claim / to the joys of love, could drive out of my mind / the lust to experience the far-flung world / and the failings and felicity of mankind."<sup>7</sup> Odysseus then tells Dante how he and his men sailed out into the Atlantic through the Pillars of Hercules, turned south, sailed for five months, and finally caught sight of a mountain rising above an island on the horizon. This, unknown to Odysseus, was the island mountain of Purgatory, which Dante places opposite Jerusalem on the globe. On top of mount Purgatory is the Garden of Eden, but Odysseus never has a chance to discover Paradise. Before he can make land a whirlwind spins his ship around three times and sinks it to the bottom.

One final contribution to Odysseus' legend must be mentioned. In Jorge Luis Borges' "The Immortal" one of the narrators of this highly problematic story goes in search of a City of Immortals across the Egyptian desert.<sup>8</sup> After much wandering he comes across a monumental city high on a plateau that cannot be scaled. In the desert around him are "Troglodites," a sub-human species somewhat resembling desert anchorites, emaciated, motionless, unresponsive to any words or stimuli. He fails to recognize them as the immortals. One of them follows him like a dog as he makes his way up through the labyrinthian entrance tunnel to the city. The ending of "The Immortal" relies on our memory of the famous scene in the *Odyssey* where Argos, Odysseus' old dog, suddenly awakes and recognizes him. The ending, which I must leave you to read, implies that Homer and Odysseus are the same person and that Odysseus' wanderings continue into the present. Perhaps they do to the extent that the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* continue to live in the imaginations of readers.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup>*The Iliad of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper and Row, 1951), I, 1-2. All quotations from the *Iliad* will be from this edition, indicated by book and line numbers in the text of my essay.

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<sup>2</sup>See Albert B. Lord, *The Singer of Tales* (New York: Atheneum, 1965).

<sup>3</sup>Bruno Snell, *Discovery of the Mind*, trans. T.G. Rosenmeyer (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1953), pp. 20-21.

<sup>4</sup>Notice as well in this passage how many examples we can find of the original oral composition of the *Iliad*. Epithets and similes are the two most famous "formulae" of Homeric epic that point to the techniques of oral composition. Notice how Homer intensifies the pathos of the scene by comparing in epic simile the young sacrificial victims to small fish fleeing the jaws of a dolphin and to fawns. Notice how each mention of name is qualified by an epithet, "heaven-descended," "Patroklos, the son of Menoitios," as if each individual is dignified by a legendary geneology and carries a consciousness of his cultural identity with him.

<sup>5</sup>*The Odyssey of Homer*, trans. Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), IX, 19-20. All quotations from the *Odyssey* will be from this edition, indicated by book and line numbers only in the text of my essay.

<sup>6</sup>C. Kerényi, *The Heroes of the Greeks* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1959); Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths*. 2 vols (New York: Penguin, 1955).

<sup>7</sup>Dante Alighieri, *The Inferno*, trans. John Ciardi (New York: Mentor, 1954), canto XXVI.

<sup>8</sup>Jorge Luis Borges, "The Immortal," in *Labyrinths: Selected Stories and Other Writings*, ed. Donald Yates and James Irby (New York: New Directions, 1964).