II

Odysseus among the Allegorists
Homer's Odysseus was a comparatively complicated man, realistic, resourceful, possessed of a strong intellectual curiosity—in many ways, an "untypical hero." But in contrast to our notion of The Wanderer, the hero of the Odyssey had a very simple desire: to return home. To be sure, his curiosity does impel him to hear the sirens' song, and he does indeed seem rather to dally along the way; but the goal of his journey is Ithaca, and from the opening council of the gods we know that he will reach that goal. Even Nausicaa and the Phaeacian Utopia cannot stay his return to Penelope.

Odysseus, being more adaptable than his rather stolid peers, is seized upon by later writers for many purposes: his "complex personality becomes broken up into various

Three Allegorical Journeys

simple types—the politico, the romantic amorist, the sophisticated villain, the sensualist, the philosophic traveller, and others.”² His detractors generally concentrated upon Odysseus's Trojan exploits. He naturally comes off rather badly in the Aeneid; and that text, along with Statius's Achilleid, afforded Dante an account of the sins for which Ulysses (with Diomedes) will be punished among the false counsellors (Inf. 26. 58–63):

E dentro dalla lor fiamma si geme
l'aguato del caval che fe' la porta
ond' uscì de' Romani il gentil seme.
Piangevisi entro l'arte per che morta
Deidamia ancor si duol d'Achille,
e del Palladio pena vi si porta.

[And inside their flame they groan for
the ambush of the horse which made the gateway
by which issued the noble seed of the Romans.
They bewail within it the craft through which in death
Deidamia still grieves for Achilles,
and there they suffer punishment for the Palladium.]

The Greek allegorists, on the other hand, present quite a different view of Odysseus.³ Allegorical interpretation of Homer received part of its impetus from the attacks of philosophers who considered his picture of the gods a scandal. Plato's famous (or infamous) condemnation of the

²Ibid., p. 80.
³Much of the following account is drawn from Felix Buffière's exhaustive study, Les mythes d'Homère et la pensée grecque (Paris: Belles Lettres, 1956).
Odysseus among the Allegorists

poet is merely the culmination of a long series of criticisms. As early as the sixth century B.C., Xenophanes had complained: “Both Homer and Hesiod have attributed to the gods all things that are shameful and a reproach among mankind: theft, adultery, and mutual deception.”

Granted, replied Homer’s apologists—if we read him literally. But Homer’s gods are actually personifications of natural forces, of the four elements, etc. Early Greek thinkers were mostly natural philosophers, and allegorical interpretation found their various systems of thought already expressed in the Homeric poems: *Homeros physiologei*. Since cosmogonical myths are largely absent from the *Odyssey*, the allegorists concentrated upon the *Iliad*, whose divine protagonists were easily identified with cosmic forces.

Later modes of allegorical interpretation are also a good guide to the currents of philosophical thought. After Socrates had given Greek philosophy a distinctly ethical orientation, allegorists came to consider Homer not a natural scientist but a moralist: *Homeros paideuei*. Now the *Odyssey* became the focus of their attention; and philosophers of various sects could agree that Odysseus represented the human ideal, the model of perfect wisdom. The Cynics stressed his endurance, his indifference to hunger and pain: he was their ideal ascetic. The Stoics had a similar view of him, although they tended to emphasize the elements of labor and struggle in his life. Odysseus’s adventures come to represent the wise man’s battles against many forms of vice and temptation: he struggles against and overcomes the passions with the aid of gods (Hermes,

Three Allegorical Journeys

Athena) who represent reason and wisdom. And as Socrates had rejected the study of the external world in order to focus on man, so Odysseus's leaving Calypso to return to Penelope depicts the renunciation of science for philosophy, the true wisdom.

This idea of Odysseus as the Sage, the perfect Wise Man triumphant over passion and adversity, finds expression in many Latin texts, perhaps nowhere more strikingly than in the conclusion to Apuleius's De Deo Socratis:

Nor does Homer teach you anything else [than what Accius does] with regard to the same Ulysses, in always representing Wisdom as his companion, whom he poetically calls Minerva. Hence, attended by her, he encounters all terrific dangers, and rises superior to all adverse circumstances. For, assisted by her, he entered the cavern of the Cyclops, but escaped from it; saw the oxen of the Sun, but abstained from them, and descended to the realms beneath, but emerged from them. With the same Wisdom for his companion, he passed by Scylla, and was not seized by her; he was surrounded by Charybdis, and was not retained by her; drank the cup of Circe, and was not transformed; he came to the Lotophagi, yet did not remain with them; he heard the Sirens, yet did not approach them.\(^5\)

Odysseus among the Allegorists

Odysseus a Platonist's hero! The reconciliation of Homer and Plato would seem almost complete; but Neoplatonists carry the process still further, and Plotinus can even compare the catharsis of the soul with the journey of Odysseus:

'Let us flee then to the beloved Fatherland': this is the soundest counsel. But what is this flight? How are we to gain the open sea? For Odysseus is surely a parable to us when he commands the flight from the sorceries of Circe or Calypso—not content to linger for all the pleasure offered to his eyes and all the delight of sense filling his days. The Fatherland to us is There whence we have come, and There is The Father.

The One, Intelligence, and the Soul "constitute the beloved native land to which Ulysses who is the wandering soul in the sensible world is bound to return; and, like Ulysses, the soul must flee from the enchantment of sensible things, from the charms of Circe." This Odysseus is a product of the third phase of ancient allegorical exegesis, the mystical or theological (Homeros theologei).

While Stoicism and Epicureanism were being irreparably overthrown, the second century witnessed a revival of Platonism in such figures as Apuleius and Numenius. Platonism was taken up again partly because it satisfied religious needs, just as did the mystery religions which flourished at this time. These religions promised a rebirth of the soul and this idea of renewal also figures large in the Hermetic writings. Bréhier observes that "these transformations of the soul appear to us as mere changes of inter-


nal states. But this could not be the case for the Hellenic imagination, which had a far too concrete conception of the soul not to imagine an inward transformation as a change of actual place, a passage from one place to another. The ascent or descent of the soul became a journey across the world.”

To the Neoplatonists, Homer was a truly inspired poet, not a mere imitator of imitations as Plato would have him. He drew his knowledge directly from the divine fount and dispensed it in a veiled and enigmatic form which only the initiated would understand. To Numenius, Odysseus’s voyage was not just a series of adventures, or even a series of moral triumphs: rather, it represented the journey of the soul. The human soul descends from the heavens into the realm of generation and becoming, and is there a prisoner of the flesh; but eventually it regains its heavenly fatherland. Odysseus’s long wanderings on the sea are an image of the soul’s troubled exile in the world of matter; and the final trial imposed upon him by Tiresias—to travel until he should reach a people ignorant of the sea—signified the flight of the soul beyond this material realm.

Thus, through a process of interpretation and reinterpretation, Odysseus’s adventures became the great archetype for any journey or process, physical or spiritual; and whether they traverse the way of our life or the streets of Dublin, we will do well to view Odysseus’s descendants through a Platonic glass.

8 Ibid. p. 35.
9 On mystical interpretations of Ulysses in the Latin West, see Courcelle, “Quelques symboles funéraires du néo-platonisme latin,” pp. 73–93.