

Journeys Home - reflections on *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*

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How are these things linked? - the art of storytelling; Homer's theology; the development of the individual in the group (adolescence).

Consider two basic narrative artforms – *dancing* and *telling*. *The Iliad* images the first form (war-movements, and also Games, are often compared to dance-movements or tumblers). Dance became the foundation for drama – choric Tragedy. Keats said the 'energies' displayed in a street-quarrel are 'fine'. The problem is when adolescent energies are explosive, uncontained (the bomb-style carnage of Achilles' revenge, epitome of his narcissism). Whereas the *Odyssey*, with all its 'adventures', is obsessed with the nature of telling stories – hence Odysseus and his tricks/lies about identity. The unsung heroes are the bards (Demodocus and Phemius), with their fragile social status yet their vital power to harness emotional attention. Odysseus has to earn his journey home from Phaeacia by capturing his audience with his song. The roving adventures turn out to be all dreams. The energy goes into mental containment, taking responsibility for his dreams. Dancing is abstracted into telling. And telling is different from mere words (lexical meaning, grammar etc) – it depends on the vital correspondence of attention and contained delivery.

Present storytellers like the bards of old know they must rivet the audience - each performance may be slightly different, owing to their perception of their audience. Their manner of speaking is understood by the 'child', actual or child-within-us. Because the storytelling language is greater than the sum of its words it is not necessary to understand all the individual words, though all the words need to be clear. Language is formal and patterned rather than colloquial (unlike drama). Violent or bloody events are digestible when verbally contained, showing childish sadism is understandable and its threat to disintegration can be overcome. The modern storytellers (Hugh Lupton, Daniel Morden) achieved a rhythm of telling-and-listening (one spoke, the other listened), modeling

the stance of undistractability which is unfamiliar to modern audiences. Stillness is at the core of listening to dreams. Other types of balance lie within this – the high-up world of the gods *versus* the low or miniature world of men; the scales of fate; the first-person narrative of Odysseus vs. the enfolding narrative told by another voice; the two armies of the *Iliad* having a voice in turn.

In the *Iliad* the gods enter into human life in a variety of ways. At their most primitive they literally take part in the action/dance/fighting, to the extent of getting wounded and complaining to Zeus. At their most sophisticated they are intangible, sensed as a presence that corresponds to a decision-point in the human mind, tipping the balance one way or the other. They brush a feather on the arrow that changes its mark. Their manner of influence is in some ways more important than their personal emotions and quarrels which are all predictably childish. But in the *Odyssey* Athena's intervention is usually through dreams. Only once does she meet Odysseus face to face, when they are wrapped in mist and she speaks fondly like a mother, though not uncritically. (The quality of this relationship begins at the end of the *Iliad* when Ajax accuses Odysseus of Athena being like his mother.) At the end of the *Odyssey* however, Athena-incarnate melts away. After she has brushed up Odysseus' appearance after the battle, she takes no further part in the final crucial recognition-scene between Odysseus and Penelope.

Sight is less important in the *Odyssey* than in the *Iliad*. The *Iliad* has some spectacular visual imagery – descriptions of landscape, weather formations, vegetation, animals. By the *Odyssey* we know sight is untrustworthy, especially for recognition of the truth – Argos hears O's voice; Eurykleia feels O's scar (she doesn't see it, at first); Penelope knows she cannot trust the godlike-looking Odysseus until he has proved himself by invisible signs.

Daphne Briggs has suggested Homer became blind (or was blinded by his 'employers' for his anti-war stance and overt sympathy with slaves etc) at some time between the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey* (during which he moved from the eastern Aegean to the west). Milton moved from visually sensuous world of his early poetry and *Paradise Lost* to spare abstract visual indications in *Samson Agonistes*. Milton considered his blindness to be part of his godsent vocation - following his hero Homer ('blind Maeonides'),

pressurising him into inward vision, 'things invisible to mortal sight'. In Homer, the tendency to internalization/abstraction corresponds with the theological change to dream-carrying gods. Also with the increased value given to storytelling over action. Odysseus wins the battle in the hall not through brute strength (he wins 'against the odds') but through judging 'tensions' (literal and metaphorical) and reliance on the 'swallow's note' of Athena. Just as he won his journey home by artistically fitting his personal experience to the attention of the Phaeacian listeners.

In the *Iliad* everybody is adolescent and nobody can develop as an individual. There are actors but no storytellers. The baby-within (Astyanax, 'Lord of the City') is doomed to be thrown over the ramparts— we know this, and Andromache voices her fear of it, though it is not actually narrated. The narrative swings from one side to the other, in a revenge cycle. The balance of the Iliad-dance is eternal retribution. Force (hormonal adolescence) is bound to conquer. The first line of the poem is the wrath of Achilles, the last the relinquishment of Hector and all he stood for. (Though even Achilles has his moment of change, his touchstone of humanity – not with Patroclus but with Priam.) Daphne says Hector seems to have been an invented character unlike Achilles and the others. All the more significant – as indicating Homer's ideal man – bound to be crushed in the maelstrom. Hector's qualities go into making the Odysseus of the *Odyssey* - the precursor of Renaissance man. Not a non-fighter but a 'defensive fighter – shield to the left, shield to the right' like a dance (as Hector describes it). In the *Odyssey* development of the individual is possible and goes along with reinstating the value of the family. The mother-father internal objects are not only Athena-and-Zeus but also Polyphemus (the Cyclops) and Poseidon. Poseidon's rage at the stake-blinding results in Odysseus clinging to a straw for nine years. The straw-mast becomes the delicate oar of Hope (from Elpenor's grave) – an instrument used to steer through Poseidon's territories – that becomes Odysseus' mission to plant in a country (latency) that as yet knows nothing of the 'sea' of adolescent turbulence.