LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Chapter III

Homer and the Epic

A Note on the Text

Numbers of excellent translations make Homer's work available in modern English. The prose version by E.V.Rieu, published by Penguin, Harmondsworth, 1946, is the most popular, and enables us to read the work much like a modern novel. However, verse translations give a better idea of the tone and rhythm of a work intended to be heard. All quotations here are from the translations by Robert Fitzgerald, published by Doubleday Anchor, New York: The Iliad, 1975 [1974] and The Odyssey, 1963 [1961]. It is worth comparing passages from these versions with any translation you may be using: the differences often help us come closer to the original. I have used Fitzgerald's transliterations of the spelling of Greek names in the quotation, but have followed traditional English spelling in my own text.)

Homer's Odyssey opens with a brief invocation to the Muse, as the poet asks for her aid to help him tell the tale of a hero, a man "skilled in all ways of contending", who has been "harried for years on end" as he has vainly tried to bring his shipmates home after the sack of Troy. In a few lines the author provides the context of the story, explaining the recklessness of the men who doomed themselves by killing the cattle of the sun-god, the charms of the nymph Calypso who has continued to delay Odysseus, and the wrath of Poseidon, the sea-god, which is the basic cause of Odysseus's troubles. We are then whipped off to Olympus, where the other gods are assembled, and start a discussion of the fate of another of the Greek leaders, Agamemnon. This opening does not, however, merely remind us of the story so far. By reminding his listeners of the story of Troy and the fate of Agamemnon, Homer establishes the moral and metaphysical framework within which they must judge the actions the poem describes.

Unlike Odysseus, Agamemnon returned swiftly and safely with

his booty to his home, only to be killed there by his wife's lover, Aegisthus. References to this episode recur through the Odyssey as a counterpoint to the main theme of loyalty and endurance. The sequence of murder and revenge which commenced with the slaying of Agamemnon formed one of the great cycles of Greek legend, which in turn the dramatist Aeschylus was to shape into the tragic series culminating in the establishment in the Acropolis of Athens of the Erinyes, the avenging Fates, as agents of justice . For Homer the story of Agamemnon is an example of of both fate and justice. Death comes to Agamemnon in the moment of his triumph and security:

> He went ashore and kissed the earth in joy,
> hot tears blinding his eyes at sight of home.
> - - -
> the tyrant
> - - - led him to the banquet, all serene,
> and killed him like an ox felled at the trough. (IV, 522-36)

Agamemnon's fate reminds us that we can never know what lies ahead, that nothing can warn us of the moment of death or save us from its stroke. Aegisthus' deed warns us that within the limits of life we make our own fate. He will die a shameful death at the hands of Orestes, a just act of revenge for his violation of the integrity of family and marriage. Homer's listeners would remember also that Agamemnon had left home and led the Greeks in the Trojan war to avenge a similar violation. Troy fell because Paris seduced Helen from Menelaus. Yet this seduction was itself fated, a product of the madness induced

by Aphrodite, goddess of love. Homer knows that the gods who decree justice to humans do not observe it themselves. His epic is about how mortals can conduct themselves honourably in a universe governed by random fate.

Despite the supernatural trappings of the gods, Homer places us at once in a secular world. The gods themselves are described in human terms, enjoying greater powers than we do but driven by the same feelings of love, hate, compassion and anger. The blind minstrel of the Phaeacians will tell the tale of Ares and Aphrodite, and the laughter of the gods who find them ensnared on their adulterous bed by the golden net of Hephaestus, the lame smith. Even Zeus, whose his strong sense of justice and his position as "father of gods and men" sets him apart, has power only to foresee and to warn, not to control. He will instruct the nymph Calypso to let Odysseus go, and Athena will continue to watch over him and his son, but finally both men are responsible for themselves. The "steadfast man" will reach home, and his son Telemachus will achieve renown through his sea voyage, but at home they will settle their affairs only through their own efforts. Zeus even explains that Odysseus's trials are not the product of blind malice on the part of the gods, but are a just retribution for Odysseus' blinding of Poseidon's son, Cyclops.

Despite this emphasis on men's control of their affairs, the opening of the book also reminds its listeners of a blindness of fate that is beyond both gods and men, but which constitutes the difference between them. The gods are immortal, and live their lives outside moral considerations. Humans die, and are therefore responsible for the manner of their living. The

treacherous Aegisthus, and later the violent Ajax, provide the contrast by which we measure Telemachus, Menelaus, and Odysseus himself.

We can contrast this opening with some modern rewritings of the legend. James Joyce's Ulysses begins with the scene of a man shaving.

> Stately, plump Buck Mulligan came from the stairhead, bearing a bowl oflather on which a mirror and a razor lay crossed. A yellow dressing-gown, ungirdled, was sustained gnetly behind him by the mild morning air. He held the bowl aloft and intoned:
>
> -- Introibo ad altare Dei.

Unlike Homer, who starts from the point of greatest generality, Joyce places his reader in a particular place and time, introducing a particular person engaged in a particular action. Yet this specific detail produces a normal scene of everyday life. The particular day could also be any day.

The Latin phrase from the Mass sets this action, like Homer's, in the context of eternity, but the jocular, almost blasphemous, use of the phrase puts in question all our efforts at religion and metaphysical speculation. The attention of the novel is thereafter concentrated not so much on what people do as on their inner lives, they way they make sense of the world around them. Paradoxically, this makes this explicitly secular novel deeply religious in its concerns, whereas Homer, confident in the existence of the gods, is free to concentrate on the things of this world.

We can contrast both of these works Nikos Kazantzakis' daring poem, The Odyssey: a modern sequel, translated by Kimon Friar. (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1958 [Greek original, 1938]). Kazantzakis begins his sequel by invoking, not a Muse, but the physical world, to which he prays not for inspiration but for delight:

O Sun, great Oriental, my proud mind's golden cap,
I love to wear you cocked askew, to play and burst
in song throughout our lives, and so rejoice our hearts.
Good is this earth, it suits us! Like the global grape
it hangs, dear God, in the blue air and sways in the gale,
nibbled by all the birds and spirits of the four winds.
Come, lets start nibbling too and so refresh our minds!

This pagan and romantic hymn to nature directs our attention not to how we can live our lives, but how we can force the circumstantial world to give of itself. The author speaks in his own voice and becomes his own subject. He speaks with the spirit of the modern world where people must create themselves.

In the same way, Odysseus in Kazantzakis' work is not just a man struggling with the gods and fate, but a man trying to win for himself the freedom of the gods. After the slaughter of the suitors and their maids, he wanders inland through Ithaca, not so much to inspect his kingdom as to take possession of it. Tired, he comes to the hut of an old man, who gives him bread and water. Odysseus repays the gift with the news that the king has returned, but the old man replies:

"We who must work day after day to eat, dear God,
what do we care if kings return or drown in exile?

We care about the rain, our vegetable plots, our lambs,
the holy bread the Immortals feed us with our own sweat;
kings are uncapturable birds, clouds blown by the winds."

(Book I, 776-781)

This is the voice of the peasant, the common man whose life down through the ages has been bounded by the realities of wind and rain, food and famine, and finds that in the end

"- - - there is no greater good
than holy mute obedience to man-eating earth."

(Book I, 11-12)

But Odysseus refuses to be bound by this simple wisdom, and challenges the gods themselves:

"I've also taken count: there is no greater good
than when the earth says 'Yes' and man with wrath shouts 'No!'
And I'm acquainted with one soul that never deigned
to stoop under the yoke of demon, man, or god,
but sailed and travelled till his heart became a wineskin
for all four good and evil elements. - - - "

(Book I, 214-19)

The metaphor which changes his heart into a wineskin which is also the universe is an image of his urge to transform the world. By contrast, Homer's Odysseus is bounded by the same conditions as the countryman. He is a hero because he endures more, not because of any extraordinary status.

Homer's Odyssey is characterized by homely, countryman's images, like calves breaking out of the pen to get to their mothers, or the fisherman hauling mackerel onto the shore, or men

competing with the scythe and plough as well as with the sword and spear. Most moving is the simile which describes the wife clasping her husband's dead body after the sack of the city, only to feel in her back the bronze spear of the conqueror and hear the harsh command to go with him into slavery. These images come from a world in which all share the same conditions of life and are bound by the same vicissitudes of fate.

Homer's Odyssey is divided into three parts. The first, Books I to IV, tells of the adventures of Telemachus as he goes in search of news of his father. The second, Books V to XV, describes Odysseus' wanderings on his voyage home from Troy. The third, Books XVI to the end, deals with his struggle to rid his house of the suitors and to re-establish his rule in Ithaca. In this last part, Telemachus joins him in the battle, so completing the unity of the tale by taking the heroism into a new generation.

These three stories are presented as history, as an account of something which actually happened within the memory of the poet. We know now that they must have been written some time in the eighth century BC, about two hundred years after they were composed. This in turn may have been as longas four centuries after the time of the events they describe, which must have been passed down to the time of the poet through the recitations of bards like the Phaeacian harper who sings tales of Troy to Alcinous.

Living in an age of print, we find it difficult to believe that historic events could be passed on with any accuracy through so many generations, and are tempted to believe that the whole

narrative is a fiction glorifying the Greeks but having no basis in fact. However, during the last century archeologists have excavated the ruins of not one but some ten cities on the traditional site of Troy, across the Dardanelles from Gallipoli and commanding this narrow strait joining the Mediterranean and the Black Sea. The site has been silted up and the sea is now distant, but evidently those ancient cities were in a position to amass great wealth from both trade and war. They would be the target not only of warrior bands in search of plunder, but of any invading peoples wishing to secure their habitation along the eastern shores of the Mediterranean. We know that around the twelfth centuries BC first the Mycenaeans and then the Greeks moved from central Asia to establish their kingdoms in this area. Homer's Trojan War could well have been one of the struggles that occurred during these migrations. The stories of the Odyssey record in legendary form the voyages of trade and settlement by which they gradually established themselves around the shores and islands of the Mediterranean from Ionia to Sicily.

The Iliad and The Odyssey are among the oldest works of European literature, coming from an oral tradition that goes back before the development of writing. Yet they are in no way primitive works. They are the product of an already highly developed civilization. The Achaeans, the victors who raze the city of Troy, "high-towered Ilium", were probably among the first comers of the nomadic warriors from central Asia who some three thousand years ago invaded the Mediterranean and overthrew the older Cretan civilization. There is still debate whether the

warriors of the poems were the Myceneans, the immediate conquerors of the Cretans, or their Hellenic successors, in whose language the poem is composed and who established the city-states that comprised classical Greece. Troy itself, the Asiatic city to which they lay siege, is portrayed as long-established and wealthy, yet it is probable that its citizens belonged to the same civilization and spoke the same language as its assailants. These assailants are not called Greeks or Hellenes by Homer, but are known as Achaeans or Danaans or Argives, the names of particular tribes. Evidently at the time they did not think of themselves as a single people.

The form of Homer's poems comes from an earlier heroic age. It belongs to warrior tribes before they settle into cities and acquire the softer graces, including writing. This form of poetry probably arises in the first place from elegies chanted at funeral ceremonies to recall the feats of the dead warrior. Later, professional singers would weave these into tales of heroism based on actual events which would then become part of the lore of the society in which they were told. Homer himself was probably one of the bards or minstrels who in earlier Greek times, around seven centuries BC, would wander from city to city and household to household, reciting to the accompaniment of music the tales of past heroes. These bards thus kept alive into an age of settlement the spirit and values of an earlier time.

Oral cultures have survived into the twentieth century, and scholars have been able to record examples of heroic narrative from many sources. These narratives differ from the earlier shamanistic literature, which records the origins of the world

and the patterns which govern the relationships between humans and nature. Heroic narratives are more concerned with relationships between man and man, or occasionally between man and woman, and with the way humans control nature for their own ends. Such epics survive in poems as far removed in time as the Anglo-Saxon epic Beowulf, the early French Song of Roland, and poems recorded in the twentieth century from Serbia, Kazakhistan and northern Russia.

The date of composition of the two Homeric epics, The Iliad and The Odyssey cannot be decided. It is most likely that the original stories were composed in the tenth century 1000 BC, and put together in their present forms some 200 years later. Controversy also remains about whether Homer, the unknown author of these works, was one man or several. Each epic incorporates stories from a number of sources. The framing story of The Iliad tells of the wrath of Achilles and its effect on the battles for Troy. Within this story however we have also the tales of Paris and Helen which precipitated the war, and tales of various heroes who took part in it. The Odyssey is framed by the story of Odysseus' return to Ithaca and his routing of the suitors, but it incorporates also stories of the voyage of Telemachus, the death of Achilles, fall of Troy and return of Menelaus, the wanderings of Odysseus and the various false tales he tells to conceal his true identity. But, while each of these tales may have a different origin, the structural unity each epic suggests that it is not merely a compilation by many bards but is the work of a single author. There is less certainty about whether the two

epics are the work of one man. They differ in theme and structure, and, although the author of The Odyssey certainly knows of the earlier Iliad, he could be writing a generation later. Yet it seems to me that the two poems have a unity of outlook which goes beyond what would be common to their time in history and suggests that tradition is right, and that we are listening even in translation to the voice of a single author.

There is debate also about whether the work was first oral and was only later recorded in writing, or was from the first in written form. We know that writing became important in Greek society at about this time, but we also know that the poems continued to be recited by story tellers, so we cannot tell whether recitation of writing came first. The version which has come down to us is based on an Athenian edition made in the sixth century BC. The division of each poem into separate books may be as late as the fourth century BC. (Finley, 1978; Grant, 1962.)

Modern readers, no longer understanding what it is like to live in a wholly oral culture, find it difficult to believe that such complex works could be passed accurately from generation to generation. But people who depend entirely on the memory for knowledge of everything from their own family and kin to the lore of hunting, stock management, cultivation, and manufacture are automatically trained to retain every detail of what they hear. The language of speech and recitation itself is adapted to the needs of memory, and will use every device of rhyme and rhythm, alliteration and repetition, stock phrases and identifying epithets, to ensure that the words remain in the memory. In the 28 ØØØ lines of the two Homeric epics, there are 25 ØØØ repeated

phrases, and each of the 37 major characters has a stock epithet. (Grant, 1962, p.31) Dawn is always "rosy-fingered", Athena "grey-eyed", Achilles "fleet-footed". The narratives of such a society are public events, and convey quite directly the shared values of the society. Homer became the schoolmaster of the Greeks because his work explicitly offers models of conduct to meet every situation.

Despite the differences in the societies from which they have sprung, these narratives share similar characteristics. They are transmitted orally, they are normally recited over several days, they shape historical events into a traditional form of the encounter between good and evil, they are concerned with the leaders, not the followers, the magical or supernatural events are subordinated to an interest in life as it is lived on earth. The heroic orientation is masculine, but the women who appear are expected, like Penelope, to play an heroic role of their own. They are not the product of primitive societies, but of societies which are emerging from the timeless world of ritual and magic into the time of history. Whether among the Greeks of the tenth century BC or the Kazakhs or Serbs or Russians whose tales have been recorded in this century, they represent societies which are starting to make their own history. The heroes of the tales fashion their individuality through their deeds rather than merely play out the roles placed on them by tradition. This power to fashion the world is, however, limited to the leaders, those who by their own strength and inheritance have the authority of rulers. This authority they justify by the

long genealogies which eventually link them to the gods, no longer actors in the human world but still providing the ultimate sanction for differences of wealth and power.

In shamanistic poetry, humans can become as gods, escaping from the world of time and overcoming death itself. The heroes of Aboriginal Dreaming become the landscape itself, the hills and trees and rivers which create human life. In heroic poetry, however, the hero remains bound by the time he uses. The Iliad becomes a tragedy as all the great deeds are shodwoed by death. Achilles expresses this in the words with which he rejects a plea for mercy by Priam's son, Lycaon:

"- - - Come, friend, face your death, you too.
And why are you so piteous about it?
Patroklos died, and he was a finer man
by far than you. You see, don't you, how large
I am, and how well-made? My father is noble,
a goddess bore me. Yet death waits for me,
for me as well, in all the power of fate.
A morning comes or evening or high noon
when someone takes my life away in war,
a spear-cast, or an arrow from a bowstring."

(Iliad, Book XXI,110-119)

So Achilles in life, and he follows his words with equally piteous action. The poet describes this dispassionately, giving equal weight to Lycaon's terror and Achilles' rage:

At this the young man's knees failed, and his heart:
he lost his grip upon the spear
and sank down, opening his arms. Akhilleus

drew his sword and thrust between his neck
and collarbone so the two-edged blade went in
up to the hilt. Now face down on the ground
he lay stretched out, as dark blood flowed from him,
soaking the earth. Akhilleus picked him up
by one foot, wheeled, and slung him in the river
to be swept off downstream. then he exulted:

"Nose down there with fishes. In cold blood
they'll kiss your wound and nip your blood away . . . "

(Iliad, Book XXI, 120-31)

The wrath of Achilles had originally been turned against Agamemnon, and had jeopardized the whole Greek campaign against Troy. However, after the death of his comrade, Patroclus, Achilles rejoins the battle and rages against the Trojans, eventually killing their hero, Hector, in single combat, and thus paving the way for the Greek victory and the destruction of the Troy. Achilles himself does not live to see this victory. On the point of his own death, Hector foretells Achilles' fate at the hands of Apollo and Paris, and it is described more fully in The Odyssey, when, in a passage which may be a later addition to the original work, the shades of the suitors meet him in the underworld. (Book XXIV, 35-95) Achilles however speaks his own epitaph when Odysseus meets him among the shades of the dead and greets him as one who is still honoured with roayl power "among the dead men's shades" and therefore "need not be so pained by death." Achilles sets him right:

"Let me hear no smooth talk
of death from you, Odysseus, light of councils.
Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand
for some poor countryman, on iron rations,
than lord it over all the exhausted dead."

(Odyssey, Book XI, 496-98)

Achilles is the supreme hero of the Homeric world, but the quality of his heroism comes from the courage he brings to life in the face of his knowledge of imminent death. His treatment of Lycaon is justified only by the fact that he expects no more himself. Yet Lycaon's fate is an image of the same tragedy of life curtailed in youth which awaits Achilles, and the splendid games with which the Greeks mourn the loss of their hero are no compensation for the fact of death. In the world of the poet, life is both splendid and unjust.

In Odysseus, we have a hero who challenges this conception of life. Although a skilled and doughty warrior -- his final victory over the suitors is as great an achievement as any feat of Achilles -- his central qualities are his endurance and his cunning. He battles when he must, but in general he tries to outwit his foes. This represents a later stage of society than Achilles' desperate personal valour. While Achilles, supported by Athena as a warrior goddess, defies fate, Odysseus, aided by the grey-eyed Athena as counsellor rather than warrior, learns to circumvent it by planning and forethought. Achilles is said to come from Thessaly, in the north, but his character suggests the earlier ancestors of the Greeks, the warrior society of horse-breeders and nomadic herders of the Asian steppes, whose life is

bounded by the unchanging cycle of the seasons and the unpredictable happenings of fate. Odysseus, by contrast, comes from Ithaca, an island which, however poor it may be, has a harbour, crops and vineyards. It is a society in which people are exercising control over their lives, and so the simpler heroic virtues, while necessary to obtain and exercise power, are no longer sufficient. Odysseus, in learning from Athena to exercise control over himself, is learning also how to control nature.

Significantly, The Odyssey begins not with Odysseus himself, but with Telemachus' first steps into adulthood. These provide us with a picture of the society of the poem. Telemachus first calls an assembly of his people, before whom he states his case. This assembly is not a body exercising democratic authority, but an audience before whom the speakers must prove themselves. Leaders like Telemachus, Eurynomus and Antinous cannot ignore it as a place where public opinion is formed, but finally they make their own decisions and succeed or fail by their own actions, including their ability to attract support for voyaging or battle. The assembly makes no decisions, although several speakers express sympathy for Telemachus, and he enlists his own crew to sail off in search of news of his father. This voyage shows us life in other small city states like Ithaca, and the story he hears of Menelaus' return from Troy places these states in the context of their wider world.

Menelaus' voyage to Cyprus, Phoenicia, Egypt, "and still farther among the sun-burnt races" of Sidon, Arabia and Libya

takes him beyond the limits of the Mycenaean world to the main trading centres of the middle east. (Book IV, 77ff.) Yet his first mention of this voyage is used to point out to Telemachus the vanity of wealth, its inability to compensate for the loss of friends and relations. The community, and the home at its centre, is presented as the source of human values. Menelaus' subsequent detailed account of his encounter with the sea-god Proteus reinforces this centrality. (Book IV, 340ff.) Proteus is one of the older gods of nature, an image of the natural forces which controlled human life and which man must placate in order to prosper. But Menelaus, rather than placating him, actively wrestles with him until he makes the god obey the will of the human and show him how to get home. Rather than living in a timeless world of nature, Menelaus controls nature and makes his own destiny.

After hearing what he himself must do, Menelaus questions the god about the fate of his companions. While Menelaus contends with the gods, Ajax has defied them and been destroyed:

> though first Poseidon landed him on Gyrai
> promontory, and saved him from the ocean.
> Despite Athena's hate, he had lived on,
> but the great sinner in his insolence
> yelled that the gods' will and the sea were beaten,
> and this loud brag came to Poseidon's ears.
> He swung the tridentin his massive hands
> and in one shock from top to bottom split
> that promontory, toppling into the sea
> the fragment where the great fool sat.

So the vast ocean had its will with Aias,
drunk in the end on salt spume as he drowned.

(Book IV, 500-11)

Humans may learn to work with nature and control it to their ends, but when they forget the finite conditions of life, the limits of their power, they are destroyed. Just as Ajax represents the uncontrollable force of human pride and passion, Poseidon represents the indomitable force of nature which will destroy it. This episode is an example of what the later Greeks were to call hubris, the source of human tragedy in the pride which makes a man go beyond what is humanly possible. This quality is, by contrast, what Kazantzakis prizes as the supreme human virtue.

In recounting the contrasting fates of Agamemnon, killed by his wife's lover as he steps across his threshold, and Odysseus, still seeking the home where his faithful wife continues to ward off the suitors, Menelaus returns us to the main action of the epic, which enlarges on his themes of the recovery of society by the man who tames the gods and lives within his own powers. But before Odysseus can fulfil his social destiny he must create himself as an individual. He can only accomplish this by descending within himself until he confronts death itself.

The journeyings of Odysseus, which he describes to the Phaeacians in Books IX to XII, fall into four parts balanced about the journey to the underworld. Each part comprises three adventures, of which two are sketched briefly and the third described at langth. The first two parts represent his descent

through different eras of society to the existential encounter with nature the destroyer, and then with death itself. From this point nature turns from destroyer to nurturer, and Odysseus rises by combatting sexuality and the lust to destroy, first in othersand then in himself, until he escapeshis own sexuality and reaches the ideal land of Phaeacia. This land is, howver, no more than a resting place, which he must leave in order to restore himself in his fulness at home in Ithaca. We may represent thiswhole process diagrammatically:

		PHAEACIA	Civilization
SOCIETY	Ciconians		war
	Lotos eaters		nirvana
		CYCLOPS	savagery/monsters
	Aeolus		nature
	Lastrygonians		barbarity
		CIRCE	nature goddess/destroyer
		Elpenor	
EXISTENTIAL		UNDERWORLD	Achilles
		Elpenor	
		CIRCE	nature goddess/nurturer
	Sirens		sexuality - outwitted
NATURE	Scylla and Charibdis		natural destruction - outwitted
		CATTLE OF THE SUN	human destruction
	Scylla and Charibdis		natural destruction - resisted
INDIVIDUAL	Calypso		sexuality - resisted
		PHAEACIA	
	ITHACA		

Phaeacia of course lies outside the narrative, for which it is both starting and finishing point. However, when Odysseus has completed his narrative and put himself in possession of the events he has described, he is ready to embark on the next and final stage of his journeying. Only in this stage does he as an individual make his own history by recovering his kingdom.

The succession of Odysseus adventures are history that he experiences, not history that he makes. His only role is to endure, but in doing so he experiences the stages of civilization up to his time. The encounter with the Ciconians is just a pirate raid of the kind that must have been taken for granted in the Mycenean and early Greek world. The lotos eaters offer the drug-induced calm which is an escape from the demands of life, both from the effort of enduring the natural world and the task of engaging with human history. The Cyclops, monsters who have not yet emerged into history, threaten to destroy the men who, trusting in the rules of hospitality, try to impose culture on nature. Yet, in escaping from them, Odysseus himself violates the law of hospitality, and must venture further back towards the origins of humanity before he can escape from the law of necessity.

Aeolus represents a beneficent nature which is incompatible with the human desires which have been awakened in Odysseus' crewmen. They are therefore driven back to the Lastrygonians, a race ven more barbarous, closer to the unthinking primeval nature from which humanity emerged. The encounter with Circe at first reduces the crew to this level of brutality. Circe represents nature as the destroyer, the force

which removes all illusions of culture. But Odysseus, with the help of a god, resists her and asserts his inherent humanity. He is thus able to enjoy her other aspect, as nurturer, but before this quality can be fully realized she sends him on the ultimate journey to the underworld. This journey itself is framed by the death and burial of Elpenor, the companion who is sacrificed for the enlightenment of the others, but who must be appeased before they can by enjoy it.

After leaving Circe, Odysseus begins the journey upwards to the full realization of his humanity. On his first encounters with the Sirens and with Scylla and Charibdis he is able to outwit their sexual attraction and destructive force, and so enable his expedition to proceed to its timely objective free from their timeless necessity. By killing the cattle of the sun, however, his men admit their own destructiveness and so put themselves back in the power of necessity, which destroys them. Odysseus is left to complete the journey alone. This time, he is unable to outwit the monsters, and escapes them only by resistance. Even Calypso, who like Circe represents the force of sexuality, is unable to win his assent to his captivity, and is eventually forced to let him go. He thus arrives in Phaecia at the end of his narrative in full possession of himself. He now has the strength to destroy the suitors whose conduct threatens the civilized order of Ithaca.

When we look at the structure of Odysseus' voyaging we can see an underlying symbolic significance. These episodes are however presented to the audience as a straightforward tale of actual adventures which represent their knowledge of the Mediterranean. Unlike Menelaus, Odysseus sailed beyond the known boundaries of the Mycennean world, and on these travels encountered the kind of wonders which have provided subject matter for sailors tales since men first ventured forth beyond sight of land. The gods and monsters represent stages through which Odysseus must grow before he can attain his own freedom, but they are based on misunderstandings of the strange and primitive societies which the voyagers of Greece would encounter once they left the safe confines of their known world. The brutality of the encounters is the price paid to move from nature to history.

This price becomes clearer in the final stage of the poem, when we follow Odysseus on his return to Ithaca. His first encounters with the herdsmen Eumaeus and Philoetius, and with Telemachus, establish the value of loyalty. Simpler human values are evident in the recognition given him by his old dog, Argus, who wags his tail and dies, and by the nurse Eurycleia. These simple scenes are contrasted with the boorish behaviour of the the beggar Irus, and with the treachery of Melantho and Melanthius. This clear distinction between the human and virtuous on the one hand and the brutal on the otherdistracts our attention from the brutality with which Odysseus himself eventually routs and exterminates the suitors. The individuals

who made their own history established their power ruthlessly.

This power is also exclusively masculine. The earlier natural economies had been based on fertility rites gave a central role to women in the form of goddesses like Circe and their priests. In the Homeric world, however, the role of women is only to be loyal to their masters. Penelope resists the suitors but exercises independent authority only over her maids. Helen is a treasured possession, first of Menelaus, then of Paris, and then again of Menelaus. The faithless maids are slaughtered, while and after raids like that on the Cicones even thenoblest of women are taken off into slavery in which they are expected to serve the economic and sexual needs of their lords. The rule of reason and justice which Odysseus establishes has clear limits.

If we turn from the tales of Homer to the Bible, an even older work which has served to educate the western world, we enter into a totally different conception of the mode by which humans move from nature to culture, from a world ruled by natural spirits to one which allows freedom of choice. While for the Greeks the agency of this move was reason, for the Hebrews it was God.