

JEFFREY CARSON

ODYSSEUS GOES HOME

Prologue

Since 1970 my wife and I have lived year round on Paros. Not exiles, we are citizens of both Greece and the United States. We live here, not because we dislike our former home, but because on Paros we can be authentically ourselves. The home of place is weaker in Americans than in Europeans; my childhood suburban neighborhood might have been anywhere (luckily it was at the edge of New York City). But when we first looked long at the Aegean, from a terrace on Paros, we recognized it, and here we still are, gazing at azure, at foam froth, at island shapes of myth and history, still learning what we meant when we called it Homer's sea all those years ago.

I

Home is a chief theme in the *Odyssey*. All three main characters, King, Queen, and Prince, seek it and find it. Telemachos must undertake a risky circular journey from his mother's supervision, that takes in two of Hellas' loftiest kings, Helen-tamed Menelaos and venerable Nestor, and return a master in his father's palace. Penelope, the cleverest woman in ancient literature, must find a way to readmit, to the island palace she is in grave danger of losing to louts, an equal and balancing masculinity to her wily and captivating femininity. And Odysseus is seven years inactive on Calypso's somnolent isle, where he is served dainties by fetching handmaids, lives resistless after years of strife, and has for bedmate a smitten goddess more beautiful than his human wife could ever be, as he admits. Encountering nothing but effortless pleasure, he longs for home, his real home. But

Calypso in her cave constrain'd his stay
With sweet, reluctant, amorous delay;

and what's a mere mortal to do, longing for the bed of his imperfect wife?

So Odysseus' voyage in the *Odyssey* is an escape from what is wholly alien to his nature: Calypso's logy land, her cave that reeks of drowsy poppies and lacks the salt tang of wild mountain thyme. At the start of Book V Hermes, persuaded by hero-loving Athena, has been sent by the gods, to secure Odysseus' release from Calypso at last; Homer's description of the messenger's

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journey and of Calypso's home – Odysseus' prison – is an exquisite set piece of nature writing, rare in Greek literature. We first encounter the hero walking disconsolate along the alien seashore, where constrained Calypso seeks him:

The nymph, obedient to divine command,
 To seek Ulysses, paced along the sand,
 Him pensive on the lonely beach she found,
 With streaming eyes in briny torrents drown'd,
 And inly pining for his native shore;
 For now the soft enchantress pleas'd no more;
 For now, reluctant, and constrained by charms,
 Absent he lay in her desiring arms,
 In slumber wore the heavy night away,
 On rocks and shores consumed the tedious day;
 There sate all desolate, and sigh'd alone,
 With echoing sorrows made the mountains groan.
 And roll'd his eyes o'er all the restless main,
 Till, dimm'd with rising grief, they stream'd again.

Odysseus is a hero unlike his peers in battle, Achilles, Ajax, and Diomedes: they do not pace the shore alone, longing for their loving wives and children. Unlike him, they think almost entirely of glory, honor, their legacy of fame, their *kleos*. Odysseus, who hardly seems a bronze-age hero, pines for home. To get home, he is willing to brave the violent, unchartered sea in a rickety raft. If we feel lost, Odysseus Elytis says in "Ad Libitum", it is because we are "the other Odysseus / upon a raft / centuries now".

II

Mythology suggests that home has always been on Odysseus' turning mind. Unlike the other heroes, who move in with their richly dowered wives, Odysseus has brought his to his capital Ithaca, a poor island, unfit for horses, on the extreme edge of the civilized world. When Agamemnon's emissary, Palamedes, arrives to draft him for the Trojan war, the wily young king tries to evade it with a ruse, and ploughs the sandy shore near his infant son as if he were mad. In Troy, while the heroes fight duels and vaunt their reputations, he spies, takes practical measures, chats with grateful Helen in her love-nest, and hopes for home. When after the impious sack the royal Trojan women are distributed as prizes, he accepts aged Priam's aged Queen Hecuba for his trophy, and prudently leaves her behind, avoiding Agamemnon's vainglorious insult to his wife Clytemnestra

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when he returns to Mycenae with the lovely, silent princess Cassandra beside him on his groaning war chariot. Penelope is home, and home is everything.

Escaping the debilitating inanity of Calypso's paradise, he is again offered a home in Princess' Nausicaa's refulgent utopia, Phaeacia, where the men are fleet of foot and the women graceful dancers and grisly war over the horizon. Mythology, aware of his temptation, lets Odysseus' marry Telemachos to her. He compares the royal girl to a golden palm he saw at Delos, and so we may fairly imagine his black ship sailing by our Paros, a mere fifteen miles from Leto's sacred rock.

Athena reports to the gathered gods that he yearns

To see the smoke from his loved palace rise,
While the dear isle in distant prospect lies

When foolish Agamemnon warns him in Hades not to trust a woman, he is polite to the great king, though Penelope is the only one he trusts. And when aided by Aeolus' fresh, following zephyr, contrary winds bound in a bag, he sees, as Tantalos sees fruit, home before him, in Homer's percipient exaggeration. Home is where he can be Odysseus, husband, father, man of action, man of thought, king. The meaning is, then, that home is where we can be ourselves most fully.

III

In a fine bit of irony, when in Book XIII Odysseus arrives on Ithaca at last, exhausted, asleep, tended, and is placed in an olive-shaded cave with his booty (such caves in Homer symbolize rebirth), on awakening he doesn't recognize where he is.

Disconsolate he wanders on the coast,
Sighs for his country, and laments again
To the deaf rocks, and hoarse-resounding main.

We are only half way through the poem. For most of us the seafaring adventures are the best part, but for Hellenes it is politics, for the same reason Dante stuffs traitors into Satan's Cyclopean maw.

One part of home is achieved. And when he meets his son, who resembles him, at loyal swineherd Eumaeus' hut, another precious part is in place.

Soon after he arrives at his own megaron in his beggar's rags, Penelope sends for him, to get news of the world. Homer, who is usually more complex than he seems, claims not to recognize him before the suitors are defeated and she can set him a test. But does he mean this? As we have

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seen, Penelope is the cleverest and most observant of women. Is she really so captivated by a beggar as immediately to invite him into her chambers, where her personal maidservant Eurycleia, once his nurse, bathes him? When Eurycleia notices the childhood boar's tusk scar on his thigh, she cries out, and is shushed (many great heroes, e.g. Jason, Achilles, Perseus, have an imperfection in the left leg, as deference to the feminine). Penelope is quivering with awareness. Her conversation then becomes more intimate. She devises the ruse of the axes, which would be inappropriate did she not know him, and he agrees. Odysseus has made plans with his son; now he makes plans with his wife, likely spied upon by disloyal maidservants so that they dare not speak openly. If I am right, the next great piece of home, Penelope, is being set in place, to her joy. She insists that he sleep outside her bedroom door, a preparation. And she sets about inflaming the greedy passions of her suitors with her charm and beauty, partly to show her husband that she retains her erotic power, as he does his (every female in the book falls for him).

Meanwhile Minerva with instinctive fires
Thy soul, Penelope, from Heaven inspires;
With flattering hopes the suitors to betray,
And seem to meet, yet fly, the bridal day:
Thy husband's wonder, and thy son's to raise;
And crown the mother and the wife with praise.

When Telemachus reveals he is able to string his father's bow, and does not for the sake of strategy, he has completed his journey and is fully his father's son.

Penelope's ruse of the bed is a fitting conclusion to his reinstatement as family man. After the slaughter, she keeps her distance, though Telemachos wants them to embrace. But Odysseus understands her deliberate pace: they have not embraced for nearly twenty years. When she says she has moved the bed, his flaring anger proves to her that he is worthy of it, and is fully her husband. For he built the bed with his own hands from a living olive tree, and it is the center of their married life, and the silver flash of olive leaves lights it.

But if o'erturn'd by rude, ungovern'd hands,
Or still inviolate the olive stands,
'Tis thine, O queen, to say, and now impart,
If fears remain, or doubts distract thy heart."

His reinstatement in his marriage bed, as it were in another olive-shaded cave of rebirth, causes Athena to lengthen their night two hours. And in between bouts of love he tells her his adventures,

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as he has never told another. As Aristophanes points out, a man and woman joined aright in love compose a whole, and to be whole is to be home. Were the epic a Romance, it would end here.

IV

But there are two more books, for the Greeks were, and are, a political people. Odysseus has killed, however justly, the sons of his kingdom's aristocratic families, and civil war ensues. He must again don his panoply. When he fights together with his father and son, and is granted victory by Athena's intervention, he is fully king again. To fulfill your proper communal rôle is to be home. Now he is father, son, husband, and ruler: a wise man of action who is home at last.

“Descended from the gods! Ulysses, cease;
Offend not Jove: obey, and give the peace.”

This is as far as it is possible to come from Calypso's dreary bower.

IV

The Classical Greeks, dazed by the glamour of Achilles, saw Odysseus as sly and guileful, and not a man who desperately wants to go home. Dante, exiled from home, a descendant of the Trojans who became Romans, sees him in Canto XXVI as hubristic, but also full of Renaissance individuality. Ulysses' sin, councilor of fraud in war, doesn't interest Dante (he also doesn't quite accept the sinfulness of Paola and Francesca, of Brunetto Latini, or of the unbaptized). His Ulysses expresses Dante's own intellectual restlessness, and is a proto-Renaissance man.

Nothing – not sweetness of son, nor piety
To an aging father, not the promised love
That would have brought joy to Penelope –
Could overcome in me a burning wish
To experience the entire world
And learn of human vices and of worth.

For Dante, exile meant he could not engage actively in the politics of his polis, his home, that continues to fill his thought. But he would not return home unless all charges were formally dropped, and the Florentines still send oil to his tomb's lamp in Ravenna.

Ugo Foscolo, who was born in Zakynthos, an island in Odysseus' kingdom, was also an exile, owing to his politics of liberation and his roving eye for women. In his sonnet “To Zakynthos” he envies Odysseus his success:

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Ulysses, beautiful with bane and fame,
Returned to kiss his rocky Ithaca.

He feared a foreign grave, for which rhyme was scant compensation. For Foscolo your land is your mother, in the archaic circularity of womb and tomb.

Contrary anxieties frightened Tennyson; lacking adventurousness, fearful and uxorious, he stayed home. Atremble at mutability, he assigns his indomitable Ulysses an impossible last voyage, to discover the anti-home of death. However you explore the world, worries Tennyson, the world remains unknown.

How dull it is to pause, to make an end,
To rust unburnish'd, not to shine in use!

The familiar is an inadequate home for the timorous.

Cavafy, the first poet anywhere to write in the modern style, after a childhood in Constantinople and London (English was the language of his education), spent most of his life in provincial Alexandria, which he rarely left. He cynically quipped, not untruthfully “Where could I live better? Under me is a house of ill repute, which caters to the needs of the flesh. Over there is a church, where sins are forgiven. And beyond is the hospital, where we die.” Believing in nothing but a dispersed Hellenism, he redefined home in his “Ithaca”:

But you must always keep Ithaca in mind.
The arrival there is your predestination.
Yet do not by any means hasten your voyage.
Let it best endure for many years,
until grown old at length you anchor at your island
rich with all you have acquired on the way.

For Cavafy, home is the place whence your mind can soar.

Nikos Kazantzakis wrote an epic longer than Homer’s about the hero. An extremely restless man himself, he could not imagine Homer’s home, where you seek to stay, whither you strive to return (though even Homer assigns him another journey). His Odysseus says, “My soul, your voyages have been to your native land.” A Bergsonian vitalist, he thinks like Cavafy that the voyage is the meaning, and like Tennyson he thinks that death is its ultimate goal, which his Odysseus embraces.

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Penelope's olivewood bed means little to these poets. But Joyce thinks Homer got it right: "At rest relatively to themselves and to each other. In motion being each and both carried westward, forward and rereward respectively, by the proper perpetual motion of the earth through everchanging tracks of neverchanging space."

Epilogue

**As a slow caïque took us south past Delos,
The sea transparent and inscrutable
To signify what god is out of sight,
A pair of dolphins suddenly finned out
Between us and the sunken ancient harbor
Whence boats would ferry the dying and the birthing
To Rheneia opposite for a Sister's care;
Their blue backs shedding sudden silver, they
Stayed with us as we angled through the strait:
We had our glimpse--it's all that we may get
And blue enough to say: "Perfection is here
Also; for a moment we were home,
And spoke the fearsome language faultlessly."**

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Translations: Homer's lines were translated by Alexander Pope; Elytis' and Foscolo's by Jeffrey Carson; Dante's by Louis Biancolli; Cavafy's and Kazantzakis' by Kimon Friar.