

**SONS AND FATHERS:
THE EDUCATION OF TELEMACHOS**

by

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What is it that moves us in a great book? According to Samuel Butler, "[I]t is not the outward and visible signs of what we read, see, or hear . . . [W]hat really stirs us is the communion with the still living mind of the man or woman to whom we owe it, and the conviction that that mind is as we would have our own to be. All else is mere clothes and grammar."¹ Butler was reflecting on Homer's *Odyssey* and for this book his remarks seem especially apt. True, the *Odyssey* invites us to participate in a world alien to our sensibilities, a world populated by strange gods and goddesses, who come and go as they please, victimizing or protecting people often for no apparent reason. But all this is only "clothes and grammar." The *Odyssey* is essentially a story about Odysseus, the man of many ways, and about his effort to achieve home. Thus, it speaks to pressing and persistent human concerns about the meaning of home and what it takes to make a home a home. Through Odysseus's many struggles and his own bittersweet homecoming, Homer

¹Samuel Butler, *The Authoress of the Odyssey* (New York: AMS Press, 1968), p. 279.

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shines his light on what each of us must necessarily and continually undergo as we try to gain a home for ourselves in an inhospitable world. Indeed, upon reading and re-reading Homer, one comes to feel like the rebellious child who in his infinite wisdom and confidence strikes out on his own only to discover just how smart his parents have become.

This brings me to the aspect of Homer's broad subject that I want to take up with you this evening, namely, how sons come to accept their fathers, or in terms of the *Odyssey*, how Homer shows us what it took for Telemachos to accept Odysseus. While this may seem, at first glance, peripheral to the epic's main concern, I offer this preliminary reflection as a defense: if Telemachos—Odysseus's only son and heir—does not fully and knowingly accept his father, could Odysseus's homecoming be secure? My thesis can be simply put: just as it is for most parents, facing his son and gaining his acceptance is Odysseus's most decisive and important battle; how this battle is won is the story-behind-the-story of the homecoming of Odysseus. To support this thesis, we shall take a close look at selected thoughts, deeds, and utterances in the *Odyssey*, first, at its start—in Ogygia, on Olympus, and in Ithaka—then, later, during the various stages of Telemachos's own odyssey—Telemachos's education.

I. Obstacles to Homecoming: Setting the Plan

The wish so close to the heart of every hero in the *Iliad*—to be forever ageless and immortal—is the opportunity offered to Odysseus as the *Odyssey* begins. The narrative proper opens as follows:

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Then all the others, as many as fled sheer destruction, were at home now, having escaped the sea and the fighting. This one alone, longing for his wife and his homecoming, was detained by the queenly nymph Kalypso, bright among goddesses, . . . desiring that he should be her husband. . . . [E]ver with soft and flattering words she works to charm him to forget Ithaka; and yet Odysseus, straining to get sight of the very smoke uprising from his own country, longs to die. (I.11-15, 56-59)²

What an odd situation. A generation has passed since Odysseus last touched Ithaka, ten years since the sack of Troy, seven years since he arrived on Kalypso's island. "[A]ll the others, as many as fled sheer destruction," were home at last, but, we know, there weren't very many who came safely back. Odysseus, too, knows this well—he alone of all his company had survived. Odysseus also knows that the dangers he faced from the Cyclopes and from Scylla and Charybdis, to recall but a few, were mere appetizers to the feast of troubles he could expect from the suitors back home in Ithaka. Further, he knows that even were he to slaughter the suitors, his triumph would be fleeting, for afterwards another long journey awaits him. Teiresias had spared him no details when they spoke together in Hades.

Few of us, looking out over such a past or into such a future, would long to leave the luxuriant island of Kalypso.

²Homer, *Odyssey*, translated by Richmond Lattimore (New York: Harper and Row, 1977). All *Odyssey* citations are from this translation.

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Few of us would long for growing sons, or for aging wives, or for ailing fathers, or for crushed kingdoms, if an ageless and beautiful goddess beckoned. Few of us would give up immortality for a few more months of worldly power. For few of us ever long to die. Not so Odysseus. Why not? What does he want? What is the vision that animates him?

A legend, though not recounted in either the *Odyssey* or the *Iliad*, is helpful:

When . . . the Greeks began to organize themselves for their Trojan expedition, they drafted all the chieftains to join them with their men, ships, and supplies. But Odysseus, ruler of Ithaka, in the prime of young adulthood, with a young wife and a baby son, was anything but enthusiastic about going to war. When the delegates of the Greek states arrived to assess the situation and to compel Odysseus's compliance, he malingered, faking insanity. The emissaries—Agamemnon, Menelaos, and Palamedes—found him ploughing with an ox and an ass yoked together, and flinging salt over his shoulders into the furrows; on his head was a silly, conically shaped hat. . . . He pretended not to know his visitors and gave every sign that he had taken leave of his senses. But Palamedes suspected him of trickery. He seized Telemachos, Odysseus's infant son, and flung him in front of Odysseus's advancing plough. Odysseus immediately made a semi-circle with his plough to avoid injuring his son—a move that demonstrated his mental health and made him confess that he

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had only feigned madness in order to escape going to Troy.³

Odysseus, here depicted as the first draft evader, seems to have cared deeply for his son. He went off to war, but not willingly. At Troy, as we see in the *Iliad*, he was indispensable to the Achaeans and, as we hear in the *Odyssey*, "he sacked Troy's sacred citadel." Though counted among the heroes, he was somewhat different. Unlike his fellow warriors, Odysseus was ever mindful of where he was, and of who he was; he never lost his head. And he never forgot his home, not even on the battlefield. To his fellow-warriors, he was known as the son of the hero Laertes, but to himself, he was always the "father of Telemachos," the young son whose name can mean "far away from battle," whom he had left behind. The vision that animated him long ago, and seems still to animate him as he sits on Kalypso's island, was less the solo fight in war that would win for himself and his father great glory and immortality, and more the shoulder-to-shoulder fight, the Laertes-Odysseus-Telemachos fight, we witness at the very end of the *Odyssey*, the fight which secures his home, now and for the future, against outside disturbers.

Odysseus, like the heroes, is ever mindful of mortality, but unlike them, is willing to affirm it. Odysseus's legendary plough is a fitting symbol of his awareness and acceptance of the "unrolling destiny" of human beings which sees "the

³Cited in Heinz Kohut, "Introspection, Empathy, and the Semi Circle of Mental Health," *Int. J. Psycho-Anal.* (1982) 63, 404. (There is one allusion to the embassy in the *Odyssey* at XXIV.115-119.).

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next generation as an extension of one's self."⁴ It is this awareness that makes possible, but also problematic, his homecoming. Even though the gods are willing to work out his homecoming, it will be no easy task, not mainly because of his nemesis Poseidon, but for another, more delicate reason.

Having informed us that the year has come round for the homecoming of Odysseus, and that Poseidon is temporarily "out of sight" and "out of hearing," our narrator moves abruptly to the council of the gods on Olympus where Zeus is holding forth. We anticipate reflections about Odysseus. But Zeus, we are told, is "thinking in his heart" of Aigisthos. He speaks about homecoming, but not Odysseus's. Instead, he dwells on Agamemnon's aborted homecoming and its terrible consequences: about how Aigisthos wooed Agamemnon's wife and then murdered Agamemnon when he arrived home from Troy; about how Agamemnon's son, Orestes, finally came of age and avenged his father's death.

After Zeus, Athene is the first to speak. Like us, she had eagerly awaited a speech about Odysseus and is annoyed by Zeus's seeming digression. She readily agrees that Aigisthos got what he deserved but argues that that is beside the point. Why Zeus, she asks, do you continue to trouble Odysseus? In his response, Zeus agrees to help, yet he conspicuously postpones any decision about how he will help. Athene intuits the need to go to Ithaka to see the son of Odysseus, Telemachos: she plans to speak to him, to have him summon an assembly and travel abroad. Zeus remains

⁴Ibid.

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silent; he neither dissents from nor consents to her plan. Athene's purpose seems not yet to be his own. It will take another assembly of the gods to win his full participation. Why? If the point is to bring Odysseus home, why proceed in this roundabout way? Why does Athene urge this plan? We must look in on Ithaka and, especially, on Telemachos and the suitors, to find out.

II. Telemachos Among the Suitors

Athene promptly enacts her plan. Disguising herself as a long lost friend of Odysseus's, she "descend[s] in a flash of speed from the peaks of Olympos, and light[s] in the land of Ithaka" (I.102-105). Leaping over the dunghill in front of Odysseus's house, she enters the gates. Here, in the middle of the afternoon, she finds 108 grown men mindlessly amusing themselves with games while their hard-working heralds and henchmen are preparing massive quantities of food and drink. No one notices her arrival. Telemachos is first to note her presence:

Now far the first to see Athene was godlike Telemachos, as he sat among the suitors, his heart deep grieving within him, imagining in his mind his great father, how he might come back and all throughout the house might cause the suitors to scatter, and hold his rightful place and be lord of his own possessions. With such thoughts, sitting among the suitors, he saw Athene . . . the heart within him scandalized that a guest should still be standing at the doors. (I.113-24)

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Homer's description of the scene, and especially of Telemachos, invites the popular conclusion that, despite his twenty years or more, Telemachos is still a mere babe—passive, young, and immature. He sits among the suitors, but he is not of them; though physically present, he remains psychically absent. Brooding and forlorn, he dreams of his "great," his wonderful and godlike, father, who will come one day and set things right, his father, the heroic superman, who will suddenly fly in from afar to save what is rightfully his, Telemachos included. Telemachos is impotent and weak, will-less and powerless, and all too ready to yield and submit, all too eager to project his childhood still farther into the future.

But this common impression of Telemachos cannot be the whole story. First, though he is seemingly a merely passive daydreamer, Telemachos is certainly not witless. The most common name-epithet for Telemachos is *Telemachos pepnumenos*: to be *pepnumenos* is to be of sound understanding, shrewd, and sagacious. True, this epithet, prominent from the start of the *Odyssey*, may describe Telemachos's potential rather than his state when the poem begins. Still, if such potential exists, can we so readily believe that Telemachos is simply the egoless and unreflective boy his outward passivity might suggest? He may draw faulty inferences, but no doubt his mind is alive, wondering, and perhaps, even calculating.

Second, Telemachos has lived in the city, close to his mother, for almost twenty years; for most of that time there has been no other parental presence, not even a grandpar-

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ent: Odysseus's mother perished long ago, out of grief and sorrow for her son; Odysseus's father, abandoned the city long ago, likewise out of grief and sorrow. Would not a child, even a dull child, resent the man whose absence caused such misery?

Third, we know that ever since the suitors arrived, even Telemachos's mother, Penelope, has become more distant, more self-absorbed. Telemachos surely notices her odd behavior: her courting and uncourting of the suitors—she sends them messages and makes promises by day but weeps by night; her weaving and unweaving of the shroud—she weaves by day and then unweaves by night; her concern and unconcern for Telemachos himself—she is shocked and horrified to learn that Telemachos has gone abroad but is unaware of his departure until someone tells her, more than a week after the fact. Telemachos must feel himself ignored and abandoned.

But, one might argue, there were always, at hand, the trusty Eurykleia, nursemaid to both Odysseus and Telemachos, and the ever faithful swineherd, Eumaios, to prevent resentment and to soothe the child, even when he became a young man. Surely they could, and no doubt did, tell Telemachos stories about how his exemplary father, the king of kings in Ithaka, was a man of ready heart—kind, gentle and just—stories about how Odysseus inspired loyalty and trust. No doubt such stories, one could argue, might have comforted and assuaged any hard feelings.

But given what we know of the state of things in Ithaka, such a suggestion is unconvincing. If the ways of Odysseus

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were indeed exemplary, inspiring gratitude and faithfulness, why do the nobles gather daily in the palace, holding Penelope, the servants, and even Telemachos himself hostage? Why do their fathers and grandfathers, the other kings in Ithaka who knew Odysseus firsthand, ignore such behavior? Such questions would very likely present themselves to *pepnumenos* Telemachos.

Finally, and most important, we observe Telemachos's own disparagement of songs or stories. In conversing with the disguised Athene, Telemachos's criticism of the suitors betrays his own sentiments. He says, "Dear stranger, would you be scandalized at what I say to you? This is all they think of, the lyre and the singing" (I.158-159). Yet, when Penelope asks the bard to cease from singing the song of the sad return of the Danaans, Telemachos adopts the suitor's attitude: "There is nothing wrong in his singing the sad return People, surely, always give more applause to that song which is the latest to circulate among the listeners. So let your heart and let your spirit be hardened to listen" (I.350-353). Although he denounces the suitors, and even claims to be scandalized by them, with respect to songs, at least, Telemachos seems to share their outlook—songs or stories are not bonds to the past but mere objects of consumption.

We are now inclined to suspect that Telemachos's identification with the suitors might be very great indeed. Telemachos is twenty years old. The suitors, probably not very much older than he, have been in his house for more than three years, ever since his own manly powers began to burgeon. As Homer remarks several times, Telemachos "sits

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among the suitors." Everywhere else in Homer orientation in space—where one places oneself, how one moves, the gestures one makes—is an expression of psychological condition; space is invested with spiritual quality.⁵ Might not the same be true here?

If so, Telemachos's apparent grief and passivity reflect more than a longing to be saved by his heroic, godlike father. One needn't be a Freudian to think that, after twenty years' absence, Telemachos might well regard his father as a rival, especially with respect to the affections of his mother. It seems hard to avoid the inference that Telemachos must, in no small part, identify inwardly with the suitors. But what this might mean requires us to look more closely at the suitors themselves. Who are they? What do they want?

III. The Soul of the Suitors

The presence of the suitors in Odysseus's palace is, at least from one point of view, quasi-legitimate. Much depends on the status of Odysseus. If Odysseus is dead, their presence is, if not altogether justifiable, at least excusable. But even this concession to the suitors assumes that they are indeed suitors, that is, men who have come to court Penelope, seriously to press their suit for her hand in marriage. This assumption proves doubtful on closer inspection.

When they speak before others, in *public*, the suitors insist that they want to marry Penelope, but their speech in pri-

⁵For discussion of this, see Norman Austin, *Archery at the Dark of the Moon*, University of California Press (Berkeley, 1975), p. 102.

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vate points in another direction. In closed session, the suitors reveal their own unambiguous criminal intentions. Their presence in the house has only secondarily to do with their wooing of Penelope. If the only, or even the main, concern of the suitors were to win Penelope, they would do so, as they readily admit, from their own homes. Their feasting in the house of Odysseus is directed, ultimately, against Odysseus himself, his possessions and his power, and hence, immediately, against Telemachos, his would-be heir.

The suitors clearly want to defame and destroy Odysseus; they want to take his place. They do not envy Odysseus his kingliness, his gentleness, his ability to rule fairly, or even the faithfulness of his beautiful and prudent wife. Rather, they envy him his power and his strength, which they try, metaphorically, to gather to themselves by eating up his substance, and by trying to kill his son Telemachos. The suitors are "civilized" cannibals who, like their soul-mates, the Cyclopes, would assert brute force in place of kingship. They look to nothing beyond themselves, respect nothing that came before themselves, honor nothing above themselves. Forever whiling away their hours playing games, stuffing their faces, drinking and whoring, they are neglectful of time, past and future. They consult only their own most pressing and immediate needs and desires.

In retrospect, Telemachos's initial remark to Athene, à propos the suitors' consumer-like attitude toward song, tells the whole story. For if human beings are by nature rational beings, clearly, for Homer, the highest and most proper use of speech is the telling of stories. Further, it is in their atti-

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tudes toward stories that the souls of human beings are most clearly revealed. To put it succinctly, if somewhat formulaically, no stories, no memory; no memory, no sense of time; no sense of time, no respect; no respect, no kingship; no kingship, no city. The suitors' perverted attitude toward songs or stories points directly to their shamelessness, and finally, to their criminal desire to dethrone Odysseus, and to overturn the city. But, as we have already seen, Telemachos, despite his apparent shame and alleged hatred of the suitors, fundamentally shares their attitude toward songs. We can now give a fuller account of Telemachos's inner state, and the difficulties it might pose for the homecoming of Odysseus.

IV. Telemachos, the Suitors, and the Council of the Gods

It goes without saying that Telemachos is neither fully conscious of the ambivalence he might feel toward Odysseus, nor fully aware of the extent to which he may share the suitors' outlook. But given what we have observed about Telemachos, we cannot overlook his, at least partial, identification with the suitors and, hence, his own possibly criminal intentions. Recall the initial description: "Telemachos . . . sat among the suitors, his heart . . . grieving within him, imagining . . . his great father, how he might come back, and . . . cause the suitors to scatter, and hold his rightful place and be lord of his own possessions" (I.113-117). Might not another reading, very different from the one offered earlier, equally fit this description? Telemachos, like the suitors, longs to replace Odysseus, but knowing that such a place is surely not his "rightful place," and that Odysseus's

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"possessions" are not his for the taking, his heart 'grieves within him.' He bitterly dreams about his "great," that is, his powerful and mighty, father who abandoned him long ago, and about how he will return and reclaim what is rightfully his, scattering all the suitors, himself included.

On the earlier reading of Telemachos's state, feelings only of personal impotence and weakness were present, with Odysseus cast in the role of god or heroic savior. On this reading, dreams of personal potency and vitality are also present, and Odysseus appears as a rival king. Where we earlier saw Telemachos's desire to prolong his childhood, we now see a somewhat guarded and guilty awareness of patricidal desires. While the first portrait suggested will-lessness, ego-lessness, and readiness to depend on others, to submit and yield in order to avoid trouble, the second suggests will-fulness, concern with identity, readiness to stand independently, to assert himself, even to court trouble. Though the sentiments point in opposite directions—the one to cowardice, the other to pride—though the longings they reflect are logically incompatible, does it not seem likely that both may co-exist within Telemachos's troubled soul and inform his self-understanding?

If so, Telemachos faces a frightful dilemma. For if Telemachos is himself a suitor, albeit one with a conscience, can he ever wholeheartedly welcome back his father? Conversely, if he looks only to his father for his own salvation, can he ever realize his wish to stand on his own two feet? Longing for his father makes it impossible for him to act at all; resenting his father and longing to replace him make it

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impossible for him not to act. Telemachos's habitual grief, his immobility, and his inertia manifest this dilemma and the division within his soul. Indeed, his frank and obviously bitter admission to disguised Athene, that he does not know whether he really is the son of Odysseus emphatically demonstrates his ambivalence. Telemachos, it seems, has, like the son with whom he had earlier, albeit it only tacitly, been compared, namely, Orestes, at least in part, a resentful, vengeful soul. But unlike Orestes, he cannot be relied on to act solely in behalf of his father.

We are now in a better position to make sense of the odd sequence of Zeus's reflections and Athene's plan narrated at the beginning of the *Odyssey*. Since homecoming is neither an heroic deed that one can freely choose and perform by oneself, nor a trial that one must endure and suffer through alone, it stands to reason that if Odysseus is to have his homecoming, others must play their vital roles. Just as one must recognize in oneself one's own vulnerabilities and dependencies in order to seek home, so one must depend on others to achieve it. Odysseus must depend on the acceptance of the Ithakans to resume his kingship, on Penelope to resume his place as husband, on his father to resume his relation as son, and on his son to resume his relation as father. Perhaps this is what Odysseus is contemplating as he sits, impotent and forlorn, on Kalypso's island, looking out over the waters, shedding tears, "longing to die."

Of the relations Odysseus must resume to gain his homecoming, his relation with Telemachos, it would seem, must surely be primary. For Odysseus's kingship cannot be se-

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cured if he has no heir, nor can he live again easily with his wife, if their only child has psychically, if not literally, unsonned himself, or, even worse, if he must lose or kill his son in order to regain his home. Neither, we imagine, can he face his father, Laertes, his still living past, if he knows there will be no future. But, for the many reasons we have suggested, the impediments to Odysseus's reunion with Telemachos are great. Is it any wonder, then, that it takes more than one council of the Gods to arrange the homecoming of Odysseus? Is it any wonder that Athene proposes and enacts, with Zeus's tacit consent, the plan that she does, a plan that begins with, and ultimately depends on, Telemachos?

In Telemachos, then, as another meaning of his name—"final battle"—suggests, Odysseus faces his most decisive battle. Ready to sail home at the outset of the narrative, Odysseus must first await and then assist in the radical reorientation of Telemachos: Telemachos must learn to beat down his own worst fears and resentments and to moderate his own ambition; he must learn to see the home of Odysseus as his own, not to conquer but to inherit, and not to inherit passively, but actively to preserve and perpetuate; he must learn to see Odysseus neither as a god or heroic savior, nor as rival, but as a man and as his father. The radical reorientation, or education, of Telemachos bears the burden of much of the narrative that ensues.

V. The Education of Telemachos

Like his father's travels which they seem so closely to imitate, Telemachos's travels take him far from home, exposing

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him to things he had never experienced before. But, at the same time, they also bring him, psychically, closer to home. Visiting the cities of men and learning their minds—seeing the world without—enables Telemachos to see also himself within: Athene exposes Telemachos to things she knows will bring out certain traits and responses in him which he will recognize as having come from his father Odysseus. Telemachos's travels, then, hold up a mirror to his own Odyssean soul. The early books of the epic abound with examples. Let us look at a few.

His "travels" begin even before Telemachos steps out of his own home in Ithaka. Athene's sudden arrival immediately initiates Telemachos's physical and psychic journey away from the suitors, and soon, from his mother as well. Abandoning his habitual lethargy and his place among the suitors, Telemachos gets up and goes to meet Athene, offers her food and drink, and then speaks to her privately, "apart from the others" (I.132). Even before he asks after his guest's identity, he draws attention to the scandalous behavior of the suitors (I.158-162) and articulates his own helplessness and hopelessness (I.163-168). Athene's very presence, it seems, engenders the initial journey toward self-recognition. Her subsequent technique takes him still further.

Athene proceeds dialectically, posing tactful but pointed questions out of "feigned ignorance." She enacts the part of the Socratic teacher, or better, as Norman Austin has suggested, "the skillful psychotherapist who forces her patient to verbalize, and thereby creates in him the psychological

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readiness for action."⁶ She compels Telemachos to bear witness against himself and, hence, further to confront his own situation. But the main point of her method is made clear only as she departs: after maintaining her disguise throughout the scene, Athene metamorphoses into a bird and flies away. Telemachos, at once recognizing that his visitor had been a deity, is thus provided with his first lesson in discernment, the ability to penetrate disguises, to distinguish the genuine from the spurious. It is precisely this power of discernment, often manifest as circumspection, sometimes as irony, that especially characterizes the family and friends of Odysseus, but above all, Odysseus himself. Athene, then, brings Telemachos into closer relation to Odysseus, first, by "sharpen[ing] his inner vision," and then, through her act of self-revelation, by turning his "discerning eye on the external phenomena around him."⁷

Telemachos is a quick learner. He absorbs and immediately applies the lesson, making manifest, by doing so, his close resemblance to his family: in reply to the suitor's inquiry about the identity and mission of his guest, he devises a plausible, yet deceitful response; indeed, he lies three times in succession. Further, he immediately assumes an authoritative posture: he summarily dismisses his mother when she tearfully complains of the singer's song, and he tells the suitors of his intention to put an end to their rapacity. Both his mother and the suitors, we are told, stand back

⁶Norman Austin, "Telemachos Polymechanos," *California Studies in Classical Antiquity*, Vol. 2, 1969, p. 53.

⁷Ibid.

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in amazement and, we must imagine, Telemachos probably does also. But more important than these immediate effects, the powers tapped by Athene give Telemachos the courage to heed her instructions—to go abroad in search of news of his father *and* to assume a more active and assertive role at home. In carrying out these instructions, he further perfects his own Odyssean powers, and, in this way, is brought more vividly to recognize his kinship to Odysseus.

The travels abroad bring Telemachos face to face with the world of his father. From Odysseus's friends and admirers—Nestor, Menelaos, and Helen—Telemachos acquires closer knowledge of a world he never knew. In Pylos and Sparta, where these heroes of old still live and re-live their stories, he sees people weep as they tell of their beloved companion, Odysseus the king, Odysseus the warrior, and most especially, Odysseus the able and cunning strategist. In each place, Telemachos first listens attentively and later speaks, first hesitantly, then with growing confidence. In each place, he is immediately recognized as the son of Odysseus, by the likeness of his feet, of his hands, of his glancing eyes, his head and his hair, and, most significantly, by the likeness of his words. In each place Telemachos weeps, first for his own impotence, then for his father. In each place he becomes progressively stronger, more self-possessed, more clever, more independent, and, in Sparta, very confident that Odysseus is still alive and, very likely, already at home. Telemachos's travels, it seems, force him to develop Odysseus's own greatest virtues—resourcefulness, prudence, tact, self-control, and a keen sense of timing.

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No longer hopeless and helpless, well aware of his own identity as kin to Odysseus, confident in his growing powers, Telemachos sails home again to Ithaka. Though we, the readers, delight in Telemachos's achievements and appreciate the signs of his increasing self-recognition and empowerment, we must wonder, now more than ever, whether Athene's careful ministrations won't backfire. As this first stage of Telemachos's education nears its completion, we wonder whether the ground that has been so successfully laid for the recognition and reunion of this son and his father won't collapse under its own weight. Is there any reason to believe that the changes wrought in Telemachos haven't further fueled his resentment, and, even more, armed his ambition? The culminating scene of this first stage of Telemachos's education, the reunion of Telemachos and Odysseus, unfortunately, supports our fears.

It is early in the morning. Odysseus, newly returned to Ithaka but disguised as a beggar, and Eumaios, the swineherd, are preparing breakfast inside Eumaios's hut. Suddenly, as if from nowhere, Telemachos appears. Eumaios runs out to greet him, and embraces and kisses him. In a burst of weeping, he says, "You have come, Telemachos, sweet light; I thought I would never see you again" (XVI. 23-24). Odysseus, inside the hut, is no doubt listening attentively. The two, Eumaios and Telemachos, now go into the hut, and for the first time in twenty years, Odysseus beholds Telemachos, and Telemachos, Odysseus. The two sit close together, in silence, and they eat. The silence must be deafening. For if Telemachos has really absorbed Athene's lessons, and we

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have every reason to believe he has, surely clever, perspicacious Telemachos must immediately penetrate the disguise of the man before him. The conversation that ensues must be excruciatingly difficult for both son and father.

Telemachos addresses Eumaios and seems purposely not to ask who the stranger is, but rather where he came from, how the sailors brought him to Ithaka, who the sailors were. Eumaios responds with a story about the stranger's origins and wanderings, but, most emphatically, with a command: "I put him into your hands now. Do with him as you will. He names himself your suppliant" (XVI. 66-67). The tone of Telemachos's answer reveals the depth of his own ambivalence. Retreating, at least in speech, to his own impotent past, he says, "Eumaios, this word you spoke hurt my heart deeply . . . [H]ow shall I take and entertain a stranger guest in my house? I myself am young and have no faith in my hands' strength to defend a man, if anyone picks a quarrel with him" (XVI. 69-72). He offers to outfit the stranger with clothing and weapons, but he is eager to send him on his way.

Odysseus, surely recognizing that Telemachos knows who he is, responds, as we might expect most any father would, first with grief and disbelief: "Dear friend, . . . you eat away the dear heart in me, as I listen to what you tell of the . . . reckless contrivings inside your palace, against your will, when you are such a one as you are" (XVI. 91-94). Then he gives some instruction, as Athene had earlier, by asking questions, trying tactfully and hopefully to appeal to Telemachos's own better nature.

Odysseus's speech does not promptly have the desired results. In responding, Telemachos does affirm, as he hadn't

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before, that he is the son and heir of Odysseus. He acknowledges that he has friends among the people. But he insists, again, on his own helplessness. And moreover, now, in addition, he blames the gods. It seems that for Telemachos to accept his kinship, he must forfeit his manhood; he cannot accept his father as father, but only as a conquering hero, a hindrance and rival to his own empowerment.

In what follows, however, Telemachos acts with confidence, and shows that his speech of impotence was largely a pose. He commands Eumaios to go to the city and tell Penelope of his safe return. As if taking her cues from Telemachos, Athene now transforms Odysseus into the resplendent hero Telemachos had envisioned, and she summons Odysseus to reveal himself to his son. Telemachos is caught off guard. Astonished by the transformation, he first averts his eyes and then, taking Odysseus to be some god, begs him to be merciful. Odysseus now speaks with great restraint and, we imagine, with great pain: "No god. Why take me for a god? No, no. I am that father whom your boyhood lacked and suffered pain for lack of. I am he" (XVI. 187-189). Then, holding back no longer, the tears ran down his cheeks and he kissed his son.

Telemachos's disbelief persists. Odysseus, painfully, repeats himself, "Telemachos . . . [N]o other Odysseus than I will ever come back to you . . . [H]ere you see the work of Athene . . . who turns me into whatever she pleases" (XVI. 202-4, 207-8). Recognizing Telemachos's own pain, Odysseus neither dissembles nor forces himself on his son. He makes no demands. He speaks, then he sits down and waits. Finally, Telemachos

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folded his great father in his arms and lamented, shedding tears, and desire for mourning rose in both of them; and they cried shrill in a pulsing voice, even more than the outcry of birds, . . . whose children were stolen away by men of the fields, before their wings grew strong; such was their pitiful cry and the tears their eyes wept. (XVI. 214-219)

This very moving moment does not, however, complete our quest. For though Telemachos now openly acknowledges that Odysseus is Odysseus, and though he has allowed Odysseus into his embrace, in the conversation that follows he makes even more vivid his deep ambivalence and irresolution about his own sonship. When Odysseus eagerly proposes plotting revenge on the suitors, Telemachos responds with doubt and cunning. Even though he is more aware than ever before of Athene's guardianship, and of his father's own powers, and of his own great abilities, Telemachos is strangely not ready to join. His pose of impotence is a mask for his ambivalence, not about the likelihood of success but about its desirability.

Odysseus now faces his most difficult and delicate trial: he must encourage his son to assume his manhood, knowing full well that it may rob him of his own. And so begins the next stage of the education of Telemachos. This time Odysseus, not Athene, is his mentor.

Like Athene's educational strategy, Odysseus's trusts largely to the psychological impact of exposure to difficult and trying circumstances. Telemachos, as before, will be

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made to assert his authority as host, but this time he will do so, purposefully and consciously, on behalf of his father. He will be made to exercise his own great Odyssean capacities for cunning and self-control, just as Odysseus would exercise them: he must pretend that he doesn't know the stranger; he must stand still and hold back as others taunt and ridicule and throw things at his father. And he must do all this precisely for the sake of Odysseus.

If the success of a teacher is in the performance of his students, then Odysseus can surely be proud. For from the moment Odysseus, disguised as a beggar, enters his palace, Telemachos acts coolly, efficiently, and competently. But, as we all know, following the directives of others, however proficiently, seldom reveals the heart. Though the trials he is made to endure may have been necessary, they were not yet sufficient. Telemachos's true willingness to accept himself as son and heir become manifest only when he departs from his father's directives and takes initiative himself. Nowhere is this more evident, or more threatening to Odysseus, than in the contest of the bow. Here, Odysseus's fate comes to rest entirely in Telemachos's hands.

It was Penelope who had proposed the contest of the bow to the suitors, promising to marry the man most able to string Odysseus's bow with the greatest ease, and to send an arrow through twelve axes. Both the bow and the contest had been Odysseus's trademarks in Ithaka, as the suitors well knew. It was, therefore, the perfect test, and, for a young man, the fitting rite of passage. Penelope had conceived the plan the evening before, during her long con-

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versation with the "stranger" Odysseus; Odysseus, self-confident, had given it his full approval. But when Penelope finally produces the bow and invites the suitors to enter the contest, Telemachos—quite on his own and without foreknowledge of the plan—steps forward to take command. Disrupting the timing, and, seemingly calling Penelope's bluff, he propels the situation toward its crisis.

While the suitors stand round, each gazing hopefully at the bow, Telemachos, witlessly laughing, bursts forth: "Come, you suitors," he yells, "since here is a prize set out before you, a woman; there is none like her in all the Achaian country, neither in sacred Pylos nor Argos nor in Mykene, nor here in Ithaka itself, nor on the dark mainland. . . . Come, no longer drag things out with delays, nor turn back still from the stringing of the bow" (XXI. 106-112). Telemachos abruptly announces that he too is willing to enter the contest, and claims that should he win, he too will be entitled to the prize: "If I can put the string on it and shoot through the iron, my queenly mother would not go off with another, and leave me sorrowing here in the house; since I would still be found here as one now able to take up his father's glorious prizes" (XXI. 116-117). Telemachos's own words seem to hurl him further onward, for immediately after speaking he "sprang upright," set the axes, dug the trench, drew the chalkline, and stamped down the earth, all, we are told, properly and orderly, and very much to the amazement of those present, for he had never seen it done before. Then, standing on the threshold, he went and tried the bow.

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Telemachos's seemingly witless levity may be his most artful disguise, but I think not. Much more likely, it is the spontaneous and effusive response of a young man, suddenly abundantly aware that everything he ever wanted is now within reach. Now he can claim all that is rightfully his. Now he can show, both himself and the world, his own strength and power. Now he can take his revenge—on the suitors, on his mother, on his father. No doubt Penelope waits and watches apprehensively—and so do we. But no one could be as apprehensive or as helpless at this moment, or as magnificently self-controlled, as Odysseus.

"Three times [Telemachos] made [the bow] vibrate, straining to bend it, and three times he gave over the effort, yet," the poet pointedly tells us, *"in his heart [he] was hopeful of hooking the string to the bow and sending a shaft through the iron."* Finally, "pulling the bow for the fourth time," we are told, *"he would have strung it, but Odysseus stopped him, though he was eager, making a signal with his head"* (XXI. 125-30, emphasis added). Though Telemachos desists on a paternal glance, he submits not from weakness but from strength. Now knowing that he could string the bow, he no longer feels compelled to do so. Having finally realized his own manhood and felt his own power to equal his father, Telemachos can now freely and generously acknowledge and accept his father's lead and authority—perhaps because he recognizes that it was his father's self-control which had enabled him to gain his moment of triumph, and even more, because the triumph is clearly acknowledged in his father's signal.

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Immediately, without resentment, as if on cue, Telemachos joins the plot with his now characteristic Odyssean cunning and dissembling: "Shame on me," he says, "I must be a coward and weakling, or else I am still young, and my hands have yet no confidence to defend myself against a man who has started a quarrel. Come then, you who in your strength are greater than I am, make your attempts on the bow, and let us finish the contest" (XXI. 130-35).

Telemachos's silent assent to Odysseus's silent signal is his true embrace of Odysseus. All the events that ensue make abundantly clear his respect, his loyalty, and his proud affection. One moment especially stands out. After each of the suitors, in turn, tries, unsuccessfully, to string the bow, blaming their incompetence on Apollo, they try to postpone the contest. But at this moment the stranger, Odysseus, begs for a chance, and Penelope comes forward in his defense. When the suitors strenuously object, Telemachos again takes command. He reiterates his claim that he has "the power in the household," and, as he had done once before, sharply urges Penelope to attend to her own work. But this time, though he challenges his mother's authority, Telemachos, quite vigorously, takes up her cause. At last, Penelope, Odysseus, and Telemachos are, in Homer's word, *homophrosyne*: they all think alike in their thoughts. Moments later, Telemachos, over the objections of the suitors, has the bow delivered to Odysseus. Assured of the future, Odysseus can now reunite past and present. Odysseus, now truly home, proceeds to string the bow and reclaim his house. And Telemachos, knowing, at last, that he is able to fill his

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father's shoes, with his father's blessings, gladly takes his rightful place as next in line.

Coda

The *Odyssey* ends as grandfather Laertes, father Odysseus, and son Telemachos go forth to face the grandfathers and fathers who would avenge the terrible death of their sons. No doubt the wrath felt by these avenging fathers was fueled by their own deeply felt guilt. Was it not their own indifference to the outrageous exploits of their growing sons that won them these sorrows? No doubt a terrible blood bath would have ensued had Athene not intervened. But she did, and we rest content thinking that with the pledges sworn to by both sides, and Odysseus's reunions completed, Odysseus's home is secure now and for the future.

So ends the poem. But this end does not mark the absolute end of Odysseus's travels. As Teiresias had foretold, one more journey remains. It is to be a solo journey to a far away, landlocked place, where there are people living who know nothing of the sea, not its food, its ships, not the "well shaped oars which act for ships as wings do." Odysseus is to carry his own oar to this land which he will recognize when another wayfarer, meeting him on the road, mistakenly calls his oar a winnowing fan. Once there he is to plant his oar and render ceremonious sacrifice to Poseidon.

We may speculate, fruitfully, I think, about where this land is, how long such a journey may take, what the planted oar might mean to these landlocked folks, and so on. But given our concern this evening, it occurred to me that en-

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coded in this last, rather obscure adventure, may indeed lie Homer's deepest reflection on fathers and sons, or more generally, on parents and children. I asked myself this: given all that has happened, would it not have made more sense for Homer to have had Odysseus give his well-shaped oar, that artful reminder of his own manhood and wanderings, to his own son Telemachos? Apparently not. Why not?

If the *telos* of Homer's poem is the completed home, that is, the home that is secure now and in the future, Homer seems to be suggesting that for a home to endure, parents must be ever vigilant. They must watch their children, of course, but they must especially watch themselves. They must desist, as we have seen Odysseus do, from asking their children to accept them, but, more importantly, they must desist from foisting on their children their own hopes and dreams and ambitions. Parents may continue to live in their children, but they cannot live through their children. They must inspire and guide their children, school them in their ways and traditions, give them encouragement and time—Homer never excuses Odysseus's absence—but they cannot put their own well-shaped oars into the hands of their sons or daughters. The life they have given can replace, but it cannot repeat their own. Having prepared the way, we parents must allow the next generation to carve their own oars, to navigate their own waters, even as we hope that their journeys will resemble our own. A very hard lesson, indeed. Even Odysseus must be coaxed.

If this speculation is true, then it would seem that the real education of Telemachos has only just begun.

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