

The Telemacheia in *The Odyssey* and *Ulysses*

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After almost twenty years of disciplined, systematic inquiry, scholars and critics have not produced a generally accepted interpretation of James Joyce's use of Homer in *Ulysses*. Richard Ellmann—whose biographical and critical studies established him as the leading authority on Joyce—recently lamented, after almost forty years of study, that the precise nature and function of the Homeric Parallel remains "problematic."¹

A major source of the problem has been the concentration on Joyce's use of, rather than his departures from, Homer and a tendency to understand the relationship in terms of similarities rather than differences; as a result, Joyce's failure to follow Homer more closely than he does is viewed as evidence of his artistic independence only, rather than as integral to his method. Ellmann, for example, believes that "Joyce felt at liberty to deal with Homer as highhandedly as Virgil had done, keeping the basic typology but varying and omitting and adding, as his own book required" (72). And Robert Martin Adams argues that "*Ulysses* takes its own direction, throwing off parallels with the *Odyssey* as it goes, rearranging the episodes as the author chooses, and changing their tonalities to accord with a complex rhythm of its own."²

As cogent as these interpretations are, they lead the reader to ignore or minimize the differences, and thus to misunderstand the nature and function of the parallel. In our view, the differences are as important as the similarities and are essential to Joyce's approach. *Ulysses* evidences a method: basic similarities between the Dublin of 1904 and the world depicted in the monumental epic of oral tradition are established; but then the parallel is manipulated and functions by contrast, directing the reader's understanding of Joyce's modern world in terms of its differences from Homer's classical one.

A comparison/contrast of Joyce's Stephen Dedalus, as he appears in the first three episodes (Telemachus, Nestor, Proteus) with Homer's Telemachos, as he appears in Books One through Four and the first three hundred lines of Book Fifteen of the *Odyssey* (referred to as Homer's Telemacheia) will not provide a definitive interpretation of the Homeric parallel, but it will illustrate

¹ Richard Ellmann, *Four Dubliners*, (Washington: Library of Congress, 1986) 72. Further references are to this edition.

² Robert Martin Adams, *Afterjoyce: Studies in Fiction after Ulysses* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977) 38.

Joyce's method and the nature of the differences between the two worlds as formed by that method.

Homer's *Telemacheia* has been analyzed as a bildungsroman. It chronicles the education of a young man--Telemachos's growth to maturity and the assumption of his proper role in society, fulfilling his responsibilities in the aristocratic genealogical line of Laertes and Odysseus. The central focus of the poem is on Odysseus's divinely ordained return and his restoration of order in his household and homeland. This focus controls Telemachos's education--his quest for Odysseus. United in Ithaca, father and son reclaim their rights in the kingdom and reestablish justice by slaying the suitors. The saga centering on the Trojan war is brought to a fitting conclusion. Order, decreed by the gods, is restored.

Now Joyce had completed his bildungsroman before he wrote *Ulysses*. There was no reason for him to write another. In *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, Stephen Dedalus grows to a precarious maturity, but the movement of this novel differs from that of Homer's poem structurally and thematically. Homer stresses return to home, reunion with family, and the reestablishment of an order religiously aligned with the cosmos. Stephen's growth ends in flight from family, country, and religion.

In contrast to Homer, the first three episodes of *Ulysses* do not constitute a bildungsroman of the departure-quest-return pattern, but rather almost the reverse. Stephen Dedalus has returned to that complex of entities he had attempted but failed to free himself from: mother Dedalus, mother Ireland/England, mother Church. Again in contrast, Joyce's Telemachos does not engage in a conscious, purposeful, divinely ordained and abetted search for Joyce's Odysseus. Nor, in our view, does the journey through Dublin on June 16, 1904 end in union and reestablishment of order, for Stephen departs from 7 Eccles Street, leaving Bloom alone amid "the cold of interstellar space."³ We find that Joyce links the modern epic to the classical model only to the point of establishing a dim and partial, even ambiguous and ironic correspondence. Having established a parallel, Joyce vigorously and systematically works in terms of differences. Simultaneously yoking his world to Homer's and dislocating his world from Homer's, departing from Homer either obviously or by omission, Joyce contrasts two *Ulysses* books, and that contrast helps to establish the nature and form of the world he creates.

There are strong similarities between the Telemachos episode of *Ulysses* and the first two books of the *Odyssey*: in order to make the contrast meaningful, Joyce must make the comparison, establish a parallel. Clearly, Stephen is a Telemachos-figure, separated from his father, his household usurped. Mulligan and Haines are plausible usurpers, the former a swaggering Antinoos who mocks his host and plunders his possessions, taking the key to Martello Tower,

³ James Joyce, *Ulysses* (New York: Random House, 1986) 578. Further references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation *U*.

twopence, and the "bard's noserag" (U 4), and promising additional demands later in the day.

But numerous and important elements of the first two books of Homer's poem are notable by their absence. There is no divine order. There is no Odysseus: no bard to invoke a muse to inspire a song about him, no Zeus to decree his homecoming at a council of the Gods, no Hermes to carry a decree to Kalypso, no Athene to descend from Olympus to the doors of his household, no Penelope, besieged by suitors, to lament his absence.

Joyce separates Stephen from the Homeric context of the young man's role in a divinely decreed homecoming and restoration of order. Stephen does not, at the urging of a goddess, embark on a quest for his natural father; instead, he deliberately avoids Simon Dedalus, who is no hero about to embark on a journey home. Stephen's natural mother, his Penelope, is dead, and his nightmare recollections of her haunt him throughout the day. Finally, he does not search for Odysseus-Bloom: he leaves Martello Tower and goes off to work.

The context of *Ulysses* is the bourgeois world of twentieth-century Dublin, not the aristocratic world of Homer. All the cultural signs and configurations drawn on by Joyce point to significant differences between these worlds. Instead of the gift-giving so basic to an aristocratic ethos and so necessary to its social-economic stability, Stephen borrows shoes from Mulligan and Mulligan borrows from him. In contrast to the aristocratic ritual of the feast--abused by the suitors but adhered to by Athene/Mentes and Telemachos--Stephen and the usurpers eat a simple breakfast and are attended not by heralds and serving maids but only by the old milkwoman. There is no treasure trove to be plundered, for Martello Tower is anything but a kingly household, and Stephen needs to earn money to pay the rent. There is no Phemios to play the lyre and sing of the bitter homecoming of the Achaians, but only Mulligan to chant his "Ballad of Joking Jesus." Instead of an assembly at which Telemachos attempts to vindicate himself and claim his rights, Stephen endures the gibes of Mulligan and the condescension of Haines. And at the end of the episode, Stephen does not leave accompanied by a goddess disguised as an old friend, and a host of noble companions in a well-provisioned fast ship, but alone and on foot.

Stephen resembles Telemachos only remotely. He lacks a princely genealogy; his mother is dead; he has broken with his father; there are no signs of Odysseus. His homeland, which he has fled from but returned to, remains in bondage to the most powerful empire in the world, and the tower he lives in is an emblem of that bondage. He is not favored by the gods, for he has refused to serve the only God he knows. In relation to his Homeric counterpart, in the first episode Stephen is a Telemachos deprived.

The differences widen as we examine the Nestor parallel. Book Three of the *Odyssey* provides locale, character, and events central to Telemachos's growth. The visit to Nestor opens to him a rich, elaborate, and complex culture which makes Ithaca seem rude and provincial by comparison. This in itself deepens Telemachos's knowledge of the world, but in addition he is required to participate in new and subtle social forms and ceremonies through which he begins to acquire a new awareness. Most important, Pylos is what Ithaca is not

but ought to be: a society in which order prevails because its ruler has come home.

Nestor's kingdom is larger than Ithaca, its wealth greater, its ruler's genealogy more impressive than that of Odysseus. Telemachos is treated lavishly, bathed by Nestor's youngest daughter Polykaste, anointed with olive oil, dressed in a "splendid mantle and tunic,"⁴ and accorded the privilege of sleeping in the palace. When he departs, he receives gifts of food and wine "such as kings whom the gods love feed on": (O III: 480), and is accompanied by Nestor's elder son Peisistratos in a magnificent chariot.

These rituals reflect a cosmic order (their violations in Ithaca indicate a disorder which must be remedied). Homage to the gods is basic to Nestor's world, as the two feasts—one in honor of Poseidon, the other a solemn sacrifice to Athena—clearly indicate. Nestor himself, though he cannot answer Telemachos's question about Odysseus, is an excellent mentor. Some commentators have belittled him, viewing him as a tedious and even foolish old man.⁵ To do so is to misread Homer and the cultural data of the poem. There is in Homer a tremendous respect for age, and Nestor's history goes back to a period of heroism even greater than that of the Trojan war's, and in that history he has been chief counselor at every important juncture, his advice taken seriously by Agamemnon, Menelaos, and Odysseus. Gracious, sagacious, learned, he consistently exhibits the "thoughtfulness of a just man" (O III: 52). From him Telemachos acquires relevant historical information about Troy and the homecomings of the Achaians; and Nestor sets a model for conduct: the paradigm set by Zeus in Book One is delivered by Nestor to Telemachos, and the Orestes story becomes basic to the young man's understanding of his role as son in his household. Finally, Nestor offers sound advice: Telemachos should not remain long away from home; he should consult Menelaos for information about Odysseus.

Joyce's parallel with Homer is tenuous at best. Like Telemachos, Stephen receives advice from an older, more experienced man. Garrett Deasy is linked to Homer's "breaker of horses" (O III: 17) by the pictures of racehorses in his office. Mainly, the parallel works by contrast.

Again we note the differences between the aristocratic and bourgeois worlds. The chief marks of the aristocracy—genealogy, household, ritual feasting, homage to the gods, gift-giving—do not exist in Dalkey. Deasy may claim descent from Sir John Blackwood, but he is wrong about his ancestor's past and he has no understanding of genealogy. Instead of giving gifts, he pays Stephen his wages (3 pounds, 12 shillings), for Stephen is an employee, not an honored guest.

⁴ Homer, *The Odyssey of Homer* (Trans. Richmond Lattimore. New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1967) 3: 467. Further references are to this edition and will appear in the text after the abbreviation O.

⁵*The Oxford Classical Dictionary* (2nd ed. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); "Nestor" 731.

Unlike Nestor, Deasy is not a cultural hero, has had no part in a heroic past, has not earned a reputation. In fact he is the reverse in conquered Ireland: an Orangeman, his name links him to a bitter period in Irish history. He is not a reliable chronicler of history—his errors are ludicrous, grotesque. Nor can he give valuable advice. His counsel to "Put but money in thy purse" (*U 25*) is not so much bad advice (as some have claimed) ⁶for Stephen does need money, as it is partial and morally coarse. In short, Deasy is inadequate in every respect, no mentor at all. Though he insists that he is generous and just, he is neither: he is parsimonious, a racist, and so blind to simple factual truth that he cannot possibly exhibit the thoughtfulness characteristic of a just man.

The most striking difference in the parallel is the reversal of the relationship between the Telemachos and Nestor figures. Though younger than Deasy and treated as an inferior, an economically dependent employee, Stephen is much the better man—more intelligent, learned, morally aware. Telemachos can grow as a result of his visit to Nestor and progress toward his goal, but Stephen can learn nothing from Deasy and gain nothing but money, which he will squander. The clearest sign of the reversal is the episode's crucial action in relation to the novel's plot: it is Stephen who agrees to help Deasy by trying to place the letter on foot and mouth disease in the Dublin papers.

At the end of the episode, then, Stephen's situation differs radically from that of Telemachos. He has not received wise counsel and is not traveling to the kingdom of Menelaos in search of news of his father. Stephen has no end in view at all, beyond the delivery of Deasy's letter and the meeting with Mulligan and Haines. Telemachos in Dublin lacks mission and means.

Homer's Telemachos does have a mission, and in Books Four and Fifteen he continues to move toward its fulfillment. His visit to Lakedaimon resembles his visit to Pylos, but all is on a much grander scale. Of all the warriors who have returned from Troy, Menelaos is the greatest: the wealthiest, the most powerful, the most favored by the gods—he will not die, but will be conveyed to the Elysian Fields because since Helen is his wife, he is son-in-law to Zeus. His world is special, supranatural, almost Olympian, a wonderland, a bridge between the world of man and the world of the gods.

As bridge, Lakedaimon signifies order. Helen is especially important here. Because of her, a terrible disruption occurred in the world of the Achaians, a disruption reflecting a cosmic disorder, a lack of harmony among the gods themselves. Now, however, she has returned: she is where she belongs; her presence in Lakedaimon as Menelaos's wife in his household marks the re-establishment of a larger order among the Achaians which will be completed when Odysseus returns.

Appropriately, this society is much more sumptuous than Pylos. When Telemachos and Peisistratos arrive, a splendid wedding feast for Menelaos's son Megapentes and his daughter Hermione is in progress. Menelaos's palace

⁶Robert Martin Adams, *Surface and Symbol* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1967) 18-26.

is so awesome, so opulent, that Telemachos can only marvel and believe (erroneously as is pointed out to him) that it rivals the court of Zeus. Telemachos and Peisistratos are bathed, anointed, and fed "the fat beef loin which had been given as his choice portion" (*O* IV: 65-66) by Menelaos. Later, in preparation for his departure, Menelaos gives Telemachos the "most splendid and esteemed" (*O* IVV: 614) of all the gifts in his treasure trove, and Helen gives him "an elaborately wrought" robe for his wife to wear at the "lovely occasion" of his marriage (*O* XV: 105 ff.)

This is not all he receives. From Menelaos and Helen he acquires more knowledge of his father—Helen recounting an Odyssean exploit at Troy, Menelaos passing on what he wrested from Proteus, that Odysseus is not dead, but detained by Kalypso. Equally important, Telemachos learns by and of suprahuman ways. Helen can provide an anodyne for sorrow and the bitter past, and as prophetess she interprets the portent of the eagle as a sign that Odysseus will return and take his revenge. So also Menelaos; a man who has mastered a god, Proteus, can truly forecast the slaughter of the suitors.

Through his experience in Lakedaimon, Telemachos moves further toward manhood and his proper role. He becomes, if not sophisticated, cogent and well versed, able to converse and behave in a manner befitting his social position. He grows more certain of his identity, more sure of the nature and purpose of his mission, more aware of the divine imperative, more determined to complete his quest. More important, he is beginning to become clever like his father; he is acquiring the Autolykan trait characteristic of his family. As receiver of gifts, he is knowledgeable, tactful, and yet sure of himself, not afraid to tell Menelaos what gifts would not be useful to him. In social strategy, his decision not to allow Nestor to detain him is consummately Odyssean: he involves Peisistratos in the decision and strategy; and in bypassing Nestor he is following the mentor's directive to return home quickly, and so he avoids a difficult social problem in a perfectly appropriate way.

At the end of the *Telemacheia*, Telemachos has ceased to be a provincial, naive young man. He has become experienced, able, resolute, fully prepared for the final phase of his education, ready to meet his father and, under his tutorship, assist in putting the household in order, thus demonstrating his growth to full manhood under Odysseus's direction.

The same cannot be said for Stephen Dedalus, wandering aimlessly on Sandymount Strand. Stephen's role in the Proteus episode seems closer to that of Menelaos than that of Telemachos: like Menelaos, he seeks to wrest secrets from a protean universe. But again, the relationship between Joyce's world and Homer's is best understood in terms of a radical departure.

Again we note the differences between the worlds of the aristocracy and the bourgeois. Unlike Telemachos, awed by the gleaming palace and the priceless gifts, Stephen, attempting to read the "Signatures of all things," sees "seaspawn and seawrack," a "rusty boot," "Unwholesome sandflats," a "porter-bottle . . . in the cakey sand dough," "Broken hoops on the shore," the "bloated carcass of a dog," and "the gunwale of a boat, sunk in sand" (*U* 31, 34, 37). Instead of the royal hosts Helen and Menelaos, Stephen is in the presence of

midwives and gipsy cockle pickers. There is no Peisistratos; Stephen is companionless.

The parallel emphasizes Stephen's isolation and the poverty of his culture. Telemachos departs from Ithaca accompanied by Athena and noble young men, journeys to the rich kingdom of Pylos, and then moves to the pinnacle of Achaian culture, Lakedaimon, in the company of a prince: in his quest culture and its representatives are indispensable and available. There is no such journey for Stephen; the culture he inhabits is broken, its representatives, such as Deasy, crippled. In contrast to Telemachos, who consults Menelaos, Stephen, alone and unaided, confronts the protean world with no resources but his own mind and what he has learned through his studies, the lore he has culled from books--the works of "Algy" Swinburne and "Lawn Tennyson, gentleman poet," the "fading prophecies of Joachim Abbas" perused "in the stagnant bay of Marsh's library," the sophistries of Berkeley, "The good bishop of Cloyne" who "took the veil of the temple out of his shovel hat" (U 31, 42, 33, 40). Available to Stephen are not the emblems of a culture at its peak, but the remnants of a culture in decline: what passes through his mind corresponds to the flotsam and jetsam he sees on the strand.

Thus where Telemachos develops in mind, sensibility, and character, Stephen is conscious mainly of failure, frustration. "Reading two pages apiece of seven books every night, eh? I was young. You bowed to yourself in the mirror, stepping forward to applause earnestly, striking face. Hurray for the God-damned idiot! Hray! No-one saw: tell no-one. Books you were going to write with letters for titles. Have you read his F? O yes, but I prefer Q. Yes, but W is wonderful. O yes, W. Remember your epiphanies written on green oval leaves, deeply deep, copies to be sent if you died to all the great libraries of the world, including Alexandria?" The young man who was "going to do wonders" has returned, but he has accumulated scant treasure: "Rich booty you brought back; *LeTutu*, five tattered numbers of *Pantalon Blanc et Culotte Rouge*, a blue French telegram . . ." (U 34, 35).

Unlike Telemachos, Stephen has little to look forward to. Conscious that his "teeth are very bad," he wryly projects himself as "Toothless Kinch, the supraman," (U 50) but this evidences painful disappointment and discouragement, not the firm resolution of the natural son of Odysseus. Homer's young man lives in an elaborate world with almost endless possibilities and opportunities; Joyce's is trapped in a world in decay.

The primary difference is one of assumptions. For Homer, order is the imperative: it emanates from Olympus and is embodied in culture, and within that culture the family and the individual can be integrated. For Joyce, disorder is a simple fact, and evidence of that disorder is the culture itself, and that extends to the family and the individual: "Houses of decay, mine, his, and all" (U 33). For Homer, a young man can grow to manhood under the direction of the gods, aided by culture and its representatives, and take on his proper role; this accomplishment ranks him as a hero, that is, a man worthy of attention. Hence the *Telemacheia* in the *Odyssey*, is a bildungsroman. For Joyce, a young man can make a valiant effort to attain blessedness but, not aided by gods, hampered by a culture in decline, remain trapped: his failure makes him worthy of attention, a modern hero embodying a problem. Hence the *Telemacheia* in

Ulysses emphasizes limitation, not potential, frustration, not fulfillment. The early sections of *The Odyssey* promise the firm, positive cultural and spiritual serenity which are completed in the ancient epic. The early sections of *Ulysses* dramatize the cultural and spiritual crisis which will be explored in the modern epic.