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Odysseus and the Possibility of Enlightenment

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Many postmodern thinkers, viewing the Enlightenment as either an impossible, misguided, or shallow undertaking, treat its failings as spelling the end of the very possibility of genuine enlightenment. They thus invite us to reject rationalism as untenable and to embrace a nonrational, subjectivist, or contingent form of thinking. However powerful their arguments are against modernity (also known as the Enlightenment), there remains unrefuted an older and, I argue, superior notion of enlightenment that is advanced in Homer's *Odyssey*. Indeed, insofar as modernity began with a rejection of this older view, any subsequent rejection of modernity would seem to compel us first to reconsider the older alternative. That view can only be recovered by provisionally breaking with the contemporary demand that we not take the soul and its needs seriously. For Homer did so, thereby illuminating the moral quandary that compels Odysseus to strive for enlightenment as well as the moral and psychological obstacles that ultimately bar him from attaining it. By examining Homer's account of Odysseus' failure to achieve enlightenment, it becomes possible to uncover and sketch Homer's reasons for denying that enlightenment as such is impossible.

Nowhere is the postmodern challenge to modernity more unsettling than in its implication that enlightenment—the premise and the backbone of modernity—is delusory or impossible. Modernity's intimate connection with the Enlightenment (which is its very alias) is now widely thought to be its fundamental handicap. If human beings need the warmth and moral meaning offered by community, the Enlightenment effort to reveal to them their fundamental individuality can only make them anxious, immoral, or miserable. And if human beings are nothing but a web of prejudices or socially-constructed beliefs and habits, the Enlightenment's attempt to strip them away can only reveal a hollow core underneath (e.g., Rorty 1989, 23–43, 45, 96–121; 1991, 188–189, 199–200, 207–208). Thus, it is no surprise that modernity is populated by increasingly aimless, alienated, chameleon-like denizens who cannot “connect” to either spouses, friends, community, or God. By revealing the misleading or destination-free character of “Enlightenment,” postmodernism hopes to free us from the bogus metaphysics and empty neutrality that it has engendered.

The crucial step in freeing ourselves from the Enlightenment's hegemony is said to be learning not to take our “selves” so seriously, for such se-

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riousness predisposes us to find some order or nature to ourselves which, once accepted, limits our freedom. Not work, but play shall make us free. This demand, however, obscures the fact that the very modernity to be transcended itself initiated the project of not taking oneself too seriously (e.g., Hobbes 1968, 209–212). For the enemy against which the Enlightenment defined itself was biblical religion, which seemed to arise from or culminate in taking the soul so seriously that, in seeking immortality, we forgot this world for the next. It was in order to counter this type of outlook that Machiavelli stated in an infamous letter that he “loved his fatherland more than his soul” (Machiavelli 1961, 249). The Enlightenment misled many people, including most postmodernists, into believing that no one but a priestly class interested in power had ever urged anyone to take the soul seriously. It was willing to do so because it feared that any effort at taking the soul seriously, even that of nonbiblical antiquity, could only lead to a “tyranny” of priests. If the soul were taken less seriously, not only would the priests be denied their primary instrument of rule over us, but we ourselves, presumably unconcerned with the soul’s fate, would be less prone to angry (and potentially dangerous) demands for justice.

On this key point, then, postmodernism merely follows and intensifies the modern, Enlightenment view. Human beings, it suggests, are perfectly capable of living without the artificial construct of “the soul.” In fact, their dissatisfactions should melt away as they stop trying to seek “higher” or “metaphysical” satisfactions for a component in them that does not exist. Insofar as there is mounting dissatisfaction with the Enlightenment, however, must we not in fairness reexamine that which the Enlightenment rejected—especially where it appears to have overlooked a manner of taking the soul seriously that did not share Christianity’s purported political failings? That is to say, we must consider the possibility that the Enlightenment’s error was not retaining, in however muted a sense, the concept of soul, but in refusing to take seriously its need to be satisfied. The classical concern with the soul not only raised, but also critically examined our longing for immortality. It thereby culminated, I suggest, in a kind of enlightenment that is less vulnerable to postmodernism’s critique. Consequently, it is only by examining (and not by merely evading) the soul’s deepest longings that we can discover whether reason, via enlightenment, can satisfy rather than alienate or falsify our souls.

1. REASSESSING ENLIGHTENMENT

I suggest that a variety of modes of enlightenment exists, and the failure of the distinctively modern mode need not spell the end of all efforts at enlightenment. Specifically, Homer, who may have been the first thinker to conceive of the possibility of enlightenment, outlines a particular mode of it

that can succeed where the modern mode has failed. Homer built the case for enlightenment from scratch, showing the goodness of—and necessity for—it in a world that had not heretofore seen any need for it. This means, among other things, that Homer confronted a world unembarrassed to make spirited or angry demands for justice, thereby putting the soul, so to speak, on veritable display. It may seem strange, however, to turn to Homer for an investigation of this theme. For Homer is often thought to have predated the discovery of the soul and the inner life of self-reflection that that discovery made possible. And, perhaps on account of our Enlightenment or Hobbesian assumptions, the seriousness with which his heroes take their situations, such as the denial to Achilles of his “prize” Briseis, is, according to present standards, likely to be treated as “infantile” rather than as serious or heroic. Williams has recently shown the unconvincing nature of these objections (Williams 1993, 46 and following, 193n5). Still, even Williams hesitates to ascribe to Homer a view of the soul that detaches it from “the gods and fate and assumed social expectations” (43). While this view may well describe the souls of almost all Homeric characters, I will argue that it fails to take into account Odysseus himself. For through him, Homer seeks to demonstrate the possibility of “winning one’s soul” from its captivity to the gods, fate, and the ways of thought in society (*Odyssey* 1.5).¹ In other words, Odysseus is a hero worthy of consideration in Homer’s eyes because he recognizes that the most heroic quest is the liberation of one’s soul from the “mythological” or “social” world in which it is, at first, inevitably imbedded. Precisely by rejecting postmodernism’s advice not to take his soul seriously, Odysseus points the way to the freedom from myth or convention sought by postmodernism.

The present essay is, of course, not the first to discover in Homer a concern with enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno, two leading lights of the Frankfurt School, authored a study—*Dialectic of Enlightenment*—in 1944 that first demonstrated this concern in its chapter on “Odysseus or Myth and Enlightenment” (Horkheimer and Adorno 1972). Their penetrating study contains much of real value; however, Horkheimer and Adorno’s ultimate ambivalence about enlightenment is itself a function of their peculiarly modern outlook—one that undermines their ability to reach the core of Homer’s position. In order to judge the success or failure of Odysseus, we must first uncover Homer’s fundamentally premodern conception of enlightenment.

Most contemporary thinkers, whether they support it or not, locate the origin of the Enlightenment in modernity (Macpherson 1962, 3, 263–264,

¹All references, unless otherwise specified, will be to book and line numbers of the *Odyssey*. I have used Richmond Lattimore’s translation, sometimes altering it (as here) to render it more faithful to the Greek.

271–275; Dewey 1930, 74–100; Sullivan 1986, 7). A few, fearing that the problem runs deeper, trace the roots of the Enlightenment back to the advent of Greek philosophy. Heidegger, for instance, does so and then goes on to praise Homer as a leading example of pre-Enlightenment, “poetic” thinking (1959, 171–172). However, Heidegger (and his many followers on this point) fails not only to distinguish adequately between premodern and modern enlightenment, he also neglects Homer’s own concern with enlightenment. Homer promotes a cautious form of enlightenment to be engaged in only by those capable of living with its findings, which he keeps largely hidden from his audience by his charming and inspiring stories.

The great virtue of Horkheimer and Adorno’s study, then, is to break from this consensus and locate the origin of enlightenment in Homer. They reject the self-congratulatory modern view that premoderns, such as Homer, were too naive and unselfconscious to be “enlightened.”² In him, they demonstrate, we witness the first efforts at the liberation of the individual mind from the outlook of the authorities of its age or surrounding community. Because Homer’s brand of enlightenment does not culminate in a proud or angry defense of “individualism,” however, Horkheimer and Adorno sometimes view it as a hesitant and incomplete effort at disentangling enlightenment from myth. But if individualism is questionable, on both moral and theoretical grounds (as thinkers from Tocqueville to a wide range of contemporary critics argue), then a Homeric enlightenment free of its difficulties (atomism, free-riding, etc.) may well prove superior to the modern alternative.

Homer uses the device of the *failure* of the wily Odysseus’ effort at enlightenment in order to accomplish his double purpose: he can reassure the bulk of his audience in their belief that those who seek critical independence will learn the folly of their ways, while quietly suggesting to its more daring and thoughtful members ways to overcome the various difficulties connected with the project of enlightenment. Genuine enlightenment, which reveals the fundamental human situation by means of unaided human reason, is the goal at which Odysseus aims and at which Homer encourages the attentive members of his audience to aim. Before we can decide in an intelligent manner whether or not to drop our quest for enlightenment, we must first consider Homer’s understanding of enlightenment and its proper relation to social life. In particular, we must reconsider the modern view that

²Consider Vico’s famous claim to that effect (Collingwood 1946, 76). Even the venerable notion that Plato dismissed Homer as sub- or pre-rational has been successfully challenged (see Bolotin 1995). Against the view that Homer could not disentangle the thinking soul from fate or the gods, see Herodotus 2.53 and Nietzsche, *Human-All-Too-Human* #125 (on Homer’s artistic and “irreligious” attitude toward the gods).

enlightenment fundamentally consists of a conquest of nature for, as we shall see, Homer sought enlightenment from or about nature as the chief means of “winning one’s soul.”

2. HOMER AND THE ORIGIN OF ENLIGHTENMENT

By general consensus, Homer was “the teacher of the Greeks” (Hegel 1956, 236). Yet, Homer, and especially his attitude toward enlightenment or rational thought, has, from the first, been an object of great controversy. While we cannot even begin to rehearse all the issues and positions taken, we can point to the underlying bone of contention: was Homer a proponent or a critic of rational thinking or enlightenment? That is, did he teach the limits of reason or was he capable of “good . . . Thought” (Aristotle, *Poetics* 1459b11), able to look critically at the beliefs of his time in order to grasp and, in his fashion, relate to his audience the truth about the world? In short, did Homer, especially insofar as he helped to “found” the West, discover and advance a form of enlightenment, or did he advance, as an intriguing recent study has claimed, a “critique of rationalism” that implies the need for “reverence” or “respect for the sacred” rather than enlightenment (Dobbs 1987, 491, 493)?

This question can be addressed through an analysis of the *Odyssey* and Odysseus’ efforts to use his intelligence to run his own life. I will show that Odysseus represents the first self-conscious effort known to us to attain enlightenment regarding the human situation and that he ultimately fails in this attempt, chiefly because he fails to control or understand his anger or *thymos*. Homer, then, does not simply celebrate Odysseus. Finally, I will show that Homer denies that this failure reveals the “limits of rationality” or the impossibility of enlightenment. Instead, by supplementing what we learn from Odysseus’ failed quest with lessons suggested by other characters in the work, he points to the possibility of a successful, Homeric mode of enlightenment.

Odysseus’ quest for enlightenment is missed by most commentators today who think that he wants only to stay alive and return to his family and community. Many otherwise instructive studies are marred by their too ready acceptance of the view that “Odysseus’ wanderings . . . serve only to focus our gaze on the importance of his return home . . . [and of] being . . . a member of one’s community” (Booth 1993, 17).³ A closer examination of the proemium, however, reveals that he seeks “to win his soul [or life] and the homecoming of his companions” (1.5). This double purpose suggests

³Compare Dante’s view: “not fondness for a son, nor duty to an aged father, nor the love I owed Penelope which should have gladdened her, could conquer within me the passion I had to gain experience of the world and of the vices and the virtues of men” (*Inferno* 26.94–26.99).

that he may not seek his *own* homecoming. In fact, as we soon discover, Odysseus not only voluntarily adds ten years to his wanderings, he seems almost relieved to hear Teiresias' prophecy that he will have to leave home once again and continue wandering until death. More important still, the verb translated "to win" [*arnumenos*] implies "to win what is not yet yours."⁴ Therefore, the phrase cannot mean to save his life (which he already possesses). It means, rather, that he must come genuinely to possess his soul which he (and, evidently, Homer as well) feels has somehow not yet been truly his own. In contrast to the postmodern approach, Odysseus takes his own soul and its nature most seriously. His soul or life is, like those of others, formed and largely unified through constitutive duties that are not of his own choosing. As a supremely wily and intelligent being, however, Odysseus has come to hope that he should not have to live out his life in thrall to others. Sensing that society seeks to possess both his body and especially, his mind, Odysseus seeks not so much his homecoming as enlightenment in order to win his soul back from the powers that have thus far formed it.⁵ It is with this purpose in mind that Odysseus, at the war's end, elects not to seek his homecoming (3.162–3.164) but instead to investigate the possibility of liberating his soul through enlightenment.

In order to begin to appreciate the difficulties involved, we must remind ourselves of the initial, and in some ways permanent, objections to enlightenment. The enlightenment project may seem frivolous or immoral; those who seek enlightenment through the free exercise of their reason are often suspected of merely choosing hedonism over the exacting demands of duty, especially religious and communal obligation (e.g., Ackerman 1980, 49; Barber 1988, 18; Pocock 1975, 551–552; Strauss 1965, 29).⁶ But Odysseus, who has apparently determined that pleasures tend to entail a sacrifice of individual consciousness, is no hedonist. He refuses to eat the Lotus, for instance, because it makes men forget who they are (9.94–9.97). Escaping into a pleasure that obscures from us our own soul, consciousness, or sense of self-directedness strikes Odysseus as a sacrifice of the very core of happiness (cf. Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 1166a19–30).

⁴See Bolotin 1989, 56. This remarkable essay lays out much of the core of Homer's teaching in the *Odyssey*.

⁵I thus disagree with Williams's claim that it was not until the modern Enlightenment that one could say: "I am not entirely free so long as there is any ethically significant aspect of myself that belongs to me simply as a result of the process by which I was contingently formed" (Williams 1993, 158). Significantly, Williams does not comment on *Odyssey* 1.5 in his work (on "winning one's soul").

⁶Consider also the biblical opposition to enlightenment on the grounds that one must piously submit to the mysterious will of God before one can even begin to understand it (Exodus 24:7: "we shall do and we shall hear").

Far from pursuing hedonism, Odysseus is rather troubled by the very limited extent to which devotion to city, friends, and family is rewarded or reciprocated; he has come to question justice. Unlike the noble Hector, for instance, Odysseus does not readily set aside his private concerns when public duty calls (cf. 24.115–24.119 and *Iliad* 6.441–6.443) because he learned a very hard lesson as a youth. Even though he acted out of the twin motives of friendship and concern for the common good, the assistance that Odysseus lent his friend Iphitos in finding his lost horses led only to Iphitos' murder by the demi-god Herakles—even as the latter was a guest in Iphitos' home (21.13–21.41). If Zeus' own son can commit a murder upon his host—despite Zeus' well-known support for friendship, justice, and extending hospitality toward guests—Odysseus comes to wonder whether the gods are of such a nature as to support the dedication to justice at all (cf. Nestor's unquestioning claim that the unjust will be punished by Zeus; 3.133). Homer seems to find additional support for Odysseus' doubts. Odysseus, for example, appears to have been a particularly gentle king, well-regarded by his subjects (2.46–2.47). Yet he is quickly forgotten in his absence. Not only do his former subjects fail to come to the aid of his beleaguered family, they never even convene a meeting to address the issue in the entire twenty years of his absence (2.233–2.234). And finally, neither Odysseus nor his family earns any gratitude from Antinoos (the head suitor) for Odysseus' success in saving his father's life (16.424–16.430). Odysseus must have been impressed by Achilles' claim that the good are no more rewarded than the bad, that dedication to others may amount simply to being their patsy (*Iliad* 9.316–9.320).

Because of the problem of justice, which has imposed itself on him in the most serious ways, Odysseus is compelled to seek enlightenment. It is true that Odysseus is first tempted by the more obvious response to the apparent failure of the gods to support justice: criminally seeking his own advantage without limit. However, Odysseus senses that thieves, like his grandfather Autolykos, continue to rely in some sense on divine support. By using the deceptive “art of the oath” rather than simply robbing his victims by brute force, Autolykos seeks to earn or be worthy of his ill-gotten gains (19.395–19.398). Odysseus thus recognizes that he still needs enlightenment and so he refuses the postmodern (or even modern) option of not taking himself or justice seriously.⁷ Consequently, he sets out to examine the premises

⁷The option of living “lightly” is suggested in the *Odyssey* by Menelaus. He would offer two-thirds (but not more) of his possessions to regain his missing friends (4.97–4.99); he is tempted by the “easiest life for mortals” (4.565); and, most tellingly, he disapproves of those who are “excessive” in either friendship or hatred (15.69–15.71). This refusal to take anything too seriously, at least since his reunion with Helen, replaces his earlier savage hatred of the man who cuckolded him (*Iliad* 3.350–3.354). It thus appears to be little more than a desperate stab at self-protectiveness. That it results in an air of defeatism, hypocrisy, and sadness suggests that human beings, to be satisfied, need to take life seriously (see 4.34–4.35, 93).

of the enlightened life—a project that entails first, an anthropological investigation of various cultures and second, a theological investigation of the sacred (or what Homer calls “the gods”).

3. WHAT IS “ENLIGHTENMENT”?

Horkheimer and Adorno treat Odysseus and Homer as the first to set the dialectic of enlightenment in motion. And they rightly note that Homer is ultimately critical (in part) of Odysseus’ efforts at enlightening himself. But they are wrong in their ultimate judgment of the inhuman or dehumanizing character of enlightenment because they overlook the fact that Homer—who I suspect would share much of their critique of modern enlightenment—points to a differing classical mode of enlightenment, a mode that, when fully developed by subsequent Socratic thinkers, would prove to be the most humanizing of activities. By analyzing Horkheimer and Adorno’s criticism we may be able, by correcting their overly historicist understanding, to rescue enlightenment from the ultimately critical verdict that they feel compelled to render upon it.

Today, Horkheimer and Adorno’s account (in which Odysseus represents the bourgeois who sacrifices the satisfaction of every “natural” or presocial instinct in himself to the goal of achieving domination over the world) is often accepted whole, without even the trouble of attribution (e.g., Lyotard 1989, 5). Horkheimer and Adorno read the *Odyssey* as a portrayal of the transition from the “mythological” or primitive world to the “Enlightened” world. Enlightenment, in their view, is a historical process. It involves both the development of human consciousness and the subjugation of both the physical and the “mythical” worlds. Every advance in understanding comes by way of a “subversion” or “negation” of some earlier stage. This means that Enlightenment is, of necessity, a dishonest movement. In order to shore itself up at every step, it is compelled to portray earlier stages of life as less variegated (and more paltry) than they really were. For instance, Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that, despite his best efforts to portray the Cyclopes as subhuman, Homer fails wholly to eradicate the (“mythical”) evidence that there were protocommunal, perhaps genuinely democratic aspects of primitive life (and even deep emotional attachments) that had to be sacrificed in order to advance the project of individualistic domination (66–67).⁸ The “totalitarian,” self-denying nature of modern enlightenment rationalism is played out, in advance, by Odysseus on his travels (24, 57, 60, 75).

Horkheimer and Adorno’s characterization of the Enlightenment as “totalitarian” and concerned with “domination” is highly compelling: for the Enlightenment to succeed, not only must it “torture nature” (Bacon), it must

⁸All page references found within parentheses in this section are to Horkheimer and Adorno (1972).

also banish from every nook and cranny of the world the “kingdom of darknesse” (Hobbes). In other words, the Enlightenment is compelled to strive for a complete conquest of nature lest any mysterious province remain into which human beings can project their still unchecked transcendent longings. For it is, above all, the baseless or imaginary character of those longings that the Enlightenment sought to bring to light. Rather than attempt the politically (and perhaps even metaphysically) impossible task of refuting the existence of the object of our transcendent longings (God), the Enlightenment strove to make those longings wither by satisfying the bodily needs which, when unsatisfied, give rise to them. In order to succeed, the Enlightenment must culminate in a total domination of the world.

Horkheimer and Adorno are mistaken, however, to treat this notion of enlightenment as the only possible one. In order to limn some of the key differences between the modern and the Homeric approaches, I focus on the themes of “hope” and “spiritedness” [*thymos*]. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, Odysseus is gripped by the hope of exercising domination over the threatening flux of the prerational, “mythological” world, up to and including that most threatening of changes, death (48). This hope, upon which the establishment of a self (or the “winning of one’s soul”) depends, involves the “subjection of everything natural” to “organization and administration” (55, 36). Spontaneous pleasures, forgetting the future, noncompetitive communal interactions—all these and more must be sacrificed so that “regulative reason” can set Odysseus up as a “master” of his environment (44, 35). Horkheimer and Adorno find the essence of Odysseus’ “bourgeois” character to be his readiness to set aside both self-sacrifice and self-fulfillment in the name of the security of both the physical body and the self (33–34). If such “bourgeois” activities truly define the process of civilization, then it is no surprise that, for Horkheimer and Adorno, “[t]he history of civilization is . . . the history of renunciation” (55).

The pain of renunciation might be acceptable if it were indeed required in order to gain what is needed. But Horkheimer and Adorno imply that Odysseus freely chose this path or, more precisely, was only required to choose it after first deciding to seek mastery over the world. As we have already seen, however, Odysseus could not help pursuing enlightenment once he was confronted with the problem of justice.⁹ In particular, they suggest that he could have succeeded in returning home without renouncing his “spirit”; his return home, they claim, is “independent of the restraint of the

⁹By encouraging us, through a toleration that verges on relativism, not to take the problem of justice seriously, postmodernism and even modern Enlightenment may, paradoxically, keep us further from the prospect of genuine enlightenment than did the preenlightened, “mythical” world (See Bruell 1995).

spirit" (55n12). But the evidence that they supply actually demonstrates the opposite. Odysseus is told by the shade of Teiresias (who "alone has [been] granted intelligence even after death") that he will win his homecoming *only* if he can "contain [his] own *thymos* [spirit] and that of his companions" (10.494–10.495; 11.105). Now, it is crucial to recognize that renouncing *thymos* is not equivalent to renouncing pleasures or desires. Homer hews quite closely, *avant la lettre*, to the Platonic psychology that distinguishes the two. *Thymos* is what, in the guise of proud self-respect, can make the renunciation of (low) pleasures a kind of pleasure itself. At its peak, in fact, *thymos* indulges itself in perhaps the most tempting pleasure of all: the pleasure of righteous indignation in the face of undeserved suffering. And for Homer, as for Plato, this *thymotic* longing cries out for, and finds its support in, providential gods who reward justice and punish injustice. Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that *thymos* (the uncalculating component of the soul that is as inclined toward self-sacrifice as toward domination) is the chief victim of enlightenment. And indeed, only enlightenment can free one from the confused, impossible-to-satisfy moral longings that lead to anger. Fearing that the man without *thymos* cannot be anything but the rational organizer, the efficient pursuer of low pleasures, the careful, steady bourgeois who cannot know of the fully human pleasures (which entail ecstatic self-forgetting or transcendence)—fearing, that is, that the enlightened man can only be the Last Man—Horkheimer and Adorno remain ambivalent about enlightenment to the end.¹⁰

Horkheimer and Adorno sometimes seem to recognize that the renunciation of *thymos*—and thereby the acceptance of enlightenment—is never complete for Odysseus. For his adventures involve submitting to "dangerous temptations" that remove him from his "logical course" (47). Why does Odysseus resist the sober and sobering enlightenment project? Though it ought to give them more pause than it does, Horkheimer and Adorno merely note that Odysseus is moved by "foolish curiosity" (47). "Foolish" is entirely Horkheimer and Adorno's addition, for this characterization of the desire to understand can nowhere be found in Homer's work. It is precisely Odysseus' curiosity to learn about the gods and about the minds of men (1.3) that makes him a hero for Homer. Odysseus sees through the ultimate "irrationality" of "rational society" every bit as clearly as do Horkheimer and Adorno (38). The "mythological" aspects of life that modern man and even Odysseus find it difficult to be rid of constitute proof, for Horkheimer and Adorno, of the inadequacy of enlightenment; they teach the "limits" of reason. For Homer, on the other hand, they constitute the very questions to

¹⁰For a series of thoughtful discussions about spiritedness from a variety of perspectives, see Zuckert 1988.

which enlightenment must apply itself. Enlightenment will surely fail if it merely “negates” or “sublates” or (in the modern fashion outlined above) assumes the imaginary character of the “mythological” world. Instead, enlightenment requires that one admit to and confront the longings—especially the longing for divine support for justice—that are reflected in the mythological world and that one then attempt to think them through. It is not “foolish curiosity,” then, but the need to determine whether there is reason to rely on divine providence that motivates Odysseus. Odysseus denies that one can simply “outgrow” the concern with just gods as though it were a form of “self-imposed immaturity” (Kant 1996, 573, 576); unless this question can be settled, there can be no enlightenment.

Horkheimer and Adorno characterize enlightenment, in part, as being concerned with the conquest of death. This characterization, apt insofar as it is applied to modern Enlightenment, becomes potentially misleading when applied to the classical mode. “The annulment of death,” suggest Horkheimer and Adorno, “constitutes the very core of antimythological [viz., rational] thinking” (76). Mythological thinking sought immortality through “magic,” namely through sacrifices to gods who could confer on one meaningful immortality in places like Hades. This is why Horkheimer and Adorno attach such vital importance to Odysseus’ trip to Hades. As the only human being to be granted a visit to Hades while alive, Odysseus is privileged with the insight that initiates enlightenment: “Only when subjectivity gains mastery over itself by acknowledging the nullity of the shades can it partake of the *hope* of which the phantom images are only an ineffectual promise” (76, emphasis added). By recognizing the emptiness of mythological (i.e., religious) concepts of immortality, Odysseus can turn to the proto-Baconian effort to secure and lengthen life. He can partake in a historical project that will use “regulative reason” to establish humanity’s “sovereignty” over the “natural” world (44, 3).

One wonders, however, whether Odysseus has truly mastered his subjective hopes. Horkheimer and Adorno may not put sufficient weight on their own observation that Odysseus continues to hope for immortality of a sort. Like Horkheimer and Adorno, Odysseus appears to put little stock in childish tales; however, many of his subsequent actions (upon returning to the upper world) suggest that he still longs for a serious and substantial immortality. Homer underscores this fact by stressing the speed with which Odysseus, upon returning from Hades, sees to the proper burial of his crewman Elpenor, whose short and uneventful life ends when, in a drunken stupor, he falls off a roof (11.60–11.65, 12.9–12.15). Elpenor’s shade pleads in Hades that Odysseus “remember” him by ensuring for him a proper burial “so that those to come will know of [him]” (11.71–11.76). Odysseus respects and shares in Elpenor’s longing for immortality (11.52–11.55). It

may even be that Odysseus is moved by Elpenor's fear/threat that he might, unburied, "become the gods' curse" on Odysseus (11.73). For if the gods' demands (e.g., for "proper" burial) conflict with enlightenment's findings (e.g., that a man's happiness cannot be affected by the treatment of his corpse after death), it could be "reckless" to pursue it (Dobbs 1987, 491).¹¹ Odysseus now seems to think that he can earn or secure his own immortality by nobly complying with the gods' wishes, especially with their demand for self-sacrificing behavior. This indeed is the hope underlying his otherwise inexplicable refusal of the beautiful goddess Kalypso's offer of immortality. Odysseus can believe only in an immortality granted to those who sacrifice their most intently desired selfish concerns; only our *moral* being can earn (and thereby secure) an immortality that, if merely granted by a capricious god (or goddess), can (presumably) just as easily be taken away.

Horkheimer and Adorno note, but fail to give an adequate account of, the incomplete character of Odysseus' efforts at renunciation. This is largely because they never free themselves from the modern conception of enlightenment as a progressive conquest over nature in the name of civilization (see esp. 55). Thus, they do not see that, for Homer, enlightenment necessarily involves freeing oneself from civilization's delusions in order to learn *from* nature. Because they cast Homer as a quasi-Hobbesian who treats nature as the enemy, Horkheimer and Adorno fail, most importantly, to understand the true character and meaning of Odysseus' "longing." Odysseus' "longing," they suggest, is his desire to take vengeance on the suitors, and his desire for enlightenment must finally be subordinated and even sacrificed to it (55n12). Essentially, Horkheimer and Adorno treat this aspect of the epic as an exercise in bourgeois delayed gratification; by withstanding humiliation, Odysseus can finally reestablish his domination over his household. This interpretation fails to see that the desire for domination, against which Horkheimer and Adorno protest, is itself a manifestation of the *thymos* that they wish to salvage from the corrosive effects of enlightenment. Like Odysseus himself, Horkheimer and Adorno in the end take not the soul itself but that to which the soul subordinates or sacrifices itself most seriously. Odysseus' need to risk death in order to reestablish his domination over what is emphatically to be understood as his own household demonstrates, not the culmination, but the failure of his efforts at enlightenment. It reveals, that is, that he is still a *thymotic* man who needs and accepts Athena's outlook

¹¹Despite Penelope's claim that Odysseus was never "reckless at all toward any man" (4.693), Dobbs is surely right to find examples of recklessness in Odysseus' behavior (see 10.435–10.437 and context, 24.537–24.545). I will simply argue that Odysseus' recklessness stems, not from his rationality, but from his drawing back from the full implications of rationality.

which informs him that men can earn the eternal protection of the gods by punishing injustice and by taking risks on behalf of justice. His renunciation of self-interest, that is, remains decisively incomplete.

4. ODYSSEUS' PROJECT

If not in the service of "mastery" then, with what is Odysseus' longing for enlightenment concerned? Odysseus needs enlightenment because he is perplexed by the manner in which to live his life. He has come to have grave doubts about justice and, indeed, about the life of virtue altogether. He has already, prior to his travels, come to doubt the simple truth of the "Greek" outlook. For him, as for so many others, Greek culture finds its apotheosis in Achilles; but he believes that Achilles' way of life is fundamentally flawed. First, at the simplest level, Achilles has never even attempted to "win his own soul." His oft-stated intention of becoming "the best of the Achaeans" only serves to underscore his hope to become most fully an Achaean, not most fully Achilles.¹² And Odysseus, despite enjoying the prestige of a variety of social roles (king, husband, father, victorious warrior), rebels against being defined by his social functions. Anticipating Rousseau, he senses that a master is in some sense as enslaved by social relations as a slave. Second, the virtuous life devoted to honor, Odysseus fears, may at some point demand the sacrifice of one's happiness. Achilles' love of honor had, after all, led first to the death of his friend Patroclus and, ultimately, to his own death. Now Odysseus is aware that it may be impossible for human beings to live with themselves if they jettison honor altogether in the name of their happiness. Immediately after telling Odysseus (in Hades) that he now knows one should always choose life over honor, Achilles' shade is nevertheless gladdened, rather than troubled, to hear that his son is risking his life for honors back in Greece (11.488–11.491, 540). Odysseus, in fact, seems to hope that his superior intelligence will spare him from the horns of this dilemma altogether.¹³ Odysseus' final objection to Achilles is simply that Achillean virtue

¹²On the striking contrast between Achilles' concern with ancestral lineage and Odysseus' indifference, see Clay (1983, 26–27). She interprets Achilles' very name ("the man who has grief for and of the people") to suggest his deep, if ambivalent, attachment to his people (64–65). In fact, Achilles even prefers to be a slave within a household to living as a *thēs* (a free laborer who sells his labor to a household without belonging to any); see Booth (1993, 29) and Finley (1979, 57–58). The latter two authors, however, fail to note Odysseus' much greater spiritual independence in this regard.

¹³The fact that Odysseus is a great liar would seem to preclude our considering him to be an honorable or noble man (see *Iliad* 9.312–9.313; Plato *Lesser Hippias* 364c–365c). As the *Lesser Hippias* goes on to demonstrate, however, only the wise can "truly" lie to benefit others (see also *Republic* 414b–415d on the "noble lie"). Odysseus, at any rate, appears still to be concerned with honor. Note the fact that, in Odysseus' apparently forthcoming admission of his affair with Kalypso, he withholds the fact that he was not always kept by her against his will but, in fact, had at one time found her quite pleasing (7.255–7.258, 23.333–23.337, cf. 5.153–5.154). He wishes to portray his own heart (perhaps even to himself) as more strictly devoted to his wife than, in fact, it was.

is inferior to Odyssean cunning; it was Odysseus' wily device of the Trojan Horse and not Achilles' virtue, however impressive, that led to the successful conclusion of the war. Odysseus, then, is a hero for a distinctly "post-heroic" age, an age that can no longer sustain an uncalculating or simple belief in virtue.

Because the strictly human evidence in support of the life devoted to honorable service to others is so tenuous, Odysseus turns to investigate the extent to which it is wise or advisable to rely on the gods for such support. Living in an age that had not yet learned either to construct a rational morality or to view men as good "by nature" or, indeed, to trust to "socializing" influences alone to make men moral, Odysseus takes the view that only just gods who intervene in human affairs will, in the final analysis, provide an adequate bulwark for morality. Reason, after all, as the wily Odysseus knows all too well, might counsel the performance of an unjust action, especially where one's life or safety hang in the balance. And social influences, however powerful within a given society, seem unreliable in the fluid, many-cultured world of the wanderer.

People who have come to think of themselves as "civilized" or not in need of "myths" in order to be moral are apt to overlook this essential ground of morality. Comfort with the status quo, taking pride in the civilization one is a part of, or even the lazy preference for the safety of morality to the risks and daring of its opposite—all these can lead people simply to equate morality with reason and civilization. Homer thus goes out of his way to draw our attention to Eumaios—Odysseus' simple, pious, and loyal swineherd who takes justice seriously—by making him the addressee of the poem. Accordingly, Homer encourages his audience to contemplate (and to admit to themselves the power of) the apparently naive hope—frankly voiced by Eumaios upon witnessing an evil he is helpless to avenge—that they, like Odysseus, might not admit to entertaining in their sophistication:

The blessed gods have no love for a pitiless action,
but rather they reward justice and the proper deeds of humans;
and though those are hostile and implacable men who land on an alien shore,
and Zeus grants them spoil and plunder, when they have loaded
their ships with it they sail away for home, for even
in the minds of these there is stored some fear of vengeance and retribution.
But the suitors [persist] (14.83–89)

Eumaios' statement would seem to present a theology that, whatever its difficulties, vindicates morality: just men are rewarded and unjust men punished by the gods. On closer inspection, however, it seems that Eumaios has doubts, which is not surprising given the situation in Odysseus' household, that the gods in fact do all that they might for moral men: even though they

“have no love” for “a pitiless action,” they nevertheless seem to “grant” on occasion spoil and plunder to wicked men. More important still, Eumaios stops short of claiming that the gods themselves will punish such wicked beings. Instead, it is the fear that such men have of (divine? human?) “vengeance and retribution” that constitutes their punishment. Odysseus tries to apply his tough and wily intelligence to the question manifestly swept under the rug by Eumaios: is there a genuine ground for such hope and fear or not?

Odysseus has long relied on his versatility, along with his famous ability to lie, to protect him from human punishment. Not only can he apparently get out of every scrape, but his ability to do so elicits in others a readiness to follow him and even to forgive his transgressions. His canniness proves everywhere indispensable. And so, since those who simply abide by morality often get less than their just desserts, the “enlightened” Odysseus relies on himself alone to avoid human punishment. Such self-reliance appears to preclude “respecting the sacred.” For one thing, he knows from experience that divine guidance is sometimes inadequate, even to the point of being misleading. At Troy, for instance, Athena (following the command of Hera) tells Odysseus to “speak to each man in words of gentleness” in order to restrain their flight (*Iliad* 2.180). While the technique succeeds with the men of “influence,” Odysseus is left to figure out on his own that “words of gentleness” will prove insufficient with the others (189, 199).

Perhaps equally troubling, Odysseus sees little evidence that those who do respect the gods come to a better end than others. In fact, he has come to suspect that the only motive to respect the sacred is an ulterior one: the powerful human longing to have the gods support virtue. As experience inevitably suggests, virtue—especially insofar as it demands self-sacrifice—does not seem to guarantee happiness. If a person should choose a private life, devoid of service to others, Odysseus reasons, he should be in less need, perhaps far less, of respecting the sacred. Achilles, in Odysseus’ presence, had more or less conceded that he ultimately relied on the gods to reward his virtue (his sacrifices for and risks taken on behalf of nobility) with glory and thereby to vindicate his life (see *Iliad* 9.314–9.325, 408–415, 16.236–16.238; Bolotin 1989, 47–8). He thus comes to doubt—at the critical moment in the *Iliad* when he turns down the Greeks’ request that he rejoin the fighting—the wisdom of the life devoted to virtue. Achilles, it is true, later pulls back from this radical view and returns to the life of virtue. But Odysseus himself may be more impressed by Achilles’ initial doubts than by his later return to the fold. For, as Odysseus later hears from the shade of Achilles himself, it was a mistake to have relied on the gods in this way since they were unable to satisfy the chief hope that was operative in Achilles’ undertakings: the desire to have death, at least insofar as it is met nobly, transformed into something other than the obliteration of all that we are

(11.488–11.491). To respect the sacred, then, is to go the route of Achillean virtue, a route that Odysseus has learned is a dead end. Insofar as the heroic life relies on divine support that is not forthcoming, Odysseus dismisses it as an alternative.

Odysseus comes to suspect that “reverence for the sacred” may be unwise. Athena, after all, has abandoned Odysseus for years since the close of the war, despite his record of sacrificing—apparently because she fears the superior might of Odysseus’ enemy Poseidon (see 13.316–13.319, 341–343). Zeus himself seems to have forgotten Odysseus until Athena, at the start of the poem (which is to say, nine years after the close of the war), reminds him of his plight.

Rather than remain in a state of suspended doubt on this fundamental question, Odysseus devises a test to determine whether or not the gods are reliable supporters of justice. When he comes to the cave of the temporarily absent Cyclops, he elects to stay (against the sensible objections of his men who want simply to steal the unguarded possessions and leave) and put himself and his men at some risk (he may not yet know how great) in order to discover “whether [these beings] are savage and violent, and without justice, or hospitable to strangers and with minds that are godly” (9.175–9.176). It cannot, then, be “greed” (e.g., Clay 1983, 74)—which would counsel snatching the goods and beating a hasty retreat—that makes him stay. Rather, it is his desire to test the existence of the gods (or the belief in the gods) which is revealed in the protection of weak or innocent beings who are otherwise apt to be victims of the strong.¹⁴

In the event, however, the Cyclops is not restrained from the most horrifying acts. He expressly states that “we [Cyclopes] are far better” than the gods (9.276–9.277) and are not held in check by any fear of them. Worse yet, Odysseus awaits the assistance of his patroness Athena in vain. Only his own ingenious device of blinding the Cyclops and then escaping under the bellies of his rams saves him and his remaining men. And so, in the belief that he has been enlightened about the fundamentally isolated nature of his situation,¹⁵ Odysseus feels, for the first time, fully justified in putting his own concerns first and in relying on his own unaided reason. Odysseus has long known the power of his wiliness to elude conventional restraints, but his efforts have largely been for the sake of his companions and the Greeks as a whole. Now, he turns his cunning to winning his soul from the moral or cultural bondage in which it is imprisoned.

¹⁴“The justice of the gods confirms their existence, while their indifference calls their meaning and, ultimately, their very existence into question” (Clay 1983, 238 on *Odyssey* 24.351–52; see also Bolotin 1989, 42).

¹⁵Aristotle notes, in his extremely compact summary of the *Odyssey*, that one of the few essential features of Odysseus in the work is that “he is all alone” (*Poetics* 1455b19).

5. ODYSSEUS AND THE DEMANDS OF SPIRITEDNESS

Though Odysseus saves his remaining companions from the Cyclops, he leaves the cave a changed man—convinced that there is no use in trusting in the gods to defend virtue or virtuous beings. He now enters into his most relentlessly individualistic, nay selfish, period. He is so self-concerned that, among Laistrygonia's cannibals, he puts his men's safety at greater risk than his own and, in fact, abandons them to a cruel death in order to save his own skin (10.95–10.132). He seems unable, however, to live with himself while acting with such unqualified and irresponsible self-concern. In fact, he shortly afterward puts himself at great personal risk to rescue his men from Circe, who had changed them into swine (10.271–10.273). The question of whether to devote his greatest efforts to his own soul (or life) or to those of others becomes sharper and more troubling to him. Even after hearing the too-late-wise shade of Achilles counsel him to preserve himself at all costs, Odysseus again takes a personal risk, against the explicit instructions of Circe, to protect his men (12.225–12.230). Initially tempted by what he takes to be the noble accomplishment of enlightened individualism, Odysseus has grave second thoughts when he comes to suspect that full awareness of the human situation, even when coupled with the most ingenious wiles, seems to lead in the final analysis to utterly base behavior (consider *Iliad* 8.93–8.96). Odysseus, of course, as a wily and crafty man, accepts base behavior as an occasional necessity. He not only lies (which Achilles deems the basest of acts; *Iliad* 9.312–9.313), he employs the disguise of a lowly beggar which, among other things, requires him to refrain from returning the blows of his inferiors, hardly a noble situation. But as we see in the end, he is willing to undergo this humiliation in order to gain the noble reward par excellence: taking vengeance against the suitors so as to defend his kingdom. Because he too easily disregarded justice in favor of his own wiliness, Odysseus never took justice sufficiently seriously. As a result, he actually retains a rather conventional view of justice and its goodness to the end (see 19.107–19.114). Odysseus' attachment to nobility, then, finally leads him to reject Teiresias' call to restrain his *thymos* in favor of Athena's encouragement to indulge it, thereby causing him to fatally compromise his project of enlightenment.

What would prompt Odysseus to believe again in gods who cannot or at least did not supply him with enlightenment—especially after their failure to aid him earlier? It seems to be the gods' offer of free will—a free will that explains or allows for our rebellion against them (see 1.34)—that ultimately cements Odysseus' relationship to them (see Dimock 1989, 27–28). He is pressed to believe in the gods by an element within him that precedes and directs his longing for enlightenment—namely his *thymos* or spiritedness. *Thymos* is the element of a person's soul that insists, often angrily, on his/her

worth or dignity, and it requires the assumption of free will (granted by the gods) in order to justify or fuel its angry or morally indignant response to injustice. One's angry invoking of the gods against the wrongdoer makes sense only if the wrongdoer could have freely acted otherwise. Thus, the desire to vent our anger presupposes both a moral position (viz., injustice is freely and knowingly chosen by the wrongdoer) and a theological one (viz., the gods punish wrongdoers). Anger (at injustice) is the psychological phenomenon that links us both to other human beings (we cannot rest until they atone or are punished for their misdeeds) and to gods (who alone can assist us in punishing those wrongdoers who escape, as so many do, earthly punishment). As we are now able to see, however, Homer teaches—with his Teiresias—that one “wins one's soul” only by containing one's *thymos* (11.105), not by indulging it.¹⁶

Anger lies at the root of Odysseus' being as much as at the root of his very name.¹⁷ And, from Homer's perspective, anger obstructs true enlightenment. Anger demands that our virtues win what they deserve. Under the influence of this view, Odysseus evinces sympathy for Hephaistos, whose beautiful wife Aphrodite cannot love him as he deserves, conceiving instead a greater passion for Ares.¹⁸ Above all, anger leads Odysseus to hope that his virtues (his “courage and counsel and . . . intelligence”) “will be remembered some day” by others (12.211–12.213; cf. 14.402–14.403, 24.196–24.198). Anger thus demands the support of gods who will ensure that others are duly respectful and grateful. For instance, Odysseus, in his (mistaken) belief that the Phaiakians had taken him somewhere other than Ithaka, angrily turns to Athena to punish them (13.209–13.213). And Athena, in turn, encourages Odysseus to become as angry as he can (18.155–18.156, 13.375–13.376, 20.284–20.286). Such anger necessarily demands the rejection of what enlightenment teaches: that only the guilty be punished (consider Plato, *Republic* 334d5–8).

In order to lay bare the moral and psychological mechanism at work here, we must examine more closely the connection between Athena and Odysseus' anger. Athena's rapprochement with Odysseus is marked by

¹⁶Spiritedness is “essentially obedient, while looking more masterful than anything else . . . It bows to it knows not what . . . The spirited man is, as it were, always on the lookout, or on the search, for something for which he can sacrifice himself . . . While being most passionately concerned with self-assertion, he is at the same time and in the same act most self-forgetting” (Strauss 1989, 166–167; see 20.17–20.24 and context).

¹⁷For a helpful discussion of the etymology of Odysseus' name (which derives from the word for anger), see Stanford (1947, 1:215 [at 1.62]). Clay (1983, 62) notes that the name can imply either “angry at many” or “incurring the anger of many.”

¹⁸See 11.433–11.434. Note also his somewhat irrational sympathy for the murdered, cuckolded Agamemnon's angry denunciation of all women, even those yet to come and those who are actually virtuous (24.201–24.202).

continuous and increasing efforts to fuel his anger. She repeatedly appeals to his desire to have evildoers pay for their injustice. Her first step in winning a suspicious Odysseus back to her is to propose killing *all* the suitors and to stoke his jealousy regarding Penelope—whom she elsewhere concedes is “blameless” (13.374–13.381; cf. 15.15). Unlike Telemachus, she never suggests that Odysseus make an effort to distinguish the guilty from the innocent servingwomen (16.316–16.317). She does encourage him to test the suitors to see which are just and which unjust (17.363–17.364)—making it all the more shocking that she takes no steps to save any of them. She even goes so far as to bind Penelope’s favorite suitor (the relatively decent Amphinomos) to the spot when Odysseus (still in disguise) obliquely suggests to him that there is still time for the repentant to flee (18.129, 146–150, 155–156). Finally, she does not “permit” the suitors to desist from their outrages, so that Odysseus’ rage will be greater (20.284–20.286).

Odysseus wishes to believe in Athena, then, because doing so gives weight to his longing for revenge against the suitors. Unlike those who take Helen’s drug “heartsease,” Odysseus cannot simply look on unmoved when loved ones or kin are murdered—or, as here, merely treated with disrespect (4.221–4.226; cf. 20.18–20.21). Belief in Athena actually encourages Odysseus (and Telemachus) to act as though the suitors, like Aigisthos before them, had already committed adultery and murder. It even leads him to deny to at least one of his enemies an excuse that he himself had once advanced in justifying his own inability to restrain his companions’ actions (cf. 22.316–22.319 and 1.6–1.7, 12.371–12.373). The *thymos* that makes Odysseus want to be “remembered” beyond his death culminates in requiring him to believe that the suitors are free not to want the very goods that he himself wants. Odysseus wants wrongdoing to be freely chosen so that he can be justified in punishing it. Like the families of the slain suitors, he cannot imagine that life is worth living without gaining revenge on those who injure us (24.432–24.436). Odysseus thus fails to “win his own soul” from the *thymos* that directs it into angry battles which may win fame but only at the cost of derailing his quest for enlightenment.

6. THE LIMITS OF ENLIGHTENMENT

Has Odysseus, then, forsworn his quest for enlightenment and, instead, chosen to accept a “reverential constraint on his intelligence” (Dobbs 1987, 505)? Indeed, Odysseus’ rediscovery of “sacred limits”—above all his rejection of Kalypso’s offer of immortality in exchange for a reunion with his wife—seems to suggest that he is making the supreme sacrifice for others and that he is no longer a self-serving individual. But the leaf that Odysseus turns over in sacrificing his heart’s desire is not quite as new as it seems. For, as one critic has shown, Odysseus makes this “sacrifice” on the

assumption that the evils he has faced thus far may be connected to his previous (selfish) moral posture (Bolotin 1989, 52–53). Thus, he reasons, by sacrificing himself to another he can attain the moral standing that would win for him (from just gods) a release from all his sorrows. Though the “sacred” may warrant “respect in itself” (Dobbs 1987, 505), Odysseus cannot help but choose it for the personal benefits that he now associates with it. Above all, what does Homer think of Odysseus drawing back from enlightenment and its implications?

If even the wily, resourceful, and intelligent Odysseus can succeed neither at attaining enlightenment nor at letting that quest go altogether, what prospect does Homer see for human happiness—and what chance is there for the true liberation of the spirit that merits the name “enlightenment”? To answer these questions, we must turn to some less prominent characters who reveal certain ingredients of enlightenment that Odysseus fails to appreciate: Queen Arete of the Phaiakians, the god Hermes, and the singers Demodokos and Phemios.¹⁹ The mortal Queen Arete is, we are told by the disguised Athena, “not lacking in any good [*esthlou*] thought. She dissolves quarrels, even among men, when she favors them” (7.73–7.74). Arete’s great virtue (her name means “Virtue”), especially her wisdom, is exercised not only on behalf of those she loves or cares for, but also—and more importantly for purposes of this argument—on her own behalf. That her wisdom, especially of human nature, can “dissolve quarrels” implies that anger and enmity among men are at bottom due to a lack of enlightenment. A wisdom such as hers that can “dissolve” anger in others (and above all in herself) is precisely the kind that Teiresias urged Odysseus to attain (11.105). Queen Arete succeeds at this while Odysseus fails.

The core of Arete’s wisdom seems to be that she is not self-forgetting in her attachments to others. She does not view the sacrifice of her prudence, judgment, or especially, self-concern as a requirement for love. Unlike her husband King Alkinoos, for instance, who offers assistance to Odysseus as soon as he meets him, Queen Arete sensibly hangs back, intent on examining this stranger who appears wearing clothing just laundered by her daughter (7.234–7.235). In fact, she refuses to say anything encouraging to Odysseus for quite some time. She never allows visions of a world transformed by love or sacrifice to overcome her responsibilities to those who she already loves and who love her. And in the end, Alkinoos’ more thoughtless and shallow generosity is not only ultimately irresponsible,²⁰ it is really

¹⁹For what follows, see Ruderman 1995, 49–50.

²⁰Alkinoos’ readiness to take Odysseus home elicits the anger of Poseidon (as Alkinoos had been warned), who, perhaps with Zeus’s support, drops a mountain on top of Phaiakia (see Jones 1988, 123 [at 13.158]). Alkinoos’ unthinking generosity is thus responsible for the destruction of his country.

more, not less, selfish than the more cautious course proposed by his wife. The schoolboy crush he nurses for Odysseus consists, in no small part, of an effort to ride Odysseus' coattails into the world of glory and renown. Arete, by contrast, even while still suspicious of Odysseus, considerably arranges for him to sleep after his ordeal (7.335–7.336). Her virtue enables her to live her own life without having to live it through others and the glory they might confer, and it counsels her to enjoy the good things (such as the company of those who please her) for herself; when Odysseus' attractions finally become clear to her, she wants him to remain with her (11.335–11.341).

Hermes, for his part, urges Odysseus to see and enjoy the world as it is, without seeking to “master” it. He was, we recall, perfectly willing to suffer pain and mockery in order to enjoy the charms of the beautiful Aphrodite. He can admire and enjoy beautiful things without insisting—as Aphrodite's lame husband Hephaistos does—that he possess them as his own (see 5.73–5.77). His enlightened view of love is unencumbered by either hopes for eternal reciprocity or fears of public disapproval. By contrast, Hephaistos, whose (unnatural) artistic productions are in a sense “immortal,” seems to expect that living beings can and should be similarly unchanging (7.91–7.94). This leads him to feel “savage anger” when they do change (8.304).²¹ The liberation indicated by Hermes, we suspect, derives from his recognition and acceptance of nature, especially the natural desire to seek the good for oneself. For it was Hermes, we further recall, who introduced Odysseus to the “nature” of the herb moly—its unchanging looks and powers (10.303). Moly's function turns out to be nothing less than to secure or guarantee our human nature; it keeps Odysseus from changing his form into something other than a human being. Hermes, that is, the “guide and giver of good things” (8.335), encourages us to study and accept our nature and not to seek happiness through any miraculous transformation of it. He enjoys the good where he can and submits to superior power when he must, unaffected by the empty shame of ignobility.

Hermes, however, only points to, without himself possessing, true enlightenment. For, as we have seen, the core of enlightenment involves comprehending the meaning of our mortality and the ways in which we rebel against it. Hermes, being a god, never rebels against mortality and so is simply freed from a concern with the noble and the base. For it is mortal man's

²¹For a thoughtful analysis opposed to the one offered here, see Saxonhouse (1992, 162–163). She suggests that it is Hermes rather than Hephaistos who unreasonably expects the beautiful to remain his forever. In my view, it is Hephaistos (crippled in soul as well as body) who, counting on gratitude for his readiness to place his wife's happiness above his own, cannot bear it when Aphrodite's happiness turns out not to include *him*. And it is Hermes who is able to enjoy the good and beautiful things without submitting them or himself to moralizing demands (see Ruderman 1995, 42–43).

fear of death that is ultimately responsible for his love of nobility. Lacking that fear, Hermes does not take justice seriously. In fact, he is said to have helped Odysseus' grandfather Autolykos to become a master "thief and taker of oaths" (19.395–19.398).²² Hermes' amoral indifference to justice proves incapable of producing a full understanding of the problem of justice. Only by taking death, nobility, and justice seriously can we hope to understand them. As Achilles' choice of a short, noble life over a long, base one (along with his posthumous retraction of that choice upon learning the truth about death) implies, we love the noble (only) insofar as we believe it will enable us to partake of a (pleasant) immortality. It is thus Dobbs's failure to see that Odysseus is no less a "hater of mortality" than other humans (1987, 501) that leads to his failure to see the ultimate motive behind all of Odysseus' actions. As mortal beings, we cannot take Hermes as a model, but we can be guided by his teaching concerning the acceptance of nature so as to contain our anger better than Odysseus contained his. And we can thereby, in a sense, attain more enlightenment about the world than Hermes can.

The highest degree of enlightenment portrayed by Homer involves the life of the mind, especially as engaged in by the poet. The poet, by submitting all viewpoints to scrutiny, comes to understand the human situation most fully. He is able to bring joy to the likes of the simple Eumaios as well as Odysseus, implying that he understands the souls of each (15.392–15.401, 9.3–9.11). His wisdom cannot, to be sure, secure him from the vagaries of superior force (3.267–3.271). But he can look on and attempt to grasp the human scene in a comprehensive way. The poet Demodokos, for instance, comprehends both comedy and tragedy and, in that sense, is tougher and sees further than Odysseus (see Dimock 1989, 103–104). And while men like Alkinoos reject "lying stories from which no one can learn anything" (11.366), Homer tells "lying" stories which not only charm and thereby benefit human beings who have suffered, but which enable a thoughtful listener to learn a great lesson.

7. CONCLUSION

Odysseus' failure to attain true enlightenment, despite his great intelligence, has led some critics to conclude that Homer's final teaching is that human happiness requires a recognition of the "limits of reason" and a "respect for the sacred" (Dobbs 1987, 493). Enlightenment, that is, is impossible; we must grant or admit our fundamental and abiding reliance on the mysterious gods. We must recognize that our "fate is in the hands of the gods" (Zuckert 1988, 20). Our study has, I hope, demonstrated that this is not Homer's final message. The truths revealed by enlightenment—including the need to cease

²²For a helpful discussion of this difficult line, see Dimock 1989, 256–257.

finding responsibility in others for what thwarts our deepest desires—will, as Homer stresses, usually be found irritating if not infuriating by most people (consider the furious response to the sober Halitherses' speech suggesting that the suitors' families are largely themselves to blame for their loss; 24.451–24.466).²³ He is thus careful to keep part of his teaching “hidden” (Plato, *Republic* 378d3–8). Odysseus fails to attain his goal not because it is impossible but because he is ultimately less rational than he supposes. He pulls back from the full implications of rationality because it would undermine his angry longing to defend what he believes he deserves. Homer, in the end, questions his need to do so. The right kind of rationality would be centered on a rigorous self-knowledge that dissolves the panorama of false hopes and fears that elicits and enflames our anger and thereby “enchants” the natural world beyond our hopes of understanding it.²⁴ That wisdom, or at least its grounding and effects, can be glimpsed in the other characters that we have discussed. By learning the limits, not of reason but of our expectations from the sacred,²⁵ one could, Homer suggests, become a truly enlightened individual.

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²³In addition to the meanings previously discussed, Odysseus' name can also, and most fundamentally, mean “to plant evils for [others]” (Dimock 1989, 257).

²⁴“Nature and Homer,” according to Alexander Pope, are “the same” (*An Essay on Criticism*, line 135).

²⁵Consider the choice made by Odysseus at the end of Plato's Myth of Er: he alone, having “recovered from the love of honor,” selects the “life of a private man who minds his own business” (*Republic*, 620c–d). Plato apparently judged that Odysseus lacked only a true understanding of the gods and the afterworld in order to lead or appreciate the life of Socrates, the most enlightened individual he knew of (see 496d, 433a–b).

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