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ODYSSEUS' MOST MEMORABLE EXPLOIT¹

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SUMMARY: The paper discusses the meaning and development of Odysseus' meeting with the Cyclops as described in the *Odyssey*, taking into account its possible origins and parallels in folklore.

As Odysseus lies awake the night before he exacts his revenge upon the suitors, against all but overwhelming odds, he looks back to his escape from what he regards as an even more appalling situation (20.17-21):

τέτλαθι δῆ, κραδίη· καὶ κύντερον ἄλλο ποτ' ἔτλης
ἦματι τῶι ὅτε μένος ἄσχετος ἦσθιε Κύκλωψ
ἰφθίμους ἐτάρους· σὺ δ' ἐτόλμας, ὄφρα σε μήτις
ἐξάγαγ' ἐξ ἄντροιο οἰόμενον θανέεσθαι.

We might have expected his thoughts to turn to his exploits in the Trojan War; surely no subsequent adventure made greater demands on his daring, self-control, and resourcefulness than the undercover intelligence gathering in Troy of which Helen tells Telemachus in Book 4 (242ff.), undertaken in preparation for the achievement to which Odysseus owed his title πτολίπορθος – the ruse of the Wooden Horse. But,

¹ This paper has evolved over many years, being greatly improved by the comments of audiences in Barcelona, Hamburg, Geneva, Jerusalem, Oxford, Pisa, Poznań and Toruń.

as the poet saw it, the nightmarish encounter with the one-eyed ogre posed the supreme challenge to the hero's distinctive qualities.

Its vivid and, in a sense, realistic portrayal of brute force out-matched by intelligence and nerve give this narrative an abiding appeal. For many who hear or read the story in childhood, it is all they know of Odysseus. The episode does not suffer from any lack of scholarly attention, and it is almost certainly impossible to say anything about it both new and reasonably sensible. I hope rather to highlight some aspects which tend to be overlooked just by reason of their familiarity.

That it was the best known scene in the whole *Odyssey* might be inferred from its popularity with the vase-painters. From around the time of the *Odyssey*'s composition (which I put in the mid-seventh century) we have four examples, one from Ionia, one from Argos, and two from Athens; all are close to the epic account, but none matches it as closely as the depiction on an Etruscan *pithos* (now in the Getty Museum) not much later in date.² They encourage us to think about the antecedents of this episode.

It has long been generally accepted that the poet of the *Odyssey* has adapted to Odysseus a folktale in which the central role was played by a nonentity, a peasant boy or minor brigand. The term 'folktale', a calque from German, lends itself to vagueness and equivocation, but is generally used to mean the kind of stories told by the illiterate or barely literate peasantry (the folk), as exemplified in the Grimms' *Kinder- und Hausmärchen*. The central roles in such tales are played by nonentities, who are either nameless or, for narrative convenience, are given some commonplace name like Jack or Hans or Ivan or Osman; circumstances of time and place are likewise unimportant. This view of the origins of Odysseus' encounter with Polyphemus in turn forms the basis for the hypothesis that more generally in Books 9-12 the poet was systematically adapting folktales to the hero to construct his *nostos*.

In this essay I shall argue for a rather different view of this episode's antecedents. I believe that the poet knew of no hero for this tale other than Odysseus. I do not think that he invented the episode, but that he adapted to Odysseus' status as a distinguished war veteran and

² See further *LIMC s.v. Kyklops, Odysseus, Polyphemus I (Suppl.)*; Shapiro, 1994, pp. 49-55; Snodgrass, 1998, pp. 89-98.

adventure belonging to his less respectable pre-war past. Indeed, this episode so perfectly fits a hero of Odysseus' type that I find very attractive Detlev Fehling's view that this adventure as it were created him.³ It admirably exemplifies his self-presentation (9.9f.): εἴμ' Ὀδυσσεὺς Λαερτιάδης, ὃς πᾶσι δόλοισιν ἀνθρώποισι μέλω, καί μευ κλέος οὐρανὸν ἵκει (the only place in Homer where a character speaks of his κλέος as already existing). Raised to the dignity of epic the episode loses the happy ending which, when we first heard it as children, we thought it had; Odysseus has not only lost half the band whom he took with him, but has provoked the wrath of Poseidon. Polyphemus' father, who is not yet appeased at the poem's end. Odysseus and Penelope are allowed only a brief reunion before he must depart again on his pilgrimage to Thesprotia, ἀμέτρητος πόνος, by which at long last the god will be propitiated (11.121ff., 23.248ff.). Tiresias' instructions on this point are far more important than what he can tell Odysseus about his route home from Circe's island, the problem which motivates Odysseus' visit to the world of the dead. Poseidon's anger is highlighted at the start, when Zeus himself explains to Athene, or rather to us, why Odysseus has been left for so long on Calypso's island (1.68-79). It is brought forcibly to our attention in Book 5 (282ff.), and again by Athena on Odysseus' arrival in Ithaca (13.341-343). It thus provides a rather disturbing unifying theme. Odysseus' name is evidently associated with his situation as the object of divine wrath, in particular, of Poseidon's anger.

Among the rather oddly designated Ἀλκίνοῦ ἀπόλογοι this episode stands out for several reasons. The narrative is unusually detailed. The precise description of the rustic milieu has affinities with the descriptions of Eumaeus' homestead (14.5ff.) and Laertes' orchard (24.226ff.). There is a certain charm, at first sight, in this primitive cave dwelling. While the Cyclopes' land, where grain and vines grow abundantly without cultivation (9. 107-111), may sound like an earthly paradise, reminiscent of early European reports of North America, Polyphemus

³ "Da übrigens die Grundidee der Geschichte mehr als jede andere der Odyssee auf einen Helden dieser Art zugeschnitten ist, bin ich versucht, den zahlreichen Theorien über die Gestalt des Odysseus die neue hinzuzufügen, dass er als Held dieser Geschichte ins Leben getreten ist". (Fehling, 1977, p. 95).

himself occupies the realistic world of the dairy farmer (218ff.). Savage as he is, he has buckets and pails, can make secure pens for his beasts, and knows how to convert his surplus milk into cheese. This sort of passage tends to be overlooked in discussions of oral composition and formulaic technique. The bard who could confidently exploit a rich stock of formulae and motifs when devising variations on themes of heroic fighting and hospitality had to work much harder when his subject matter came from outside the regular range of epic song. Of course a skilled poet could draw on the tradition of poetry of advice and instruction such as we associate with Hesiod; archaic hexameter verse was not restricted to heroic narrative. What must be emphasised is that an unconventional scenario such as this called for much more premeditation than a story largely recycling typical elements.

Detail fosters verisimilitude. To us it may seem obvious that Odysseus passes off the map when he fails to round Cape Malea and is blown westward (80ff.), but we should not suppose that the poet and his audience would have regarded as fantastic the lands and peoples of the hero's subsequent adventures. There is a well-documented tendency to relocate wonders just beyond the boundaries of the known world, instead of abandoning belief in them when they are not to be found where they are supposed to be. The legend of the Christian kingdom of Prester John well illustrates this adaptability; in recent times we have seen it operating in the displacement to Papua-New Guinea of cannibalism as a socially accepted practice.⁴ In the antiquity the one-eyed pastoralist Arimaspians were located just beyond the point reached by the enigmatic traveller Aristeas of Proconnesus, whose account of his journey took its title from them.⁵ Herodotus, who tells us that the name is Scythian (4.27), robustly expresses scepticism about this physiological peculiarity (3.116.2), as he does about goat-footed men and people who sleep for half the year (4.25.1). But travellers' tales embody a practical concern to gather information and must be distinguished from fairytales and fantasy. The ancients took the *Odyssey's* geography seriously; the concentration of outlandish phenomena in Odysseus' account of his journey corresponds to the remoteness of

⁴ See further Arens, 1975.

⁵ On Aristeas see further West, 2004, pp. 43-67.

the regions in which he travelled.⁶ The operations of the careful dairy-farmer⁷ maintain our sense of reality. This brief pastoral idyll heightens the sense of Polyphemus' savagery in his dealings with Odysseus and his company.

Polyphemus' cave is on the outskirts of Cyclopean territory, by the shore (182)⁸, but though eremitical in lifestyle he is not presented as an isolated freak. Already in Zeus' speech at the opening of the poem we have been told that he is the strongest of the Cyclopes (1.70f.), a detail which heightens our admiration for Odysseus' achievement in overmastering him. We have a significant reference to the community of Cyclopes as the Phaeacians are introduced (6.4ff. οἱ πρὶν μὲν ποτε ναῖον ἐν εὐρυχώρῳ Ἵπερρείη ἀγχοῦ Κυκλώπων, ἀνδρῶν ὑπερνορεόντων, οἳ σφεας σινέσκουτο, βίηφι δὲ φέρτεροι ἦσαν.) Odysseus can expect his audience to listen with unfailing sympathy to his tale of triumph over a group whom they had found to be impossible neighbours.⁹ ἀνδρῶν leaves no doubt that these troll-like beings are mortal; they have nothing in common beyond monocularity with the immortal manufacturers of thunder and lightning depicted by Hesiod (*Th.* 139–146).

In general Odysseus' adventures on his homeward journey result directly from his landfalls, but his visit to the land of the Cyclopes is an optional excursion from the adjacent Island of Goats. The latter, an excellent prospect for colonization (116ff.), offers a fine base for rest, recreation, and re-victualling. Odysseus presents his visit to the mainland as prompted by mere curiosity (9.173–6):

αὐταρ ἐγὼ σὺν νηί τ' ἐμῇ καὶ ἐμοῖς ἐτάροισιν
ἐλθὼν τῶνδ' ἀνδρῶν πειρήσομαι, οἳ τινές εἰσιν,

⁶ See further Romm, 1992.

⁷ Not, however, as careful as might be wished; cleanliness is not high on his agenda (329f.)

⁸ Odysseus thus takes an obvious risk of his falsehood being immediately exposed when he claims that Poseidon has wrecked his ship (283–286); the lie does him no good, though Polyphemus' response highlights his savagery.

⁹ These lines would refute the suggestion, put to me by a colleague, that if Odysseus had not come along Polyphemus might never have strayed from the harmless existence of a primitive pastoralist (tempting as it might otherwise be to take the episode as foreshadowing the impact of European colonialism on less sophisticated peoples).

ἦ ῥ' οἷ γ' ὕβρισται τε καὶ ἄγριοι οὐδὲ δίκαιοι,
ἦε φιλόξενοι, καὶ σφιν νόος ἐστὶ θεουδής.

Euripides evidently found this motivation unsatisfactory; his Odysseus has put in to take on water and other provisions (*Cyclops* 96, 133ff.). Disinterested curiosity is not characteristic of the Homeric Odysseus; admittedly, he wants to hear the Sirens' song, but this does not entail any delay (12. 158–200). (Curiosity to see more of Hades' *Sehenswürdigkeiten* is the pretext he gives for not persisting in his attempt to get Ajax to talk to him (11.565–7), but we may judge this disingenuous.). Bearing in mind that his men think that he does rather well from the presents given to him as a mark of esteem by kindly hosts (10.38ff.). we should probably, the hope of guest-gifts (cf. 229, 267f.) focus on the implications of φιλόξενοι.

His companions think in terms of a brisk raid on Polyphemus' store of cheese and stock of young animals, but Odysseus has grander ideas. In his optimism that the unknown occupant of this cave dwelling is likely to react generously to the opportunity to make his acquaintance we see the pride of a heroic warrior, manifested again when he introduces himself to Polyphemus (259–66), in his immediate reaction to Polyphemus' first act of cannibalism (299–301, cf. *Il.* 1.190), and in his prayer to Athene as he seeks the means of escape, expressed as a plan for revenge (317). This trait is manifested quite disastrously in the reckless desire for κλέος which leads him to reveal his identity when he believes that he is out of Polyphemus' reach, thus exposing himself to Poseidon's wrath. His dalliance, against the pleas of his companions, illustrates one of the most striking features of this episode, Odysseus' uncharacteristic lack of prudence. The qualities of caution and self-control so marked in the reminiscences with which Helen and Menelaus enlarge Telemachus' conception of his father (4.240ff., 271ff.)¹⁰ here desert him. The point was well made by W.W. Merry¹¹: 'He may show cleverness in Polyphemus' cave, but his old caution has forsaken him: he is foolhardy and thoughtless. The mantle of his wisdom seems for once to have descended on his comrades. It is they who recommend

¹⁰ These are overlooked by those who see in the *Odyssey* straightforward character development.

¹¹ Appendix to his commentary on *Odyssey I-XII*, Oxford 1886, p. 553.

him to take advantage of the absence of the Cyclops, and merely to drive his herds away. But Odysseus insists on seeing him and partaking of his hospitality. Nor is he less reckless when he taunts the Cyclops from shipboard, and incurs new perils after his deliverance.' Odysseus himself concedes that he made a wrong decision when he insisted on waiting for Polyphemus' return (230), ἀλλ' ἐγὼ οὐ πιθόμη· ἦ τ' ἂν πολὺ κέρδιον ἦεν.¹² This frank admission of course commends Odysseus to the audience. We appreciate the poet's skill the more keenly if we consider what difference it makes that Odysseus relates these adventures himself.¹³

Even if the cave's owner had been as conscientious as Nestor and Eumaeus in his observance of the obligations of hospitality, Odysseus' behaviour, in making himself at home in his host's absence (231–3) does not at all conform to the heroic world's ideas of the conduct proper in a stranger hoping for entertainment. Contrast the description of Athene/Mentes' reception in Ithaca (1.104ff.), from which it is clear that a visitor should wait by the entrance until he is invited in (even if like Mentes he claims to be an old friend of the family); we may compare Telemachus' reception at Pylos (3.5ff.) and at Sparta (4.20ff.), the unrecognized Odysseus with Eumaeus (14.29ff.), and the custom at Peleus' court, as recalled by Nestor (*Il.* 11.776ff.). This is indeed what we might expect.. The theme of hospitality in the *Odyssey* has received a good deal of attention in recent years,¹⁴ but concentration on Polyphemus' outrageous defiance of his obligations has distracted attention from Odysseus' departure from accepted convention. The poet's audience would probably have been more sensitive to this point.

Odysseus' untypical foolhardiness is held against him later. Eurylochus, in a speech marking his emergence as a rival to Odysseus' leadership, recalls how Polyphemus trapped the comrades (10.435–7):

ὥς περ Κύκλωψ ἔρξ' ὅτε οἱ μέσσαυλον ἴκοντο
 ἡμέτεροι ἔταροι, σὺν δ' ὁ θρασὺς εἶπετ' Ὀδυσσεύς·
 τούτου γὰρ καὶ κείνοι ἀτασθαλίησιν ὄλοντο.

¹² We may hear an echo of Hector's acknowledgment that Polydamas was right and he was wrong (*Il.* 22.103). But space forbids discussion of the general question of the *Odyssey*'s apparent references to the *Iliad*.

¹³ See further De Jong, 1992, pp. 1-11.

¹⁴ See in particular Reece, 1993.

The last line recalls the poet's unfavourable verdict on Odysseus' comrades in the prooemium (1.7), αὐτῶν γὰρ σφετέρησι βλάσθησι ἰησι δλοντο (the more striking by reason of its unusual word order, genitive *preceding* possessive adjective.). The episode is a blatant exception to the poet's defence of Odysseus' concern for his men. While the hero may proudly claim (12.211f.) that even from the Cyclops' cave ἐμῆι ἀρετῆι βουλήι τε νόωι τε, ἐκφύγομεν, the adventure brought death to six of the twelve men whom he took with him, seriously undermining the confidence which a successful leader should inspire in his followers; as a result he fails to persuade his men to sail on past Thrinakia where the Sun God's cattle pasture. For Odysseus himself the reckless desire for κλέος, which leads him to reveal his true identity (500–05), makes a bad situation very much worse, since it allows the Cyclops to curse him, bringing upon him Poseidon's hostility, to delay his return and necessitate further journeying. (We may note that he does not *there* admit that he was wrong to disregard the protests of his men.) This combination of imprudence with short-term cunning in solving a precisely conceived problem is rather reminiscent of the Hesiodic Prometheus.

We might wonder whether the poet of the *Iliad* had in mind the manner of Odysseus' escape when he made Priam, in the *teichoscopia*, compare the hero to a bell-wether (3.196–198)¹⁵:

αὐτὸς δὲ κτίλος ὡς ἐπιπωλεῖται σῆχος ἀνδρῶν
 ἀρνειῶι μιν ἔγωγε εἴσκω πηγεσιμάλλῳι,
 ὅς τ' οἰῶν μέγα πῶν διέρχεται ἀργεννάων.

Helen replies (3.200–02): οὗτος δ' αὖ Λαερτιάδης πολύμητις Ὀδυσσεύς εἰδῶς παντοίους τε δόλους καὶ μῆδεα πυκνά. What examples of his cunning might she be supposed to have in mind? To have come to her knowledge they should belong to the period before she left Sparta. In the *Iliad* others too testify to Odysseus' slyness and cunning. Thus Agamemnon addresses him as (4.339) κακοῖσι δόλοισι κεκασμένε, κερδαλέοφρον and the Trojan Socus (11.430) as δόλων ἄτ' ἠδὲ πόνολο. These expressions are not formulaic; they elaborate pejoratively Odysseus' regular epithets, πολύμητις and πολυμήχαν' but hardly correspond to his role in the *Iliad*. At Troy he

¹⁵ Admittedly, a briefer simile of this type is used of Aeneas (*Il.* 13.492f.)

is already one of the senior chieftains; οὗτος δὲ προτέρης γενεῆς προτέρων τ' ἀνθρώπων; ὠμογέροντα δέ μιν φασ' ἔμμεναι (23. 790f.) observes Antilochus. What was he doing before the War? Rule in rugged Ithaca could hardly have brought him the reputation which made Agamemnon and Menelaus go to some trouble to recruit him (cf. *Od.* 24.114–119).

The *Odyssey* reveals a little about his pre-war career. Athene/Mentes shows her protégé in an interesting light in the tale she tells Telemachus (1.255-264) of Odysseus' visit to Taphos in quest of arrow poison, φάρμακον ἀνδροφόνου διζήμενος, ὄφρα οἱ εἴη, ἰοὺς χρίεσθαι χαλκίρεας. ΝΟΤΕ ἀνδροφόνου. Odysseus had failed to get it from a more scrupulous Thesprotian acquaintance ἐπεὶ ῥα θεοῦς νεμεσίζετο αἶεν ἑόντας) but Mentes' father had been more accommodating φιλέεσκε γὰρ αἰνῶς. This is the first of a series of reminiscences preparing Telemachus for the father he is to meet in Book 16; it contrasts strikingly with the Trojan War recollections of Nestor, Helen and Menelaus (3.120ff., 4.240ff.), and indeed with the general presentation of Odysseus in the *Iliad*.

In the *Iliad* the bow is not regarded as a proper weapon for a major hero. 'Archer' is an insult. τοξότα, λωβητήρ, κέραι ἀγλαέ, παρθενοπιῖπα (11.385), Diomedes' disdainful reaction to Paris' joy at wounding him, memorably expresses 'the aristocratic spearman's contempt for those who fight at a distance (and often anonymously) with the bow'.¹⁶ Apart from Paris, in the *Iliad* the bow is associated with the truce-breaker Pandarus and, on the Greek side, with the minor heroes Teucer and Meriones. Odysseus does not even take part in the archery competition at Patroclus' funeral games (23. 850-83), though his pride in his skill is proclaimed by his son's name, of which we are reminded by Odysseus' very abnormal form of self-description, Τηλεμάχοιο πατήρ (2.260, cf.4.354). The *Odyssey* allows Odysseus some archery practice at Troy (8.216ff.), though it is essential for the plot that he left his most valued bow at home (21.38-41). Still, the use of arrow-poison to enhance his archery's effects seems unworthy of a heroic warrior; the detail calls to mind the unscrupulous Odysseus of Attic tragedy, above all of Sophocles' *Philoctetes*. In the scholia it is suggested that with

¹⁶ Hainsworth ad loc.

this reference to arrow poison the poet prepares the ground for Odysseus' massacre of the suitors: προκατεσκεύασε ἵνα μὴ ζητῶμεν πῶς ἀπὸ μιᾶς πληγῆς ἀναιροῦνται οἱ μνηστῆρες. In the event Odysseus achieves his initial success in a manner more worthy of a hero, by surprise and superb marksmanship, until his arrows are exhausted, and he assumes the full equipment of a heavy armed warrior.

We learn something of the events which led to Odysseus acquiring his bow from Iphitus, whom he got to know when he went to recover cattle taken from Ithaca by Messenian raiders (21.13–38); since he is there described as παιδινός impressive competence at an early age is indicated. But the most important episode from his youth of which we hear in the *Odyssey* (19.392–466) connects him closely with his maternal grandfather Autolycus, the archetypal trickster and favourite of Hermes, supreme in his skill at burglary and in the advantageous wording of oaths. Guile was an important element in Odysseus' genetic inheritance. Autolycus had invited the boy to visit him ἠβήσας, and it was during this visit that Odysseus was taken boar hunting on Parnassus and suffered the injury which left the scar by which Eurykleia identified him. That hunt had marked Odysseus' passage to manhood. Hunting large animals like boar, deer, and bears called for the qualities characteristic of Odysseus – stealth, trickery, intelligence, self-control (cf. Arrian, *Cyn.* 1.3). The simile of the hunting dog which Athena applies to him at the beginning of Sophocles' *Ajax* (5–8) is peculiarly apt. Such, I suggest, was the context for the adventure which established his reputation.

Athene/Mentes' speech undoubtedly presents Odysseus in a guise rather different from that made familiar by the *Iliad*. It is the more interesting in that Athene could have chosen to tell a story wholly creditable to the hero. Telemachus is not to be naively idealistic about the father he has yet to meet. Odysseus' origins have been much debated, but it seems to me wrong to regard as a post-homeric development the stories of Odysseus' talent for deceit familiar from Attic tragedy and already present in the lost poems of the Epic Cycle. We may see the poet of the *Iliad* discreetly indicating that *his* Odysseus is a more admirable figure than the stereotype when Antenor takes up Helen's brief characterization, εἰδὼς παντοίους τε δόλους καὶ μῆδεα πυκνά, with his

recollections of Odysseus' marvellous oratory when he came with Menelaus to attempt to negotiate Helen's return (3.205ff.). The qualities expressed by Odysseus' distinctive epithet πολύαινος (*Il.*9.673, 10.544, *Od.*12.184), which I take to express a gift for telling stories with an ulterior purpose,¹⁷ are here given a wider usefulness in the service of the Greek cause, winning the respect of the Trojan who consistently advocated a peace settlement (cf. *Il.*7.347ff.).

Odysseus' deceitful ingenuity is an indispensable element in the story of the Trojan War (whereas Achilles and Hector could be discarded without affecting its basic structure). Troy, with its divinely constructed walls, was impregnable, not to be taken by conventional military skills. Without trickery Troy could never have fallen to the Greeks, but, significantly, though the *Iliad* leaves us in no doubt that the city's fall is at hand, the manner of its capture is never mentioned. The story is out of keeping with the ethos of the older epic. But, like the tale of Polyphemus, it illustrates the victory of Greek cleverness over barbarian stupidity.

Odysseus did not merely suggest the ruse of the Wooden Horse; he played a major part in executing the trick (cf.11.524). ἀλλ οἶον τόδ' ἔρεξε καὶ ἔτλη καρτερὸς ἀνὴρ (4.242, cf.271) is the phrase with which Helen introduces her account of Odysseus' preliminary reconnaissance. His mission required the skill in role-playing at which he shows such virtuosity on his return to Ithaca. Menelaus has a corresponding story of Odysseus' resolution and prudence as they waited in their nerve-racking ambush. The use of ἔτλη in these contexts should warn us against giving too passive a sense to πολύτλας. The epithet implies more than the toleration of adversity. Odysseus is prepared to expose himself to indignity – as in his reconnaissance disguised as a beggar, a situation in which we cannot imagine Ajax, let alone Achilles – and is possessed of an unusual degree of patience and self-discipline. The qualities required to capture Troy (which retrospectively show that the right verdict was reached in the Judgement of Arms) allowed Odysseus to outwit Polyphemus.

This episode is the only point where Odysseus falls short of the claims made for him in the prooemium, that he did all he could to

¹⁷ As at *Od.*14.468ff., where his tale extracts a cloak from Eumaeus.

secure the safe return of his comrades, yet it is the most prominent of his adventures, and has been made pivotal to the epic's plot. We have seen that it is quite inadequately motivated; curiosity and the hope of tangible expressions of esteem seem insufficient reasons for risking delay to their homeward journey. The victors of Troy should by now have had their fill of excitement; this is an escapade for younger men.

The poet, I believe, adapted to the hero of the Trojan War a story belonging to Odysseus' irresponsible youth (before marriage and succession to Laertes), the period when he gained the reputation for guile which made so desirable his recruitment to the Greek force. The trickster from the Western Isles rose in status when he was included among the princes who fought at Troy.

Polyphemus too has risen in the world. That the ogre was already a familiar figure to the poet's audience is implied by the notorious failure to advert to the distinctive feature of the giant's physique, essential to the story, his single eye. This grim peculiarity could very appropriately have been mentioned when Odysseus describes Polyphemus' return to the cave (233ff.). Contrast Hesiod (*Th.* 142-5):

οἱ δ' ἦτοι τὰ μὲν ἄλλα θεοῖς ἐναλίγκιοι ἦσαν,
 μῦθος δ' ὀφθαλμὸς μέσσωι ἐνέκειτο μετώπῳ
 Κύκλωπες δ' ὄνομ' ἦσαν ἐπώνυμον, οὔνεκ κ' ἄρ' ἀρά σφρων
 κυκλοτερῆς ὀφθαλμὸς ἔεις ἐνέκειτο μετώπῳ.

The word Κύκλωψ is puzzling; we expect a word meaning 'one-eyed' rather than 'round-eyed', and we might wonder whether it represents popular etymology of a non-Greek word. But clearly Odysseus' victim is a familiar figure; indeed, his name tells us that at the poet's first reference to the episode (1.69f.): Κύκλωπος ὃν ὀφθαλμοῦ ἀλάω σεν, ἀντίθειον Πολύφημον. Familiarity with Book 9 leads us to take the last word as a personal name, but if we did not know this tale and simply heard this line (or read it in a text which did not conveniently distinguish between lower and upper case), we should take the word as an adjective, 'the godlike one, whose story is much told'.¹⁸ Inconsistencies in the narrative itself make it clear that the poet knew more than one way of telling his story.

¹⁸ The poet of the *Iliad*, who includes a Polyphemus in a brief catalogue of noteworthy Lapiths (1.263f.), was surely unaware of any association with a cannibalistic ogre.

The inclusion of this encounter within the epic framework gave it a grandeur lacking when told as an independent story satisfyingly demonstrating the triumph of intelligence over brute force. The poet has given it a theological dimension by the involvement of Poseidon. Already in Aristotle's time it was found puzzling that the god's union with a sea-nymph (1.71–3) should produce a Cyclops (F 172 Rose): ζητεῖ Ἀριστοτέλης πῶς ὁ Πολύφημος μήτε πατὸς ὦν Κύκλωπος - Ποσειδῶνος γὰρ ἦν - μήτε μητρός, Κύκλωψ ἐγένετο αὐτός. ἐκ δὲ τοῦ μύθου ἐπιλύεται· καὶ γὰρ ἐκ Βορέου ἵπποι γίνονται καὶ ἐκ Ποσειδῶνος καὶ τῆς Μεδούσης ὁ Πήγασος ἵππος.

This genetic puzzle reveals the mechanism by which the episode has been made central to the structure of our *Odyssey*. Polyphemus' divine ancestry will account for his huge physique, thus anticipating the question why Odysseus with twelve men could not move the door-stone which the giant handled so easily.

We need to bear in mind that, as Snodgrass well puts it, 'there was a great web of vernacular, orally transmitted mythology in a broad sense which penetrated every part of the Greek world, which was known to everyone of whatever level of education, and which did not need to depend at all on epic poetry.'¹⁹ The limitations of our information regarding the stories which gathered round the figures of the great heroes are demonstrated by the popularity with the vase-painters of a scene depicting Ajax and Achilles playing a board game²⁰; we have no idea of the context in which to place such an incident. Hexameter narrative demands more skill and practice than story-telling in prose, and correspondingly lends grandeur to its subject. Stories of Odysseus' adventures as a resourceful folk-hero surely developed in prose before his elevation to epic status. Integration in his *nostos* could give such episodes a new lease of life, and verse allowed a first-person narrative such as might have been confusing in ordinary, informal story-telling.

I suspect that the Circe episode had similar antecedents. Again, the motivation for the encounter seems weak. Odysseus and his men have found an excellent place to recover from the Laestrygonian massacre; they can easily supply themselves with water and venison. They may

¹⁹ Poet and painter in eighth-century Greece, *PCPhS* 1979, n.s. 25, pp. 118-130.

²⁰ *LIMC* s.v. Achilleus ix.

have no idea where the island is, but Odysseus' complaint that they cannot tell where the sun rises or sets (10.190–2)) suggests a forest scene, not the seashore.²¹ Odysseus' highly rewarding meeting with a stag as he explores may remind us of a common motif in encounters with the uncanny: the quest of a beast leads a hunter far into the forest, until he is lost.²² The pretext for investigating indications that the island is inhabited is flimsy – so flimsy, indeed, that Odysseus in relating this episode fails to make it clear why he dispatched a reconnaissance party. Moreover, notwithstanding the comforts of Circe's hospitality, we should expect the group to be impatient to get home. Odysseus is extraordinarily unconcerned about Penelope; this part of the narrative is a striking exception to the high regard in which the *Odyssey* normally holds central family relationships. Was the episode devised in the context of a foray on the mainland in Odysseus' irresponsible youth, when he could play a lone hand, before the obligations of marriage and rulership made him settle down? The (somewhat puzzling) role of Hermes as Odysseus' patron and helper, as he had been his grandfather's, would seem less surprising with such a scenario.²³ But Odysseus' encounter with Circe does not work as well as an independent narrative as the Polyphemus episode does, and we should return to the latter.

Detached from its hero it was to enjoy very wide diffusion. It has long been recognized that it has counterparts in the folktale traditions of many lands; an excellent selection of examples is conveniently assembled by Frazer as an appendix to his edition of Apollodorus.²⁴ Sir Denys Page's discussion made the point thoroughly familiar to

²¹ As Rhys Carpenter well puts it, "No Grecian mariner on the midland sea could thus have lost his celestial bearings. These are the words of a landsman wandering vaguely in great dark woods". (Carpenter, 1958, p. 19).

²² See further Alexander, 1991, pp. 520-524.

²³ Continuing this speculation, I should like to suggest that an originally nameless witch has, like Polyphemus, risen in the world, to become Aetes' sister and daughter of the Helios, and thus drawn into an Argonautic milieu. The poet himself pays tribute (almost, we might say, acknowledges a debt) to Argonautic poetry (12.69f.), but though we may accept in principle that he has in mind a body of traditional poetry rather than a particular instantiation, it is hardly possible to discuss its relationship to our *Odyssey* without assuming the latter. See further West, 2005, pp. 39-64.

²⁴ *Apollodorus, The Library* (Loeb ed., 1921), 2 p. 404-455, Appendix 13.

Anglophone readers.²⁵ It is indeed very well discussed in the appendix to Merry's *Odyssey* commentary, though Merry, writing in 1886, was not able to use the exhaustive monograph of Oscar Hackman, *Die Polyphemsage in der Volksüberlieferung*,²⁶ with 125 examples of this type of tale. Though by far the majority were recorded only in the nineteenth century, the great age of folktale collecting, a version of the tale is given in the mediaeval compilation from Lorraine, written in or soon after 1184 and entitled *Dolopathos sive de rege et septem sapientibus*. From the Turkic collection known as *The Book of Dede Korkut*, probably compiled early in the fifteenth century, we have a fine example, in which the Giant's name, Tepegöz, literally 'Head-eye, Top-eye', is almost certainly a corruption of Greek *Sarandapekhos*, 'Forty-cubits'. There is an allusion to this Turkic story in an Arabic history written in Egypt between 1309 and 1340.²⁷ These early examples attest the tale's extraordinary appeal, transcending immense cultural differences.

It might seem a natural and obvious inference that the *Odyssey* is ultimately the source of all these later versions. But Page, whose discussion has enjoyed immense influence, attached great importance to the absence from the later tradition of two elements, the inebriation of the giant and the *Nobody* trick, whereby Odysseus prevents Polyphemus' neighbours from coming to his aid. These two motifs are connected; intoxication dulls the giant's wits sufficiently for him to accept Odysseus' unlikely claim that his name is Nobody. (Odysseus does not immediately answer Polyphemus' request for identification (355), but waits until he has drunk well (361), while the form in which he gives the accusative of his name, ΟΥΤΙΝ ΔΕ ΜΕ ΚΙΚΛΗΣΚΟΥΣΙ, makes the onomastic improbability slightly less obvious.) Of course, the poet clearly relished the opportunity for word-play with μήτις μήτις (405f., 410, 414, cf.515; 20.20)²⁸. But we may see a certain irony in Odysseus' choice of alias as his adventures lead him further and further away from the heroic world by which his identity has been defined, so

²⁵ *The Homeric Odyssey*, Cambridge 1955, ch.1. See also Hansen, 2002, pp. 289-301.

²⁶ Helsingfors 1904.

²⁷ See further Lewis, 1974, pp. 140-150.

²⁸ See further Schein, 1970, pp. 73-83.

that when he comes to Scheria he goes to some trouble to frustrate his hosts' very reasonable requests for his name, until he can be sure that it will not seem implausible for the man who first appeared among them as a wretched castaway to claim to have been the architect of the Greek victory at Troy.²⁹

On Page's view, which seems to be very widely accepted, the poet added these elements – inebriation and the Nobody trick – in adapting to Odysseus a pre-existing folktale. But their absence from later versions can be explained as the result of generalization and simplification, once the story ceased to be tied to Odysseus. It is a more edifying tale if the hero does not actually lie. The striking uniformity which has preserved the basic narrative in recognizable form, from Finland to Mongolia³⁰ rather suggests the predominance in oral tradition of a small number of popular intermediary versions.³¹

The belief that in Book 9 our poet adapted to Odysseus a story not originally associated with him, a folktale early diffused from some undetermined source, has suggested that more generally the poet was adapting to Odysseus themes and motifs drawn from folktale. It is of course easy to find in the *Motif Index of Folk Literature* parallels for Odysseus' vicissitudes, but it is not clear what is thus established. 'Folktale' may conveniently be contrasted with sophisticated literary creation, or with well documented factual narrative; orality is of its essence, but it is not in itself a useful literary category. Man-eating giants and witches with the power to change men into beasts for us belong to bedtime stories or to the milieux of Frodo and Harry Potter. Still, many people for much of human history have believed such beings to exist, among them, surely, the poet of the *Odyssey* and his audience. We do not believe either in a flat earth encircled by a freshwater river, but Oceanus was a staple of Greek geographical thought for many generations after Homer. Cannibals, witches, were-wolves, and shape-shifters are out of place where orderly human settlement is well established; they belong to the forest and wilderness, to country unfrequented by the unadventurous but where hunters and enterprising traders may be

²⁹ See further Austin, 1972, pp. 1-19; Gera, 2003, pp. 4-17.

³⁰ *OCD* ed. 3 s.v. Folk-tale (A. Griffiths).

³¹ See further O'Sullivan, 1987, 62, pp. 5-24.

deterred from progressing further by reports of monstrous creatures just beyond.

The *Odyssey's* proemium appears to imply a less fantastic version of the hero's *nostos* than what we read in Books 9–12, and it has seemed to some that we have the relics of such an earlier version in the cover-stories which Odysseus tells when he needs to conceal his identity back home in Ithaca (13.256ff., 14.199ff., 19.172ff.), in which his itinerary takes him by way of Crete, Thesprotia, and Egypt.³² (The story that he tells Laertes (24.304–14) is rather different, one among many indications that the end of the *Odyssey* comes from a different hand(s).) But the poet knew many ways to tell his story, and in the end decided that his hero's distinctive qualities were more effectively displayed in his dealings with beings who were more than a match for conventional human antagonists. To us, who admire the superior rationality of the *Iliad*, the prominence of magic and the supernatural in the *Odyssey* may seem retrograde. But in the resourcefulness and determination with which Odysseus confronts dangers for which the heroic warrior's code offered no guidance, we see the triumph of qualities more relevant to the poet's world, and to ours. Horace's characterization of Odysseus (*Epistles* 1.2.17ff.) involves some idealization, but the ultimate success of the hero *adversis rerum immersabilis undis* highlights the power of ingenuity and patience to overcome apparently overwhelming odds.

Such, when I first visited Krakow in October 1987, appeared to be the situation of classical scholarship under socialism. It is a pleasure to pay tribute to those who laboured to maintain high standards in adversity, and cause for profound regret that Professor Turasiewicz could not long enjoy his hard-earned retirement.

³² This view was pioneered by W. J. Woodhouse, *The Composition of Homer's Odyssey*, Oxford 1930, p. 25-28, 126-136; however, he weakened his case by presenting the hypothetical earlier version as historical, 'the real experiences of the real Odysseus on the way home from Troy'. See now Reece, 1994, pp. 157-173. On Odysseus' cover-stories generally see Grossardt, 1998.

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