

Bogdan Bogdanov: *As you set out for Ithaka*

The *Odyssey* revolves around one central character – this is what Aristotle says in his *Poetics* and this is what distinguishes the *Iliad* from the *Odyssey*, because in the *Iliad* there are more characters, while in the *Odyssey* there is one story connected with one character - Ὀδυσσεύς.

The *Odyssey* as a text reveals a somewhat better internal cohesiveness; its cohesion is not as consistent as that of one song or a separate scene – those are a lot more close-knit. This is so, because back in those times there was an ideal for a work of art to be heard out in its entirety, and one cannot listen for very long periods of time. However, the *Odyssey* is very cohesive and shows one small pitfall – whether to link the pieces in one way or another and what its aboutness should be read to be. It starts with a song-exposition – the first song which sets the topic very clearly. At the outset there is a piece of advice from a god, which lucidly, the way Greeks do it, and without further ado, formulates a problem. The problem in the eyes of the gods is that Odysseus has already been roaming round the world for too long, which is undeserved and unfair – say the gods who love him, which is why he should hasten back home, and this is how such a divine decision has been quickly made. However, he cannot return home, because he has angered Poseidon and the god stands in Odysseus' way. Of course, other impediments also exist, but Poseidon's interference is a high-ranking problem which can only be solved only with advice from a god. Things happen, for whatever reason, however here, in the realm of the epic, they take place because gods so decide. Occurrences are not coincidental.

Both the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* present us with a picture which we, modern people, find so difficult to grasp: we cannot see how a man connected with other people changes, becoming bigger or smaller, or different in any other way. It is what modern sociologists call a “modular mind” and scrutinise scrupulously that is presented to us in epic poems. Man is a modular creature; he is not just one integral person, he has, by necessity, one or another self: he is one type of person with friends, another – with all the people; he keeps shifting egos – and it is not Man who matters in this narrative, but such is the epic perspective. What really matters, however, is what becomes of him in the end and what presents this modular personality to the world. And what do we see in this epic poem – a home with no master – and this is wrong and unacceptable. The idea of welfare is that well-being befits a house with a master. The well-being pertains to the master, but this is how it is also shared with the others. The individual well-beings of different people should be perfectly attuned with each other. The master's welfare of Odysseus, which is what the poem is to take care of, as it will take him home and help him slay all the suitors and take control over things as they used to be before his departure. However, welfare is also a joint state with others. Nowadays this sounds conditional, we live with a type of poetics that we inherited from Romanticism: everyone has their essence and fights for it; for this essence Man needs to fight with others who more often than not stand in his way - the state stands in his way, traditions stand in his way - but sooner or later Man overcomes the impediments and achieves his essence. Then, if you were to approach him and ask: “you live by virtue of your essence, can you name it?” the man, of course, will be unable to name precisely what his essence is. But does a man have one essence? Of course – he has an essence-soul, but there are impediments in its way too. And what, if you tell someone “you seem to have more than one essence, why are you one – on one occasion and a different person – on another”?

If we do not read carefully, we may miss the fact that the text is not in the least interested in what precisely Odysseus is, but in getting Odysseus to be as many essential things as possible – to be reckless, cunning, smart, stupid, to behave in a number of different ways. *The Odyssey* has a plot that

lets Man be multilayered – as we all are, with no exception – however, with a conscience that will not let us be any random thing, but disciplines us to be one and the same character all through. As we cleverly say: “I am a good person. I am good at all times”, we strive for a firm identity. However, identity is not firm - and that is why the plot meanders.

We should never think of the theme of home-coming as trivial – because we are so fond of it. Now I am going to read for you a poem by Cavafy, which is widely known – the poem *Ithaca*, despite the fact that this is a very difficult poem, and a poem in translation. Thus, the theme is home-coming, but also - achievement, attainment, to have and to have not. A man is a man inasmuch as he possesses things. Odysseus, having set foot in Ithaca, sees to it with the help of Athena that he brings abundant gifts given to him by the Phaeacians, and he stores them safely in a cave, and then he goes to see his faithful swineherd, Eumaios in his hut – an interesting scene to watch: the presentation of the two characters – a master and a slave. The picture is fascinating: a slave and his master deep in conversation with one another and in complete rapport and utter absorption. First of all, the slave inevitably needs a master, and the master unflinchingly pretends to be an ordinary man, while in the course of telling their stories, it turns out that the slave used to be a master, but it so happened that he became a slave. Stories can only be told of masters. And only a master, in his guise as a slave can tell that something ever happened to him. Because it is a given that that masters are those that have a modular personality, and masters have things happen to them. Ordinary people cannot expect anything to happen to them, they are stuck to a master and trail in the wake of whatever happens to their master. This is the epic idea of Man. It is not a happy one in our eyes, because we all think of ourselves as people with a history, some of us insist on being masters, or course, and we build our stories in a totally different vein.

Aristarchus, a great philologist from the 2nd century, claims that the *Odyssey* ends in the 23rd song. Maybe he is right. Probably it also begins with the 5th song. And perhaps it was someone else who added the *Telemachy* in the beginning. However, we have one song, number 24, that is not on a par with the First Song, not as well structured – which, however, ends in a triumphant chord with something very positive – Odysseus, having been recognized by all, goes on to be recognized by his own ancient father as well. So the nexus is: Odysseus returns to Ithaca, not simply to his homeland, but he also regains his position as Penelope’s beloved husband, becomes king, having dealt with the suitors, and becomes the Odysseus he has always been. However, the story goes on, as song 11 tells us, because Poseidon will not forgive him and he will only stay home for a short while before he continues his never-ending quest through the world. Cavafy’s interpretation of this great Greek theme, which is truly Greek, but which we can hardly grasp because it is something about which we need to make a choice – whether to be home and stay there, or to move away and come back to our country, or to leave it altogether.

You see that when it comes to construing a model of life, the Greek has done it in his traditional way – that nothing is sweeter than being bonded with a piece of land, moreover - with a barren one, such as Ithaca – but it is just as wonderful to be far away from this home and to see so many wonderful and weird things, as can be seen in the Cyclops’ cave. Here is what Cavafy says:

*As you set out for Ithaka
hope the voyage is a long one,
full of adventure, full of discovery.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
angry Poseidon—don’t be afraid of them:
you’ll never find things like that on your way*

*as long as you keep your thoughts raised high,
as long as a rare excitement
stirs your spirit and your body.
Laistrygonians and Cyclops,
wild Poseidon—you won't encounter them
unless you bring them along inside your soul,
unless your soul sets them up in front of you.*

(C.P. Cavafy, *Collected Poems*. Translated by Edmund Keeley and Philip Sherrard. Edited by George Savidis. Revised Edition. Princeton University Press, 1992)

There is nothing from the *Odyssey*, not a word about soul. Odysseus keeps talking about his heart, his thought and soul are subsumed in his heart – but the soul is not problematic, the trouble comes with the world out there. That is why the plot meanders. However, there is the soul here, too.

*Hope the voyage is a long one.
May there be many a summer morning when,
with what pleasure, what joy,
you come into harbors seen for the first time;
may you stop at Phoenician trading stations
to buy fine things,
mother of pearl and coral, amber and ebony,
sensual perfume of every kind—
as many sensual perfumes as you can;
and may you visit many Egyptian cities
to gather stores of knowledge from their scholars.*

Nowhere in the *Odyssey* does the main protagonist say “how happy am I” to visit so many places and to see so many wonderful things, but still he does not appear unhappy, either. Indeed, he is happy, although he never admits it. He says that he wants back in his homeland Ithaca and, indeed, this is where he is heading. There is nothing original in that. All the characters after the collapse of Troy return to their homes. What else could they do; where else could they go. However, this is what the modern reading says:

*Keep Ithaka always in your mind.
Arriving there is what you are destined for.
But do not hurry the journey at all.*

But Odysseus is, indeed, in no hurry!

*Better if it lasts for years,
so you are old by the time you reach the island,
wealthy with all you have gained on the way,
not expecting Ithaka to make you rich.*

Ithaca has nothing to give him, because it is poor.

*Ithaka gave you the marvelous journey.
Without her you would not have set out.
She has nothing left to give you now.*

A modern viewpoint of someone who sees man as an authentic soul. And as a conversation of man with himself. Odysseus does not see himself as an authentic soul. He thinks of himself as a master who is lucky to be connected with Athena, who seems to be as clever as him, but, of course, has her sight set farther than he could ever see.

*And if you find her poor, Ithaka won't have fooled you.
Wise as you will have become, so full of experience,
you will have understood by then what these Ithakas mean.*

You see it, do you not, that what matters is “you who want to come back and travel” rather than the story in the Odyssey. The opportunity to read the Odyssey from the point of view of Cavafy, which is a wonderful viewpoint, but a dangerous one – because this is what we have been raised to ever since the time of Romanticism – although we think that this is our nature. Therefore, bear in mind – nothing is less pleasing in our modern intellectual environment than the fact that a man may consider the Romantic concept of Man a revelation of his own. The moment a man adopts this type of thinking, he certainly generates energy and is capable of becoming a great poet and writer, but he does not develop a thinking of his own – he just builds up a contextual contingency. The Odyssey is the reason why we query our own personal contextual positioning. This is why I want you to read the Odyssey and ancient Greek literature, because they take us to a new perspective, which is different from our own but it is not different from our life. We are split between a viewpoint we adopt and our own life, which differs from it.

The moment I see a man contradict himself every ten minutes – I am not outraged. This is precisely what the human condition is like – to enter different relationships while the identity adapts to each of these relationships in a peculiar way. Our big lesson from literature is this. And this is the literature we have chosen to read.