

THE ODYSSEY OF POLITICAL THEORY

THE POLITICS OF DEPARTURE
AND RETURN



Patrick J. Deneen

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To the memory of my grandmother

Wilma L. Dionne

1917–2000

storyteller, reader, and Muse

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Preface



Only with utmost difficulty will I resist again resorting to the inviting resonance of the word *odyssey* to describe the long and halting path of this book. I suspect that all authors must travel a trying and circuitous route, so the subject of my study—the *Odyssey* of Homer as a work of political theory and the ways that the work has been understood, interpreted, or even misinterpreted in the history of political thought—gives me little right to its exclusive use. Yet, along the way, although I have encountered many obstacles that to me have been as daunting, if not as dangerous, as those faced by Odysseus, unlike Odysseus—who only found true friendship at the end of his journey—I have had the help of friends, old and new, from the outset.

This book began, as many first books do, as a dissertation and, perhaps not unlike many dissertations, had its origins amid the many conversations with my friends from graduate school. I can recall the first time I floated the idea of pursuing Homer's *Odyssey* as a subject of political inquiry. My friends Joseph Romance, Clifford Fox, and Deirdre Condit supported the idea, I would like to think, on its merits; however, their enthusiasm was perhaps magnified by the libations that we liberally shared at Tumulty's pub, where, half joking, we imagined that the bar stools might eventually be inscribed with our names in honor of our long patronage.

I am deeply grateful to my teachers at Rutgers University, especially to Benjamin R. Barber, whose early support of this idea convinced me that it was worth pursuing and whose continued friendship has, at several points, made a difference in my life path for the better. P. Dennis Bathory taught the first undergraduate course I attended—a fact that he acknowledges with a grimace—which, I still recall, was devoted to an exploration of the meaning of Plato's "Allegory of the Cave." He posed a conundrum that continued to fascinate me for many years, and my furtive attempts to add to the vast literature on Plato in the pages that follow are a testament to our attempts to come to terms with Plato's meaning on that warm afternoon almost two decades ago. Arlene Saxonhouse served as an outside reader on my dissertation and asked questions that I still ponder and have tried to answer, I'm sure in ways that would provoke more searching and thoughtful questions.

At Princeton I have gained valuably from the insights of my colleagues, especially George Kateb, who continues to insist, perhaps rightly, that I am too hard on Achilles; and Maurizio Viroli, whose prowess at soccer is the closest analogue I have witnessed to a kind of Homeric athletic virtue in today's academia. Parts of the manuscript were read by "students"—I use the term loosely because I guiltily realize that often I learn more from them than I suspect they do from me—and among them I am especially grateful to Lynn Robinson and Jonathan Allen for their generous comments.

The manuscript was also read by Norma Thompson and Michael Davis for Rowman & Littlefield, both of whom "revealed" themselves to me after encouraging the project. Each provided a wealth of suggestions on how I might improve the manuscript, and I have attempted to address many of their points. Jacob Howland subsequently read the manuscript, in a gesture of extraordinary kindness. I am deeply grateful to Jacob for his extensive comments and for sharing his ranging knowledge of Greek thought. Steve Wrinn at Rowman & Littlefield lent this project his enthusiastic support; and aside from his good taste in manuscripts, he is a good fellow to boot.

I have also benefited from material support from several sources. The Earhart Foundation generously provided assistance during the summer before the project's completion, and the Pew Foundation's Pew Evangelical Fellows Award allowed me to take a leave in the following semester as I completed the manuscript. Princeton University provided additional research assistance for preparation of the manuscript. Susan McWilliams and James Mastrangelo quite miraculously transformed the rough collection of citations into a consistent whole.

Special thanks are owed to my mentor and friend, Wilson Carey McWilliams, who showed me that literature, politics, and philosophy are rightly pursued together. More importantly, I thank him for showing me that one's academic life does not exist at a remove from how one can live one's life generally. Generosity, laughter, and beauty of expression deserve an honored place within the university.

If this book wouldn't have been started without Carey, it never would have been finished without the care and support of my family—my wife, Inge, and our sons, Francis and Adrian. Sometimes I suspect that my praise of *nostos*—homecoming—to which Odysseus dedicates himself is not wholly derived from my understanding of the *Odyssey* but, rather, reflects the warmth of the home to which I gladly return daily and from which I never really leave.

INTRODUCTION



Between Oikos and Cosmos

Until then I had thought each book spoke of things, human or divine, that lie outside books. Now I realized that not infrequently books speak of books: it is as if they spoke among themselves. In the light of this reflection, the library seemed all the more disturbing to me. It was then the place of a long, centuries-old murmuring, an imperceptible dialogue between one parchment and another, a living thing, a receptacle of powers not to be ruled by a human mind, a treasure of secrets emanated by many minds, surviving the deaths of those who had produced them or had been their conveyors.

—Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*

Contested Origins

Origins are contested objects, the battleground of self-definition on all fronts of today's culture wars.¹ How we define ourselves as human beings is deeply intertwined with commonly held stories about our respective beginnings as a person, a culture, or a polity. Among the first questions children formulate is "Where did I come from?" and among the first lessons they will have in school is the story of the founding of the United States. A family, a society, and a nation use origins as maintaining myths, precious to the continuance of an organization's spirit and serving as both reminders of past glory and, at times, correctives to contemporary shortcomings. These myths create order out of chaos by organizing our self-perception and our relationships to others—friends, acquaintances, and enemies. Mythic stories of origins are thus *limiting* tales, placing borders around the self and the self's understanding of others—perhaps out of necessity, given the ultimate limitations of human perception, but limitations nonetheless that can be contested at some level as arbitrary.

As a fabled unanimity about those origins attenuates over time, battles that seem out of proportion to the contested objects themselves can arise between various camps seeking to preserve, to amend, or even to overthrow stories about one's origins. The recent observance of the bicentennial of the U.S. Constitution and of the Bill of Rights was a source of simultaneous celebration of and contestation over origins, depending on one's understanding of the relative benefits or disadvantages brought about by the ratification of those documents. Some—such as former Chief Justice Warren Burger, who resigned his chair to head the Committee on the Bicentennial of the Constitution—sought to use the opportunity to renew America's common claim to the principles enunciated in the document. Others viewed it as a chance to point out the Constitution's inherent weaknesses, even its dubious claim to represent any population in its entirety.²

Similarly, the infamous "Battle of the Books" at Stanford University was also provoked by a series of sallies about contested origins, this time more broadly concerning the foundations of the West.³ The many-sided question of whether a select group of books can be defined as core to the Western tradition, or whether the Western tradition is in itself admirable and worthwhile, or even whether such a Western tradition could be said to exist was eagerly displayed by a variety of political spectrums in the 1980s and continues unabated into the present.⁴ The core curriculum, or canon, of Western thought at Stanford was swept aside in a wave of reformist fury against sexism, racism, and finally Westernism. By the time the debate ended, formerly required readings by such authors as Plato, Dante, Machiavelli, Marx, and Freud and books such as the Bible, the *Odyssey*, and the *Aeneid* were no longer required reading for Stanford's students; they were replaced by whatever was chosen by individual professors. Even any concept of shared origins was rejected, suggesting that the students' lack of common origin was in itself a defining feature of American identity—multiculturalism as a simultaneously shared and separating norm. The pluralism set into play by the U.S. Constitution was apparently applicable to the university as well, now better defined as a "multiversity" because it was no longer in any sense unified.

The two debates at roughly the same time—one concerning the U.S. Constitution and one regarding the Western canon—share some striking resemblances and, indeed, emanate out of the same intellectual divisions. The American polity was founded uniquely on the basis of documents; as Alexander Hamilton wrote at the outset of the *Federalist*, the American founding was one that provoked the question of "whether societies of men are really capable or not of establishing good government from reflection and choice, or whether they are forever destined to depend for their political constitutions on accident and force."⁵ Partaking of the unique *writtenness* of the Western tradition, the Constitution is in some

senses the culmination of Enlightenment theories that *ideas* rather than custom and accident should be the ruling principle of polities. Even this apparent Enlightenment view is suffused with traditions dating from the Middle Ages, from church documents and edicts of nobility, and even from the antiquity of Greece and Rome, where written philosophy sought to convince that reason and persuasion should rule over opinion and arbitrary force. The debate over the Constitution was effectively based on the same arguments used in the debate over the Western canon.

On the one side, traditionalists sought to defend the written text or texts against the claims of reformers who argued, on the more moderate side, that other texts were relevant and deserved inclusion and, in the more extreme case, that the written classics were instruments of repression and should be criticized or excised altogether rather than revered. In the debate over the Constitution's meaning, this ground had been well-prepared by the confirmation hearings of Judge Robert Bork in 1986, who claimed that the Constitution's exact words alone, informed by the intentions of the Framers, should be the guiding text for judges seeking to apply constitutional standards to state and federal laws. Critics of this view contended that the Constitution was fundamentally undefinable in the manner Judge Bork claimed, or that the Constitution should be subject to considerations of "evolving standards," or even that the Framers had intended that future generations should not be held captive to any literal reading of the Constitution.⁶ Similarly, in the debate about the canon, reformers argued that works other than those select few by "dead white males" should be included in the required reading lists of college freshmen.⁷

The critique of the canon is surprising and ironic, coming as it does almost without exception from intellectuals on the Left who don the postmodernist mantle. Their attack on the monolithic, repressive canon in fact contradicts the postmodernist creed that signifiers are protean, that the written word is finally resistant to final interpretive definition, and that even authorial intentions are irrelevant to determining meaning.⁸ Critics of the canon have created a straw man—an extraordinarily stationary one—whose existence otherwise contradicts postmodernist literary theory; for contained within the "authoritative" list of books that defined, for example, the Stanford "Great Books" courses, are countless contradictions, dichotomies, and intellectual disagreements. Taken as a whole, those works that compose what is recognized as the canon—as much as what books should be included—represent an ongoing battlefield, from Aristotle's critique of Plato's *Republic* to Rousseau's rejection of Locke and Hobbes's state of nature, from Luther's demolishing of Aquinas to Marx's re-vision of Hegel. Such a canon of books, then, is not a source of undying and unchanging norms as its critics suggest but is, in fact, a storehouse of unsolved and even ongoing debates,

including the very debate over the validity of canons: in addition to Luther's attack on the Catholic doctrine of received tradition, recall the *Querelle des Anciens et des Modernes*.⁹

Those who seek to defend the canon largely play into the hands of its critics, adopting this monolith as in some sense worthy of defense. Typical of such attempts is that of William J. Bennett, former secretary of education in the Reagan administration. He severely criticized the reform of the Western civilization core at Stanford, lamenting that "American colleges and Universities [have] given up on what was once a central task: the study of a core curriculum, a set of fundamental courses, ordered, purposive, and coherent, that should constitute the central, foundational part of the liberal education."¹⁰ Core curricula on Western culture are consistently defended by Bennett because they are "important": why they are important is "self-evident."¹¹ If critics of the canon joust at an immobile straw man, conservatives such as Bennett prop him up nicely for the kill. Although Bennett noted that Western culture is "the most self-critical of cultures," the validity of such self-criticism evidently does not extend to current critics of the West.¹² If the canon according to the Left is an invariable repository of repression and inequality, the canon according to the Right is an invariable repository of virtue and high culture. In the creation of this contested monolith, the Left and the Right come out well defined, but any reasoned discussion of the canon's internal dynamics—including the dynamic of internal contradiction and constant re-creation—is lost.¹³

Typical to many of the debates comprising the "Culture Wars," both the Left and the Right seized the ground at the extremes, leaving the middle undefended and even unnoticed. Both the Left and the Right created and fostered the straw man called the canon for rhetorical purposes. Despite the Left's seeming dedication to postmodernist literary theories, many of those on the Left refused to turn such theories introspectively on the "repressive" literature they sought to reject. And in spite of the apparent dedication of those on the Right to the works of the canon, they ignored that the individual works that comprise their beloved canon are contradictory, subversive, and even, at times, leftist. If it can be said that there is a canon—and laying aside all cant, thinkers on both the Left and the Right would have to admit that what is canonical can and has changed throughout space and time—then it is not entirely "self-evident" that such works that comprise this canon, when actually *read* and interpreted, always and everywhere transmit the same enduring message (whether repressive or virtuous).

In a sense, both the Left and the Right were correct to see the specter or the vision of authority in the canon, even if they both overlook its internally subversive dynamic. In the Greek, *kanōn* means "a straight rod," a "ruler," and hence "standard" or "norm." A canon is "established" in order to afford such standards;

yet, inasmuch as a literary canon, and even a religious one, is subject to interpretation and even to fundamental change, its constancy as a standard-bearer is dubious. At issue are two different but not unrelated definitions of *canon*. The first definition consists of a list, like that famous list of books that was the subject of Stanford's Battle of the Books. This contested list is like a photo negative of the Catholic Church's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum*. Conservatives sought to stake out and to defend a specific list of accepted titles, whereas more radical critics attempted either to modify the list (for example, to include nondead, nonwhite, nonmales) or to eliminate the list, and hence its authoritative claim, altogether.

Although this first definition of *canon* claims much of the attention paid by the media and the general public to this debate—inevitably due to the very nature of lists, which simplifies complicated matters—the second definition is much more fluid and changing than either its defenders or critics suggest. Given that such a shifting set of books is not a singular work of museum art but a temporal accumulation of contested and contesting words, the entire configuration of this supposed monolith is subject to constant change as new works are added to it and as new interpretations of existing works surface through the dense secondary literature that invariably seeks to accord or to rescind canonical status. Jorge Luis Borges (a canonical or anticanonical author?) made precisely this point in a provocative essay entitled “Kafka and His Precursors,” in which he relates how once Kafka had written his haunting stories and novels, one could never again read his precursors in the same light. Had Kafka never written a line, Borges writes, one would not read the poems of Browning, for example, in quite the same light they are now read. “The fact is that every writer *creates* his own precursors.”¹⁴ Borges's observation is profound: rather than suggesting a fixed canon of unchanging works, he posits that with the addition of each new canonical work, the seemingly fixed words that preceded it (while not changing in its black-and-white form) change ever so imperceptibly in *meaning*. Stated less radically than Borges, T. S. Eliot wrote that “what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it . . . ; the whole existing order must be, if ever so slightly, altered.”¹⁵ The past influences the creation of the present; but like the ripples of a stone thrown in water, the ripples emanate back to shore. So, too, the present influences the perception of the past.

If the canon can be defined in any way, it is perhaps by the inclusion of those works that have perpetually challenged human beings in their attempts at self-understanding, works that have remained relevant to human concerns and aspirations despite changes in politics and technology, works that have adamantly resisted interpretive closure and, hence, have ever beckoned new generations to sharpen their wits against the pages of those works. As such, the very meaning of

the word *canon* at some level contradicts the defining features that constitute the canon: such works do not represent a “rule” per se as much as, in one guise, an ongoing inquiry into how such ruling principles are arrived at. They are works that do not necessarily provide answers to the many questions they pose but rather pose those questions in endlessly provocative ways. If such works do provide answers, those answers can be no more than, in the words of Benjamin Barber, “a provisional resting point for knowledge and conduct.”¹⁶ Together they compose what Sheldon Wolin, referring to interpretations of the Constitution, has called a “public hermeneutic” in which no one voice dictates its final answer to the rest.¹⁷ The canon is itself a dialogue, one of profound depth and disagreement, one that does not permit easy conclusions.

Philosophy versus Poetry

A profound irony lies at the heart of this contemporary debate. Those on the Left defend the values of multiculturalism against the conforming magic that the canon proposes; those on the Right defend the universal truths that the canon affords its students. The Left assumes a stance of particularism against intrusive universalism; the Right succors universalism against the devolving ferocities of particularism. Such posturing was not always the case. Traditionally, the Left, as defined by the thought deriving from the Enlightenment, has sought the overthrow of cultural, political, and religious particularism by appealing to such universal values as liberty, equality, and human rights as derived solely from the dictates of reason. In response, the Right attempted to preserve—to *conserve*—the particular customs and practices that constitute a given society against the radically universalizing tendencies of liberal thought, expressed most cogently in the work of Edmund Burke and recently in the work of Michael Oakeshott.

The Left, especially those branches represented by liberalism and Marxism, has historically aligned itself with appeals to universal truths that cut across national and ethnic lines. Developed most fully in the Enlightenment, this universalist project is captured in such works as the *Encyclopedia*, or, as it was fully titled, *Encyclopédie, ou Dictionnaire universel des arts et des sciences*. The attempt at *universality* was explicitly set forth in the editorial plan of the *Encyclopédie* by Diderot, who, although claiming to respect national differences, revealed his true regard for such prejudices:

In all cases where a national prejudice would seem to deserve respect, the particular article ought to set it respectfully forth, with its whole procession of attractions and probabilities. But the edifice of mud ought to be overthrown and an unprofitable heap of dust scattered to the wind, by references to articles in which solid principles serve as a base for the opposite truths. This way of undeceiving men operates promptly on

minds of the right stamp, and it operates infallibly and without any troublesome consequences, secretly and without disturbance, on minds of every description.¹⁸

Such sentiments, abhorring local and particularist sentiments, culminated in the French “Declaration of the Rights of Man and Citizen” of 1789, declaring the inviolability of “the natural, inalienable, and sacred rights of man.” These rights, notably, applied first and foremost to “*hommes*,” not “*citoyens*”; where regimes did not recognize such rights, they nevertheless derived from each person’s inherent humanity. Thus could Condorcet write that he sought the improvement not merely of the French, but “that the perfection of man is truly indefinite.”¹⁹

In explicit reaction to these universalizing doctrines of the Enlightenment and to the attempt to put them into practice in the French Revolution, conservatives (or, according to some, reactionaries) such as Edmund Burke and Joseph de Maistre appealed to the dignity of existing custom, the practicality of prejudice, and the steadiness of tradition. Burke scoffed:

Whilst they [the Revolutionaries] are possessed by these notions, it is vain to talk to them of the practice of their ancestors, the fundamental laws of their country, the fixed form of a constitution, whose merits are confirmed by the solid test of long experience. . . . They have “the rights of men.” Against these there can be no prescription; against these no agreement is binding: these admit no temperament and no compromise: anything withheld from their full demand is so much fraud and injustice. Against these rights of men let no government look for security in the length of its continuance, or in the justice and lenity of its administration.²⁰

This condemnation of the universalizing, uncompromising, and leveling philosophy of the Enlightenment was trenchantly echoed by Maistre, who similarly attacked the Declaration of the Rights of Man: “There is no such thing as a *man* in the world. I have seen, during my life, Frenchmen, Italians, Russians, etc. . . . But as far as *man* is concerned, I declare that I have never in my life met him; if he exists, he is unknown to me.”²¹ Beyond the empirical *falsehood* of wholly rationalist claims to universal humanity are the *dangers* that accrue when applying such rational theories to the unruly reality of particularist politics, attempting to fit particular customs and circumstances into the Procrustean straightjacket of reason.²²

Until recently, this gaping division between the traditional Left and the traditional Right has been the defining feature of modern political philosophy. Even of late an astute political observer such as Leo Strauss could define *liberal* theory as “homogeneity grasped by reason” and *conservative* theory as “heterogeneity unfolded through tradition.”²³ Recently, however, the reversal that has taken place has been noted by perceptive critics, notably Todd Gitlin, who has lamented the Left’s embrace of the particularistic doctrine formerly claimed by the Right.

The right, traditionally the custodian of the privileges of the few, now speaks in an apparently general language of merit, reason, individual rights, and virtue that transcends politics, whereas much of the left is so preoccupied with debunking generalizations and affirming the differences among groups—real as they often are—that it has ceded the very language of universality that is its birthright. . . . The left and the right have traded places, at least with respect to the sort of universalist rhetoric that can still stir the general public. Unable to go beyond the logic of identity politics, the left has ceded much political high ground to the right.²⁴

Gitlin dates this shift to the student movement of the 1960s, when civil rights for blacks and equal rights for women began to move the Left to identify reform with group-based politics and into identity politics in which not rights but self-definition and group identity became the goals of reform. In response, the Right ironically called on the Left to cease politicizing debates by appeals to group identity—“ironically” because for centuries the Right had claimed that a form of traditional group identity centered around the nation was the only *legitimate* form of politics.

Recent developments, however, suggest that some thinkers on the Left and the Right are seeking to return to their more traditional positions vis-à-vis their sympathy or condemnation of the Enlightenment. Critics of the multiculturalist position have arisen in order to recover a form of universalism and rationality that accords with the cosmopolitan outlook of the Enlightenment. Not willing to cede to the Right the mantle of universalism (which they have rightly suspected was never a comfortable fit) thinkers like Martha Nussbaum, Russell Jacoby, David Hollinger, Todd Gitlin, and Stephen Eric Bronner, among others, have sought to reclaim for the Left a vision of transcendence beyond clan, region, or nation that regards suspiciously what they view as an overly deterministic assignment of identity according to ethnicity, race, gender, or any number of inescapable factors.²⁵ Ranging from arguments about the need for a “postethnic” understanding that recognizes that “most individuals live in many circles simultaneously” to the lament that the embrace of multiculturalism has led to the “end of utopia” because “with few ideas of how a future is to be shaped, they embrace all ideas,” like-minded thinkers *on the Left* have pointed out many of the excesses of the multicultural position.²⁶

Homer’s Canon

Winnowing through the many books and articles that were written in roughly the decade from the mid-1980s to the mid-1990s, when the Cold War was ending and the culture wars heated up, one is struck by the great anger, accusation, recrimination, denial, and defensiveness in those writings. Reading the almost

countless pages that were written in that ten-year period, one can see the same stories being told over and over again. Bogeymen of various ideological stripes were brought onstage to terrify the packed house of like-minded observers. Conservatives would hiss at Paul de Man, at Jesse Jackson at Stanford, at “the masturbating girl” in Jane Austen; others on the opposite side would drag out “the killer ‘B’s” —William Bennett, Allan Bloom, and Saul Bellow—for resounding disapproval. Name-calling abounded: *The Closing of the American Mind* was called “Hitleresque” by one scholar, according to Roger Kimball;²⁷ whereas one of the more grotesque epithets on the Right remained Rush Limbaugh’s use of the cobbled word “feminazis.” Everywhere scowls were evident.

Curiously, it is the canon itself that may tell the most, or may tell most deeply, about these contemporary debates. One figure among many cropped up more often, perhaps, than any other, a name dropped often alongside Plato, Shakespeare, Dante, and Cervantes, a figure consciously invoked for his ancient authority and sometimes reputed wisdom—Homer. For many, more than any other figure, Homer represented the West because he represented Greece, and Greece prefigured and determined the West. Homer became either *the* standard around which conservatives would circle their wagons or one of the primary objects of criticism among the multicultural Left.

The very title of a recent book lamenting the decline of classical studies in the university by Victor Davis Hanson and John Heath insists on this identification. To the question posed by their title, *Who Killed Homer?*, Hanson and Heath answer, those classicists who no longer either teach Homer seriously or attend to the virtues of antiquity. By contrast, they hope to revive “the meaning and significance of this ancient Greek vision of life—what we mean in our title by Homer—and the consequences for the modern world for its complete abandonment. Homer is the first and best creative dividend of the *polis*, and so serves as a primer for the entire, subsequent world of the Greeks.”²⁸ For Hanson and Heath, as for Werner Jaeger before them, Homer represents “Greek Wisdom”: he is the “Educator of Greece,” the authority whose “ideas and values . . . have shaped and defined all of Western civilization.”²⁹

For proponents of multiculturalism, if Homer were to remain at all, he was not to be revered as a source of authority nor imbibed as a font of timeless wisdom, but presented as an example of cultural particularity, an exemplar of early, Greek, Western, male thought. All cultures and traditions were to be viewed as equal, not allowing one to make judgments between and among them. If conservatives looked to a tradition that appealed at some level to commonality, for example, a tradition that might unite all people of the West or bind Americans by means of a documentary heritage, others saw only difference as defining humans across time and place. Barbara Herrnstein Smith, a multiculturalist, related that “there is no knowledge, no standard, no choice that is objective. Even Homer

is a product of a specific culture, and it is possible to imagine cultures in which Homer would not be very interesting."³⁰ Similarly, Stanley Fish has contended that "*it is difference all the way down*; difference cannot be managed by measuring it against the common because the shape of the common is itself differential."³¹ Ironically, in the debate in which one side declared that all cultures were distinct and at some level incomparable and the other insisted on the superiority of Western culture for its universalist claims, the universalists often became cultural nationalists and the multiculturalists, through their critique of conservatives, at times slipped into a stronger denunciation of that Western tradition than their relativist position otherwise should have allowed them.³²

Homer, then, appeared on stage either as, according to Hanson and Heath, a source of all wisdom about not only the West but also humankind, or as an irrelevant cipher that might draw us away from relevant social concerns. Leaving aside these extreme and, in my view, misleading views of antiquity, what I would like to suggest in the subsequent chapters is that Homer, especially through the *Odyssey*, is neither of these two things, neither savior nor bogeyman, but rather that he was among the first authors to raise the questions that animate this current debate without himself ultimately succumbing too easily and securely to any one position. Stating this of course, I argue that Homer is closer to the first position—a source of some wisdom—than to the second—an irrelevant cipher—but for reasons different from those often argued by traditionalists. What is particularly fascinating about the *Odyssey* in particular is the extent to which it seems to be in part animated by some of the same fundamental causes that underlie this current debate. In traveling the world of the known and the unknown, the world of beasts, gods, and even the dead, Odysseus is confronted by the question of whether one can escape one's culture, in a sense one's apparent destiny. Of course, Odysseus insists on his return and secures it after awesome effort and travail. Nevertheless, we sense that he is not the same for it. Although the *Odyssey* can at one level be seen as asserting the primacy and undeniability of the claims of culture—indicated by Odysseus's homecoming—at the same time it seems to indicate the possibility of at least limited transcendence reflected in Odysseus's constant if dangerous willingness to partake of divine or beastly qualities that are most often forbidden to humanity.

The Political Theory of the *Odyssey* and the Odyssey of Political Theory

Thus, Odysseus is the consummate wayfarer, the man of the sea, the sky, and the underworld; but he is also a man dedicated to *nostos*, return to hearth and home.

He can be, as in the *Iliad*, as great a warrior as any of the leading soldiers, yet also a trickster as crafty as Hermes. He can be a tender lover and father figure, as seen in the touching departure scene from Nausicaa, a scene that inspired Goethe to begin a play on the theme. And yet Odysseus can be a vicious and unforgiving bringer of vengeance, exhibited most gruesomely through the savage execution he arranges for the suitors and their helpers. The breadth of his character was the central inspiration for James Joyce in writing his modern retelling of the *Odyssey*, *Ulysses*: only one so simultaneously homely yet weighty as Odysseus could be transformed into the wandering Irish Jew, Leopold Bloom; it is difficult to imagine Achilles or Hector assuming that role. Homer was clearly aware of Odysseus's chameleon—or better, protean—character: as described in the opening line of the *Odyssey*, he is *polutropos*, an almost untranslatable word meaning “man of many devices or ways.”³³ He is a hero almost defined by his indefiniteness; a mirror whose reflection allows his interpreters to give him whatever form they want to see him take. Thus, throughout the centuries, Odysseus has been a receptacle for every age's hopes and aspirations, a conduit for every poet's imaginative flights, and a parodic figure for every detractor's condemnation.³⁴

As Pietro Boitani relates in *The Shadow of Ulysses*, much subsequent interpretation of Odysseus has hinged on one's understanding of the key episode in Book 11 of the *Odyssey*, in which Odysseus travels to Hades to hear from Teiresias the prediction of his future.³⁵ As Teiresias cryptically relates to Odysseus in the kingdom of the dead:

After you have killed these suitors in your palace,
 either by treachery, or openly with the sharp bronze,
 you must take up your well-shaped oar and go on a journey
 until you come where there are men living who know nothing
 of the sea, and who eat food that is not mixed with salt, who never
 have known well-shaped oars. . . .
 When, as you walk, some other wayfarer happens to meet you,
 and says you carry a winnow-fan on your bright shoulder,
 then you must plant your well-shaped oar in the ground, and render
 ceremonious sacrifice to the lord Poseidon. . . .
 Death will come to you from the sea (*thanatos de toi ex halos*), in
 some altogether unwarlike way, and it will end you
 in the ebbing time of sleek old age. Your people
 about you will be prosperous. All this is true that I tell you.
 (11.119–137)³⁶

There are two elements to Teiresias's prediction: (1) the description of the journey Odysseus must take far inland in the near future once he has secured justice at home; and (2) a description of the manner of his death in the more

distant future. In the first instance, the fact that Odysseus is destined to travel again proves significant in future portrayals of Odysseus's life subsequent to the end of the *Odyssey*: does he travel unwillingly, longing as ever to return to Penelope and his son Telemachus; or does Odysseus *polutropos* rapidly tire of the staid life of his island-kingdom, longing again for the open seas and the fabulous adventures they supply?³⁷ How one interpreted Odysseus's attitude toward the necessity of future travels—with glee or resignation—could be determined from one's perspective on Odysseus's character and indeed on how that character served as a model for human nature.

In the second instance, Teiresias's prediction of Odysseus's eventual death would perhaps prove even more central in determining the extent of Odysseus's commitment to humanity and his *polis*. There is uncertainty how best to interpret Teiresias's prediction that *thanatos de toi ex halos*, which can be rendered either "death shall come to you at sea" or "death shall come to you from out of the sea."³⁸ The Greek can imply either, as it seems to mean death shall come "by agency of the sea." According to the former interpretation of this passage, one can conclude that Odysseus will again be wandering when he meets his death—if he is at sea, then he will not be on Ithaca, an island. It was this interpretation that served as the basis for Dante's portrayal of Odysseus's end in the *Inferno*. The latter interpretation suggests he will be at home when someone or something lands on Ithaca from the sea and causes his death. A later epic arrived at the latter possibility, telling of a child by Odysseus and Circe seeking revenge on his father.³⁹

Less noticeable than literary renditions of Odysseus's wanderings, but no less frequent, have been the appeals to Odysseus as an exemplary figure by political theorists over the course of centuries, and for much the same reason as he has served as a *typos* in literature. As the redeemer who institutes Justice in his homeland or as the immoral originator of *raison d'état*, Odysseus has served often as both a positive and a negative example in the pages of political theory. Yet, beyond this relatively narrow definition of *politics* as the institution of political order, the story of the *Odyssey* has provided an understanding of politics that might be called typically Greek: a broader conception of relations between human beings that includes more than, as Hannah Arendt puts it, "counting noses," but rather attempts to form among individuals in a *polis* "the capacity for an 'enlarged mentality,'" a vision of commonality and association that bridges the loneliness of the single soul to the incomprehensible otherness of strangers.⁴⁰ It is this aspect of the *Odyssey*—the theme of human interconnectedness and yet the sometimes insurmountable gap that separates people from one another, either through physical or psychological barriers—to which political philosophers have returned repeatedly in attempting to describe (and to change) the prevailing understanding

of human nature. Depending on how the *Odyssey* was individually or collectively understood, one's answer to the possibility of real political community was arrived at through a rendering of Odysseus as either relentless traveler abroad or dedicated pursuer of *nostos*, homecoming.

What follows, then, is an exploration of the *Odyssey* as it might be understood politically and as it might be seen both as a work within the "canon" of political theory and as a work that, like most "canonical" works, finally resists easy inclusion or co-optation by any party or camp. From Odysseus's appearances in post-Homeric epic cycles to his frequent sightings in the plays and the philosophy of democratic Athens, from his transformation into the stoic Ulysses of imperial Rome to his punishment in Hell for *hubris* recorded by Dante, from his political portrayals by the bard of Stratford-on-Avon to Tennyson's scientific and colonial depiction, one realizes that Odysseus's odyssey merely began with the *Odyssey's* conclusion.⁴¹

Subsequent chapters in this book present an unfamiliar journey into the known: a revisitation of several "canonical" texts of political philosophy, viewing them through the character of Odysseus who appears in their pages so often and to such great effect. The choice of Homer's *Odyssey* for examining the vagaries of the canon of political theory is obvious for reasons other than its simple antiquity: the Homeric epics are among the oldest known Western texts; but, more important, they have served for centuries as a foundation in Western education. Yet, beyond the antiquity of the texts themselves, there is a less obvious but perhaps more compelling reason for exploring the *Odyssey* in particular. Odysseus for the first time embodies the dilemma of Western political philosophy and perhaps the human paradox more generally. He is, in one guise, the *universal man*, wandering the world and encountering the varieties of gods, beasts, and mankind above and below the earth. He constantly tempts the limits imposed on mortals, threatening his extinction as a mortal, either through death or immortality. His temptation by the Sirens best exemplifies his craving for universal knowledge: they sing that "over all the generous earth we know everything that happens" and offer to share that knowledge with Odysseus. Of course, such knowledge is deadly, but it is tempting nonetheless. The similar offer of immortality by Calypso represents the philosophic wish to escape the bonds of the mortal condition, to attain godlike wisdom. Although again a deadly wish, it is one often grasped by desperate mortals, as demonstrated by numerous humans in mythology who accepted the offer and were struck down for it.

In his other guise, Odysseus is the *particular man*: he is king, father, husband, son; his longing to return to the tiny kingdom of Ithaca, his home, is the paramount goal that fuels the action of the *Odyssey*. If he is tempted by the Sirens' offer, he makes sure beforehand that he is bound to the mast—perhaps the image

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