

THE HOMERIC ODYSSEY: MANIFESTO OF HUMAN CONSCIOUSNESS

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Effortlessly, the arrow leapt from the taunt string of the bow, accompanied by the stinging ring of the vibrations after the arrow had departed. Straight and true the arrow coursed through the aligned axe handles and thumped triumphantly as the point bit into the timbers at the other end of the room. With that shot, as the arrow twanged from its final position, those who had any inkling of consciousness would have known that the end was near. For, when Odysseus strung his bow he claimed his talisman of power and announced his true identity, without words, without fanfare, without equivocation. Yet, the slothful suitors remained unconscious of the reality which was about to descend on them. With that arrow (Od. XXI, 400-405), the temporal conjunction of past and present merged into the unfolding Homeric drama of the Odyssey, which in my opinion is the Manifesto of Human Consciousness.

My personal “mythology of mythology” is that mythology is about “consciousness.” Mythology focuses on three primary aspects of consciousness: phenomenetic, psychological and anthropic. Phenomenetic consciousness refers to the physical and factual elements of human experience—the world, the cosmos and all the phenomena we encounter. Psychological deals with the nature of self, both hidden and unknown aspects of psyche and archetypes. The anthropic consciousness deals with what it means to be fully human. The Odyssey explores all three of these aspects of human consciousness and boldly asserts the liberation and empowerment of human consciousness from the dark forces of the unexplored unconscious and the uncontrolled superstitious.

Beginning with Odysseus' son, Telemachus in Book I, the *Odyssey* deals with consciousness on the level of an individual becoming a man. At first, unconcerned with the presence of suitors in his mansion, Telemachus becomes increasingly conscious, as he matures, of the meaning and ramifications of those carousing interlopers constantly present in his environment. Little by little, as the drama unfolds, he becomes aware that their presence is inhibiting the natural order of things and they must go. With the assistance of the goddess Athena, Telemachus realizes he must go on his own "odyssey" to acquire news of the fate of his father and to claim his own identity. So Telemachus moves towards the consciousness of one who is as a man and as part of a larger legacy.

Meanwhile, Odysseus, trapped in the bed chamber of the goddess Calypso, has become increasingly conscious of the passage of time, and again with divine intervention is freed from the entrapment of libido, of which Freud was so fond (Od. V). Once freed from the psychological bondage via a craft of his own making, Odysseus casts his fortune again on the fathomless depths of the wine dark sea. Eventually, he is washed ashore on the lands of the Phaiakians (Od. VI), where he finally tells the tales for which the *Odyssey* is best known. But these tales are not told in the first person in real time, but as the retrospections of a person who has come, through privation and hardship, to understand the meaning of his own experience. In short, Odysseus is conscious of the fuller meaning of his own experience, including his own strengths and shortcomings. Each of these stories could be analyzed from the phenomenetic, psychological or anthropic perspectives. Space does not permit that here.

Odysseus tells of the Lotus Eaters, who like addicts and inebriates everywhere represent the psychological entrapment of seductive life styles—unproductive and incapable of ever reaching the shores of home. There is the tale of the escape from the blinded dream

monster Cyclops which then leads to the bedchamber of Kirke. Odysseus, wayfarer and shaman encounters the shades of the underworld, seeking the input of the sage Teresias. And, of course, the famous story of the Sirens—where he alone faces the music of the incomparable call to self-destruction. Then there are the dueling disasters of Charbydis and Skylla—who like life will take a toll but we must proceed onward or perish. As the *Odyssey* unfolds we discover life doesn't always work out the ways it's supposed to. Rather than starve to death, Odysseus' shipmates choose to eat of Helios' flock and the certain death which comes as a direct consequence of such difficult choices. The consequences of such choices are not just psychological, but also entail consequences in the phenomenal world.

Each of these stories is rendered by Odysseus, not as a psychological chronicle, but as an existential exposition of the pain, difficulty and complexity of the sojourner's life. As the raider of cities shares his story, we realize that our lives are also a journey home as much as his, (if home is a metaphor for fully possessing our own psychic landscape). Without seeking adventures, we find them along the way. Each of us is confronted from time to time with the all too appealing prospect of self-destruction (Sirens), or dealing with some demon from deep within our psychic landscape, like the Cyclops. Rarely do we get confronted with a good choice and a bad choice. More frequently we are faced with two bad choices we'd rather avoid but cannot, such as Charbydis and Skylla. For Odysseus, and for ourselves, there is seemingly always someone there to help, human or divine.

Throughout the chronicles of Homer, we encounter the elevation of consciousness about how humans are to treat one another. Whether treating beggars or princes, hospitality and courtesy to guests permeates the pages of the *Odyssey*, as well as indictments against those who violate this form of anthropic consciousness, such as the suitors. From the

mythological perspective of the Odyssey, and the religious experience of every day people, the gods take an active part in the unfolding of events, for good or ill. This form of “synchronicity” of phenomenetic consciousness is not enjoyed by everyone, but is accepted and appreciated by many.

One can incorporate these three forms of consciousness in dealing with the whole notion of eradicating the suitors. From a psychological standpoint, one could consider the suitors as representatives of unwelcome psychic forces (complexes, neurosis, etc.) that must be eliminated in order for Odysseus to claim autonomy in his own home/mind. From the phenomenetic standpoint, the suitors represent forces of chaos and disintegration, which threaten our very ability to survive—in essence the kill or be killed ethos we try to avoid in civilized society. As for the anthropic consciousness, there is the reasonable suggestion of Eurymakhos (Od. XXII 48-62) that the death of Antinoos (because he was the ringleader of their mischief) should satisfy the need for revenge—if they were allowed to live, they could compensate Odysseus adequately for their squandering of his resources. However, being fully conscious of the situation at an anthropic level, Odysseus knew they would only regroup if allowed to live and come after him. Conscious of the power dynamics involved, he continued his slaughter of the suitors while he had the means to do it. From a literal point of view, such a slaughter was perhaps unnecessary, but this story goes way beneath the literal.

Perhaps I am overstating the value of the Odyssey as a source of important knowledge about human development. One may not accept as valid the ultimate sense of consciousness conveyed in the Odyssey, but one must then wonder why it has enjoyed such impact for thousands of years of its retelling. While it is a rousing tale of human strength and weakness, I believe within this ancient poem is an immense source of human wisdom that

has endured because, as I stated in the beginning and will reiterate again, the Odyssey truly is the Manifesto of Human Consciousness. Through familiarity with this epic, I believe we come to a fuller appreciation and acceptance of ourselves and the heroic meaning of our every day lives. Our life journey is about how we tell the tale of achieving a fuller consciousness of ourselves, our lives and the world around us.

WORKS CITED

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