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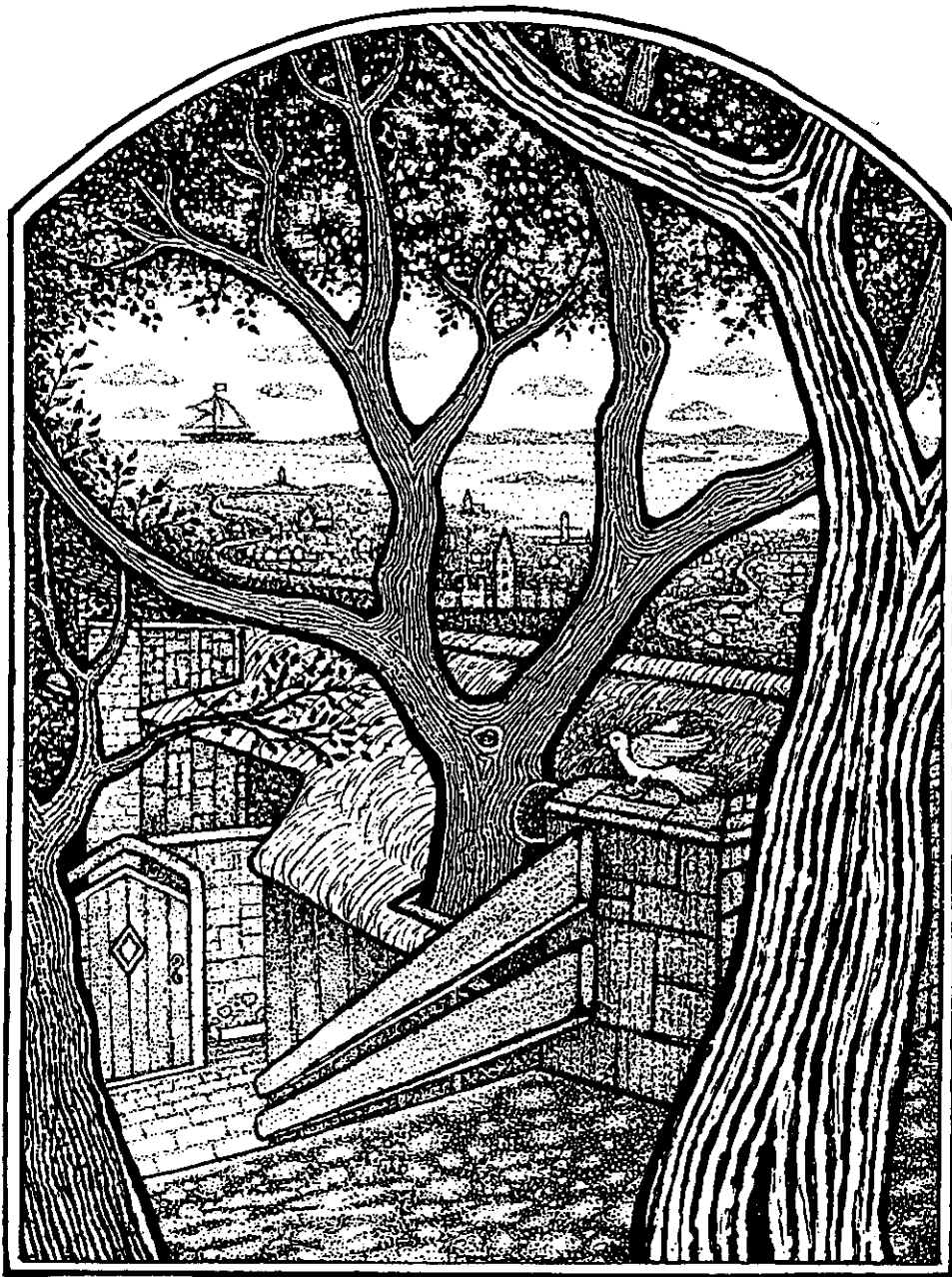
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ARTHUR FOULIN, OFUL

## Great Returns

Katharine Swearingen

*"How lovely is thy dwelling place,  
O Lord of hosts!  
My soul longs, yea, faints  
for the courts of the Lord"*

*Psalm 84, verses 1 – 4*

There was a time when I would roam the winding neighborhood streets of the Berkeley Hills, when the sun was setting across the bay, and watch the gold glow of kitchen lights appear, one by one, in the nestled, wood-shingled homes. Women with salt and pepper colored hair would come before the kitchen windows, heads bowed, preparing an evening's meal. I had entered my second decade of living alone, commuting hours to work as a teacher and counselor in an urban high school. Overwhelmed at times by the increasing needs and emotional challenges facing young people today, I found myself yearning to retire within one of these oases of harmony and home. In a wilderness of thoughts, I would wander back to my own apartment, my bivouac at the base of the San Andreas fault, and wonder: What's at the heart of this yearning for home?

It was Lent; a time for reflection, pondering, preparation. From the fourth century Lent has been associated with the forty days Jesus spent facing temptations in the wilderness. In earlier times Lent was connected with the preparations of candidates for baptism; for penitents it was a time of reconciliation. And it has always been a time to focus on Jesus' life and ministry.<sup>1</sup> In sharing our humanity did Christ know this yearning for home? And if he did, where and to whom did he come home?

To my utter amazement I found light on this question reading, of all things, Homer's *Odyssey*. A one-eyed giant and a bearded fellow hugging the underbelly of a ram were the images engraved in my memory from high school textbooks. Actually, the tale contains more books describing the longing and nostalgia for home and the meaning of being human<sup>2</sup> than it does entertaining us with the riveting adventures of blinding a Cyclops, or escaping the deadly songs of the Siren. As Robert Fitzgerald writes: "The *Odyssey* is about a man who cared for his wife and wanted to rejoin her."<sup>3</sup> But it's a LONG tale, twenty-four books, filled with flashbacks, extensive dialogues, and tales within tales. As Odysseus himself admits at one of many banquets therein: "Ah, Majesty, what a labor it would be to go through the whole story" — and then does. But in the telling Homer portrays the temptations and risks that go

with being human, the values of relationships and the quiet beauty of everyday life. In this ancient tale of one man's great return, an unexpected image rose before my questions of home.

I am not a classics major and certainly not a scholar.<sup>4</sup> But I am always a candidate for new illuminations of faith, finding them in the most unlikely places, even in Greek poems composed and performed eight hundred years before the birth of Christ. As a penitent I offer some thoughts on how the homecoming of Odysseus prompts new understandings of Christ's call to Calvary, and by that considered, set forth on my own Lenten odyssey.

### *Temptations in Paradise*

Odysseus is in exile from his home on Ithaka as Homer's twelve-thousand line poem begins. The beautiful goddess Calypso "hosts" him on her remote tropical isle. Club Med plays on the desires for such places today:

*...and right about the hollow cavern extended a flourishing/growth of vine that ripened with grape clusters. Next to it/there were four fountains and each of them ran shining water,/each next to each, but turned to run in sundry directions;/and round about there were meadows soft with parsley/and violets and even a god who came into that place/would have admired what he saw, the heart delighted within him. (Book 5, lines 68 -74)\**

But Odysseus sits upon the blonde silky sands looking across the shoreline "breaking his heart in tears, lamentations, and sorrow." He wants home. Calypso shares with Odysseus not only this lovely island but all manners of bodily pleasures, even the promise of immortality if he would but stay as her consort in paradise. But Odysseus yearns for his gray-haired, aging Penelope; he wants human things.<sup>5</sup> It takes tact on his part, and no small amount of pressure from Hermes, to convince Calypso to let him go. But Odysseus is clear:

*Goddess and queen, do not be angry with me. I myself know that all you say is true and that circumspect Penelope can never match the impression you make for beauty and stature./She is mortal after all, and you are immortal and ageless/But even so, what I want and all my days pine for/is to go back to my house and see my day of homecoming./And if some god batters me far out on the wine-blue water,/I will endure it, keeping a stubborn spirit inside me, for already I have suffered much and done much hard work/on the waves and in the fighting. So let this adventure follow. (Book 5, lines 214 - 225)*

After one last night of lovemaking, Calypso gives Odysseus a great ax, made with a handle of olive wood, and after several days of cutting

and carpentry Odysseus takes his boat down to the "bright salt waters" and slips into the sea, leaving behind timeless pleasures and immortality.

No sooner has Odysseus set sail than he encounters a storm tossed out by an angry Poseidon. Shipwrecked, nearly drowned, he swims ashore on Skheria, land of the Phaiakians. Odysseus has no possessions, no clothing, and no knowledge of where he is. Sleeping beneath wild olive trees, near the mouth of a river, he is soon found by a young, nubile and brave princess, Nausikaa, who befriends him, giving him clothing and an invitation to her home. With this event Odysseus begins his re-entry into civilization; he is offered marriage to the mortal Nausikaa and life within a human community.

But life on Phaiakia has its own set of problems. Alkinoos, ruler of the land, describes his country: "but we do run lightly on our feet, and are excellent seamen,/and always the feast is dear to us, and the lyre and the dances/and the changes of clothing and our hot baths and beds" (Book 8, lines 247 - 249). When the Phaiakian singer Demodokos sings of the Trojan War at a large banquet, the Phaiakians, oblivious to the true nature of that war or any war, delight in the narrative beauty of the song. Odysseus can only weep; he knows first hand the heavy losses and sufferings of the world and its wars beyond the lands of the Phaiakians.

Calypso's indifference to human civilization and her offer of immortality contrasts with these mortal Phaiakians who possess a culture and a civilization, but to an extreme.<sup>6</sup> The Phaiakians suffer their own kind of isolation; life is too cultured, too easy, too light on its feet. Both islands are not without the allures of bodily pleasure and aesthetic enjoyments. But as places in which to call "home," they are too removed from the challenges of human relationship and striving for which Odysseus longs.

### *Return under Strange Sail*

As if to balance these episodes of ease and effortless pleasure, Odysseus experiences plenty of risky engagements elsewhere throughout the poem in his journey home, encountering the temptations and trials of a more fantastic kind. Charybdis, a whirlpool sea monster swallows ships and crews whole; Odysseus clings to the slender branch of a fig tree and survives. The savage Cyclops consumes Odysseus' comrades right before him, and the Lotus Eaters offer forbidden foods which also threaten Odysseus' homecoming. Circe, with her sensual pleasures, and the Sirens, "with their sweet song," work magic which tempt and delay and threaten to destroy his return. Odysseus even journeys to the land of the Dead and lives to tell about it. With patience, intelligence, self-discipline, help from Athena, and his friends, as well as his will to return — "by hook or crook" — Odysseus survives.

In his yearning for home, Odysseus chooses hardship over pleasure, risk over isolated self-sufficiency, death over god-like immortality. Landing at last on his home shores, he discovers he has nothing, With no standing, no power, and an identity which must remain hidden, Odysseus returns to a family and land now under siege. Disguised as a beggar, Odysseus crafts the overthrow of the suitors in his own household. After slaughtering the usurpers, while having the good sense to let all the musicians and poets live, Odysseus begins the final leg of his journey home. Penelope, after twenty years, has not yet come to believe that this stranger, this skilled archer who subdued all the suitors, and now stands before her, is indeed her long-awaited Odysseus. Penelope, "shining among women," tests him; but this stranger knows the secret of their bed. With this begins the last great recognition scene.

### *The Long-Leaved Olive*

Throughout the twenty-four books of the *Odyssey*, trees, especially olive trees, as well as the wood fashioned from them, aid, protect and eventually assure Odysseus' homecoming. As a symbol throughout the poem, wood embodies restorative powers.<sup>7</sup>

To name only a few: It is an ax made of olive wood which first enables Odysseus to build his ship for his journey from remote isolation. A fig tree Odysseus clasps saves him from the devouring mouth of a monster below. Odysseus blinds the Cyclops with a stake of olive wood. And on more than one foreign shore Odysseus finds his only rest and refuge beneath groves of olive trees.

And so in the twenty-third book of the *Odyssey* Odysseus reveals the secret of their bed and by doing so is restored to his fullest identity. It is nothing less than a giant olive tree, rooted in the earth, a living thing. Within its massive trunk Odysseus has crafted their marriage bed. The tree, in fact, provides the supporting foundation for the entire room.

The bed carries vast symbolic significance. For cradled within the bows of this olive tree, the bed illumines itself as a symbol of the alpha and omega, the source for human beginning and end. It is the place for rest and death. It is the source for regeneration and birth. All the temptations and risks, all the wanderings of Odysseus' journey home come before this "still point," this unmovable bed, and are put to rest. Penelope recognizes her husband and Odysseus finally comes home.

The *Odyssey* of Homer suggests that a life fully lived necessitates risk, relationship, and death. Unlike the immortal gods of the ancient Greek pantheon, humans encounter injury and die. But because of the encounter with these conditions, human life takes on a significance and value that the gods and goddesses never know. Even with the vulnerabilities, trials and temptations, human life takes on a meaning and life more abundant than any eternal paradise. Also, human beings cannot be

human in isolation. In the realm of relationships we are given the chance to "come home," to discover and reveal our true selves and so recognize one another. We cannot discover what makes us human by living lives of pleasure, comfort, or ease, but by embracing the challenges and longings that come with our humanity. Homer's poetry reveals that our yearning for home, for human relationships and the efforts and decorum of ordinary life, returns and restores us to our fullest humanity.

Jesus too comes home before a tree, not a great tree of a finely crafted marriage bed, but on a broken tree on Calvary. I wonder that any yearning Jesus had for home was a yearning for union with a creating and reconciling God. By responding to that yearning, Jesus embarked on a homecoming which brought him to wander not only among the wildernesses of the world and the human heart, but ultimately brought him to the cross. If we understand the Incarnation as the union of God with humanity, in the fullest and most intimate way, then "It is finished" when Jesus says so. Here, God's yearning for the world and Jesus' yearning for God met on the home of the cross. On that broken tree we recognize that God in Christ is the God whose love will suffer with us, even to the point of death. No Greek god ever does this.

I no longer wander the Berkeley hills. Providence is my home. And while I shall always be tempted to retreat from the risk and suffering in the world, I am reminded and restored by these images of great and broken trees. The homecoming which lies at the promise of Christian faith is not the promise of an easy paradise, but something that is realized from living a life of risk, relationship, and above all, compassion. At the heart of our yearnings to come home is our yearning to return to God. We most fully unite with God when we live on the cross of everyday human life.

<sup>1</sup> Price and Weil, *Liturgy for Living* (San Francisco: Harper and Row, 1979), p.230.

<sup>2</sup> William Thalman, *The Odyssey: An Epic of Return*, Twayne's Masterwork Studies, No. 100, 1992, Twayne Publishers, New York, p. 11.

<sup>3</sup> Robert Fitzgerald, Trans., *The Odyssey*, (New York: Anchor Books, 1963), p. 497.

<sup>4</sup> Centuries of interpretations and volumes of literary criticism abound on the *Odyssey*. Nothing contained in this article adds to this corpus of scholarship. In addition, I am in debt to many of the lectures of Professor Anson of UC Berkeley and John Boyle, SJ, of the Jesuit School of Theology at Berkeley, whose wisdom provoked many thoughts here.

<sup>5</sup> Thalman, *The Odyssey*, p. 49.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 52.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 61.

\* All quotations of the poem in this article come from Richmond Lattimore's *The Odyssey of Homer*, Harper and Row, 1965.