Part 2
THE RETURN OF ODYSSEUS
Translated by Robert Fitzgerald
“Twenty years gone, and I am back again . . .”

Odysseus has finished telling his story to the Phaeacians. The next day, young Phaeacian noblemen conduct him home by ship. He arrives in Ithaca after an absence of twenty years. The goddess Athena appears and informs him of the situation at home. Numerous suitors, believing Odysseus to be dead, have been continually seeking the hand of his wife, Penelope, in marriage, while overrunning Odysseus’ palace and enjoying themselves at Penelope’s expense. Moreover, they are plotting to murder Odysseus’ son, Telemachus, before he can inherit his father’s lands. Telemachus, who, like Penelope, still hopes for his father’s return, has journeyed to Pylos and Sparta to learn what he can about his father’s fate. Athena disguises Odysseus as a beggar and directs him to the hut of Eumaeus, his old and faithful swineherd. While Odysseus and Eumaeus are eating breakfast, Telemachus arrives. Athena then appears to Odysseus.

. . . From the air she walked, taking the form of a tall woman, handsome and clever at her craft, and stood beyond the gate in plain sight of Odysseus, unseen, though, by Telemachus, unguessed, for not to everyone will gods appear. Odysseus noticed her; so did the dogs, who cowered whimpering away from her. She only nodded, signing to him with her brows, a sign he recognized. Crossing the yard, he passed out through the gate in the stockade to face the goddess. There she said to him:

“Son of Laertes and the gods of old, Odysseus, master of landways and seaways, dissemble to your son no longer now. The time has come: tell him how you together will bring doom on the suitors in the town. I shall not be far distant then, for I myself desire battle.”

Saying no more, she tipped her golden wand upon the man, making his cloak pure white, and the knit tunic fresh around him. Lithe and young she made him, ruddy with sun, his jawline clean, the beard

1. Eumaeus (yoo’ mē’ as)

**Critical Viewing**

Which details in this image suggest that Odysseus, the figure at the far right, is returning home from a long journey?

**Vocabulary**

**dissemble** (di sem’ bəl) v. conceal under a false appearance; disguise
no longer gray upon his chin. And she withdrew when she had done. Then Lord Odysseus reappeared—and his son was thunderstruck. Fear in his eyes, he looked down and away as though it were a god, and whispered:

“Stranger, you are no longer what you were just now! Your cloak is new; even your skin! You are one of the gods who rule the sweep of heaven! Be kind to us, we'll make you fair oblation\(^2\) and gifts of hammered gold. Have mercy on us!”

The noble and enduring man replied:

“No god. Why take me for a god? No, no. I am that father whom your boyhood lacked and suffered pain for lack of. I am he.”

Held back too long, the tears ran down his cheeks as he embraced his son.

Only Telemachus, uncomprehending, wild with incredulity, cried out:

“You cannot be my father Odysseus! Meddling spirits conceived this trick to twist the knife in me! No man of woman born could work these wonders by his own craft, unless a god came into it with ease to turn him young or old at will. I swear you were in rags and old, and here you stand like one of the immortals!”

Odysseus brought his ranging mind to bear and said:

“This is not princely, to be swept away by wonder at your father’s presence. No other Odysseus will ever come, for he and I are one, the same; his bitter fortune and his wanderings are mine. Twenty years gone, and I am back again on my own island.
As for my change of skin,
that is a charm Athena, Hope of Soldiers,
uses as she will; she has the knack
to make me seem a beggar man sometimes
and sometimes young, with finer clothes about me.
It is no hard thing for the gods of heaven
to glorify a man or bring him low.”

When he had spoken, down he sat.

Then, throwing
his arms around this marvel of a father
Telemachus began to weep. Salt tears
rose from the wells of longing in both men,
and cries burst from both as keen and fluttering
as those of the great taloned hawk,
whose nestlings farmers take before they fly.
So helplessly they cried, pouring out tears,
and might have gone on weeping so till sundown,
had not Telemachus said:

“Dear father! Tell me
what kind of vessel put you here ashore
on Ithaca? Your sailors, who were they?
I doubt you made it, walking on the sea!”

Then said Odysseus, who had borne the barren sea:

“Only plain truth shall I tell you, child.
Great seafarers, the Phaeacians, gave me passage
as they give other wanderers. By night
over the open ocean, while I slept,
they brought me in their cutter, set me down
on Ithaca, with gifts of bronze and gold
and stores of woven things. By the gods’ will
these lie all hidden in a cave. I came
to this wild place, directed by Athena,
so that we might lay plans to kill our enemies.
Count up the suitors for me, let me know
what men at arms are there, how many men.
I must put all my mind to it, to see
if we two by ourselves can take them on
or if we should look round for help.”
Telemachus replied:

“O Father, all my life your fame as a fighting man has echoed in my ears—your skill with weapons and the tricks of war—but what you speak of is a staggering thing, beyond imagining, for me. How can two men do battle with a houseful in their prime? For I must tell you this is no affair of ten or even twice ten men, but scores, throngs of them. You shall see, here and now. The number from Dulichium alone is fifty-two picked men, with armorers, a half dozen; twenty-four came from Same, twenty from Zacynthus; our own island accounts for twelve, high-ranked, and their retainers, Medon the crier, and the Master Harper, besides a pair of handymen at feasts. If we go in against all these I fear we pay in salt blood for your vengeance. You must think hard if you would conjure up the fighting strength to take us through.”

Odysseus who had endured the long war and the sea answered:

“I’ll tell you now. Suppose Athena’s arm is over us, and Zeus her father’s, must I rack my brains for more?”

Clearheaded Telemachus looked hard and said:

“Those two are great defenders, no one doubts it, but throned in the serene clouds overhead; other affairs of men and gods they have to rule over.”

And the hero answered:

“Before long they will stand to right and left of us in combat, in the shouting, when the test comes—our nerve against the suitors’ in my hall. Here is your part: at break of day tomorrow home with you, go mingle with our princes. The swineherd later on will take me down.
the port-side trail—a beggar, by my looks, hangdog and old. If they make fun of me in my own courtyard, let your ribs cage up your springing heart, no matter what I suffer, no matter if they pull me by the heels or practice shots at me, to drive me out. Look on, hold down your anger. You may even plead with them, by heaven! in gentle terms to quit their horseplay—not that they will heed you, rash as they are, facing their day of wrath. Now fix the next step in your mind.

Athena, counseling me, will give me word, and I shall signal to you, nodding: at that point round up all armor, lances, gear of war left in our hall, and stow the lot away back in the vaulted storeroom. When the suitors miss those arms and question you, be soft in what you say: answer:

‘I thought I’d move them out of the smoke. They seemed no longer those bright arms Odysseus left us years ago when he went off to Troy. Here where the fire’s hot breath came, they had grown black and drear. One better reason, too, I had from Zeus: suppose a brawl starts up when you are drunk, you might be crazed and bloody one another, and that would stain your feast, your courtship.

Tempered iron can magnetize a man.’

Say that.

But put aside two broadswords and two spears for our own use, two oxhide shields nearby when we go into action. Pallas Athena and Zeus All-Provident will see you through, bemusing our young friends.

Now one thing more.

If son of mine you are and blood of mine, let no one hear Odysseus is about. Neither Laertes, nor the swineherd here, nor any slave, nor even Penelope.
But you and I alone must learn how far
the women are corrupted; we should know
how to locate good men among our hands,
the loyal and respectful, and the shirkers\(^5\)
who take you lightly, as alone and young.”

**Argus**

*Odysseus heads for town with Eumaeus. Outside the palace, Odysseus’ old dog, Argus, is lying at rest as his long-absent master approaches.*

While he spoke
an old hound, lying near, pricked up his ears
and lifted up his muzzle. This was Argus,
trained as a puppy by Odysseus,
but never taken on a hunt before
his master sailed for Troy. The young men, afterward,
hunted wild goats with him, and hare, and deer,
but he had grown old in his master’s absence.
Treated as rubbish now, he lay at last
upon a mass of dung before the gates—
manure of mules and cows, piled there until
fieldhands could spread it on the king’s estate.

Abandoned there, and half destroyed with flies,
old Argus lay.

But when he knew he heard
Odysseus’ voice nearby, he did his best
to wag his tail, nose down, with flattened ears,
having no strength to move nearer his master.

And the man looked away,
wiping a salt tear from his cheek; but he
hid this from Eumaeus. Then he said:

“I marvel that they leave this hound to lie
here on the dung pile;
he would have been a fine dog, from the look of him,
though I can’t say as to his power and speed
when he was young. You find the same good build
in house dogs, table dogs landowners keep
all for style.”

\(^5\) shirkers (shurk’ ărz) *n.* people who get out of doing what needs to be done.

\▼ Critical Viewing

What can you infer about the ancient Greeks based on the fact that they depicted their gods on everyday objects like this urn?
And you replied, Eumaeus:

“A hunter owned him—but the man is dead in some far place. If this old hound could show the form he had when Lord Odysseus left him, going to Troy, you’d see him swift and strong. He never shrank from any savage thing he’d brought to bay in the deep woods; on the scent no other dog kept up with him. Now misery has him in leash. His owner died abroad, and here the women slaves will take no care of him. You know how servants are: without a master they have no will to labor, or excel. For Zeus who views the wide world takes away half the manhood of a man, that day he goes into captivity and slavery.”

Eumaeus crossed the court and went straight forward into the megaron among the suitors: but death and darkness in that instant closed the eyes of Argus, who had seen his master, Odysseus, after twenty years.

The Suitors

Still disguised as a beggar, Odysseus enters his home. He is confronted by the haughty suitor Antinous.

But here Antinous broke in, shouting:

“God!

What evil wind blew in this pest? Get over, stand in the passage! Nudge my table, will you? Egyptian whips are sweet to what you’ll come to here, you nosing rat, making your pitch to everyone!

These men have bread to throw away on you because it is not theirs. Who cares? Who spares another’s food, when he has more than plenty?”

Historical and Cultural Context

How do Eumaeus’ beliefs about servitude and slavery compare with those of your own culture?

6. megaron (meg’ a rön) n. great, central hall of the house, usually containing a center hearth.

7. haughty (høj’ ē) adj. arrogant.

8. Antinous (an tin’ ō as)

Comprehension

How does Antinous react to Odysseus, who is disguised as a beggar?
With guile Odysseus drew away, then said:

“A pity that you have more looks than heart.
You’d grudge a pinch of salt from your own larder

to your own handyman. You sit here, fat
on others’ meat, and cannot bring yourself
to rummage out a crust of bread for me!”

Then anger made Antinous’ heart beat hard,
and, glowering under his brows, he answered:

“Now!
You think you’ll shuffle off and get away
after that impudence?9 Oh, no you don’t!”

The stool he let fly hit the man’s right shoulder
on the packed muscle under the shoulder blade—
like solid rock, for all the effect one saw.

Odysseus only shook his head, containing
thoughts of bloody work, as he walked on,
then sat, and dropped his loaded bag again
upon the door sill. Facing the whole crowd
he said, and eyed them all:

“One word only,
my lords, and suitors of the famous queen.
One thing I have to say.
There is no pain, no burden for the heart
when blows come to a man, and he defending
his own cattle—his own cows and lambs.

Here it was otherwise. Antinous
hit me for being driven on by hunger—
how many bitter seas men cross for hunger!
If beggars interest the gods, if there are Furies10
pent in the dark to avenge a poor man’s wrong, then may
Antinous meet his death before his wedding day!”

Then said Eupeithes’ son, Antinous:

“Enough.
Eat and be quiet where you are, or shamble elsewhere,
unless you want these lads to stop your mouth
pulling you by the heels, or hands and feet,
over the whole floor, till your back is peeled!”

---

**Historical and Cultural Context**

What conflicting values does this exchange between Antinous and Odysseus reveal?

9. **impudence** (im’ pyōdəns) *n.* quality of being shamelessly bold; disrespectful.

10. **Furies** (fyôr’ ez) *n.* three terrible female spirits who punish the doers of unavenged crimes.
But now the rest were mortified, and someone spoke from the crowd of young bucks to rebuke him:

“A poor show, that—hitting this famished tramp—bad business, if he happened to be a god. You know they go in foreign guise, the gods do, looking like strangers, turning up in towns and settlements to keep an eye on manners, good or bad.”

But at this notion Antinous only shrugged.

Telemachus, after the blow his father bore, sat still without a tear, though his heart felt the blow. Slowly he shook his head from side to side, containing murderous thoughts.

Penelope on the higher level of her room had heard the blow, and knew who gave it. Now she murmured:

“Would god you could be hit yourself, Antinous—hit by Apollo’s bowshot!”
And Eurynome her housekeeper, put in:

“He and no other?

If all we pray for came to pass, not one would live till dawn!”

Her gentle mistress said:

“Oh, Nan, they are a bad lot; they intend ruin for all of us; but Antinous appears a blacker-hearted hound than any.

Here is a poor man come, a wanderer, driven by want to beg his bread, and everyone in hall gave bits, to cram his bag—only Antinous threw a stool, and banged his shoulder!”

So she described it, sitting in her chamber among her maids—while her true lord was eating.

Then she called in the forester and said:

“Go to that man on my behalf, Eumaeus, and send him here, so I can greet and question him. Abroad in the great world, he may have heard rumors about Odysseus—may have known him!”

Penelope

“Friend, let me ask you first of all: who are you, where do you come from, of what nation and parents were you born?”

And he replied:

“My lady, never a man in the wide world should have a fault to find with you. Your name has gone out under heaven like the sweet honor of some god-fearing king, who rules in equity over the strong: his black lands bear both wheat and barley, fruit trees laden bright, new lambs at lambing time—and the deep sea gives great hauls of fish by his good strategy, so that his folk fare well.