Adorno, Derrida, and the Odyssey: A Critique of Center and Periphery

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The question of the subject continues to be one of the most important and vexing problems in literary and philosophical studies today. Since Marx and Freud, the self-evident and self-identical subject has been justifiably and irretrievably shattered. In Marx's case, the individual and world-historical subjects are the consequences of a historical and political process whose ultimate realization is always in the future. This subject remains an open-ended project, one whose conditions of conceptualization and fulfillment shift with its historical situatedness. For Freud, a subject of consciousness is the product of psychic fissure and struggle. The unification of this subject could only mean death. The subject of modernity is a subject aware of its fractured stature, yet it is also a subject that wishes things could be otherwise.

In the works of Theodor Adorno and Michel Foucault we find a continuation and intensification of this question of subjectivity, but with any hope of unity abandoned. While for Marx and Freud the possibility (if not the likelihood) of the return of the subject to itself in the form of revolutionary or cathartic fulfillment is retained, for Foucault and Adorno the very validity of the insistence of the problem of subjectivity is put to the task. Throughout texts like Negative Dialec-
tics and Dialectic of Enlightenment Adorno points out that every instance of subject-formation, both individual and world-historical, is wrought at immense cost. We shall see this in our consideration of the case of Odysseus, whose realization as subject is inversely related to the diminution of subjects elsewhere, and whose mode of subjectivity is for Adorno a prototype of bourgeois imperialism. For Foucault, the negative consequences of the subject in the form of its most recent historical manifestation—that of “man”—are still greater than the diminution Adorno speaks of: the creation of a new creature, observable, capable of being recalled, shackled:

Does man really exist? To imagine, for an instant, what the world and thought and truth might be if man did not exist, is considered to be merely indulging in paradox. This is because we are so blinded by the recent manifestation of man that we can no longer remember a time—and it is not so long ago—when the world, its order, and human beings existed, but man did not.1

Of course, Foucault is speaking here of a particular instance of subjectivity, of a particular form of “man.” But this does not alter the fact—rather, it emphasizes it—that the current controversy surrounding the question of subjectivity has implications not only for each individual in the conduct of his or her daily life (What, knowingly or unknowingly, is the effect of the particular notion of subjectivity that each of us carries with us each day?), but also because such notions inform practically the whole field of human endeavor. To call a human being “man,” or to locate the question of an individual’s authenticity within the field of post-1945 mass culture, is to participate in a form of active manipulation. And to speak in such terms as authenticity, rightness, and subjectivity is to invoke the forgetful memory of a humanist ideology which holds that man is, and has always been, the measure of things. It is at this point that the question of subjectivity and canon-formation coincide.

To describe a human being as “man” is to issue a veiled proclamation of what that individual ought and ought not be. In The Order of Things, Foucault tells us that, “the major change with which we are here concerned, man, as we know him today, makes his appearance and becomes the measure of all things . . . Man becomes the subject and object of his own understanding.”2

This is an instance of hypostatization, and it is an event that entails an enormous task of forgetting. For Adorno and Foucault, the idealization of the subject is realized through the forgetting of its historical character, a condition which culminates in the acceptance of a certain condition of man as natural and eternal. This same forgetting of the historicity of man, as well as the forgetting of the historical itself—which Lukacs calls “second nature” and Adorno calls “natural-
history”—is at the heart of the question of the canon. The canon of Western thought is itself a subject of the highest order.

II

In his now infamous report in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* entitled “To Reclaim a Legacy: Report on Humanities in Education,” William Bennett, echoing a perception held by a great many humanist educators, assails the hyper-specialized and fragmented mode of study that has come to predominate in American universities, and demands (echoing Matthew Arnold) instead that we return to a core of great texts, “the best that has been said, thought, written and otherwise expressed about the human experience.” Having vaguely invoked a notion of “the best that has been said” (itself a phrase symptomatic of a high order of spatialization and atemporal understanding), he goes on to say:

the humanities can contribute to an informal sense of community by enabling us to learn about and become participants in a common culture, *shareholders* in our civilization. But our goal should be more than just a common culture—even television and the comics can give us that. We should instead want all students to know a common culture rooted in civilization's lasting vision, its highest shared ideals and aspirations, and its heritage.\(^4\) (emphasis mine)

The language here is shot through with the dynamics of late capitalism and its spatializing, totalizing, and reductive tendencies. Participation in culture is reduced to an act of being a *shareholder* in civilization. The irony of this commodity-language is not hard to fathom: the civilization to which Bennett refers is indeed much like a corporate conglomerate, owned by few, controlled by few, insatiable in its desire for new markets. Except that in this case the markets are ideological *tout entier*; that is, it is a question of intellectual, not monetary capital. The idea that one should participate in culture as a shareholder exhibits the degree to which, in Adorno's words, “exchange has come to mean everything,” and the extent to which the universal—the society as corporation—has subsumed the particular out of which it is composed. This latter fact is further exemplified by Bennett’s claim that students should come “to know a common culture, rooted in civilization's lasting vision, its highest shared ideals and aspirations, and its heritage.”

I would like to suggest, in addition to the global thinking apparent in such a pronouncement, that Bennett’s project is essentially Odyssean. And here the link between the question of subjectivity and that of canon-formation becomes explicit. For Bennett, and for those who share his view of the nature and import of intellectual “capital,” the canon itself is the product and source of a sort of Odyssean doubling, a doubling not terribly unlike that described by Foucault in *The Order of Things*: Man is “a being such that knowledge will be attained
in him of what renders all knowledge possible.” Man is thus both ground and superstructure, subject and object, empirical and transcendental at once. But he forgets this fact. A similar understanding can be applied to Odysseus: he is both subject and object of his tale, teller and told, inside and outside, at once. Hence we have two models of subjectivity, models which the canon, in its most recent historical formulation (and for which Bennett is a most vehement spokesperson), both mimics and fails to see. The canon, indeed the very idea of a legitimate canon, has become a subject which has forgotten the ruthless course which the path to its subjectivity has chronicled and engaged in. Just as the primal history of subjectivity was for Adorno a process of temporary self-abnegation in the face of nature for the purpose of a later domination of that same nature, so has the process of canon-formation excluded those elements whose contents threaten the order it both is and seeks to uphold. The canon is a literary, political, and above all historical subject that has forgotten its own historicity as well as the underside of its triumphant march in the name of right reason. It is in opposition to this neat, corporate, conglomerate, and actively forgetful perspective that W. V. Spanos can pass sentence on the “legacy” Bennett refers to as an “assimilative or, rather, de-differentiating dynastic logic.” This is the logic of canonical terror, and it is in opposition to such logic that the following reconsideration of the Odyssey is offered.

The following paper, then, is the product of a meditation on the dynamics that inform (or rather, deform) one of the most prized possessions of the Western literary canon: the Odyssey. However, the central focus here shall not be on the formal characteristics of that text, but on the play of center and periphery as a mechanism of domination and control, particularly as it is realized in the figure of Odysseus himself. The basic premise here is that Odysseus is precisely the figure of the absent center, a function that he fulfills with varying degrees of finitude, and that this understanding of his function has insinuated itself into the essential vision of Western culture. In short, Odysseus is the dialectical projection of a certain notion of human being onto the field of nature and narrative. As such, the Odyssey articulates a particular relationship to being: while the text does not participate in the sort of sedimentation of the question of being that takes place in the Aeneid, it is nonetheless a culpable participant in a thinking that lay the way open for the transformation of thinking into a world view. Put in other words, the Odyssey (and to a similar extent, the Iliad) is an element in an unfinished—and in that sense, non-teleological—rendering of a particular encounter with being. But it also carries within it the incipient elements of a totalistic humanism. Though it stands in stark contrast to a revisionary text like the Aeneid, the Odyssey is by no means an innocent recitation of a culture in contact with the question of being—as a too zealous Heideggerian reading might lead us to conclude.
Indeed, the insidious and seemingly uninterrupted imprint of Odyssean man on the panoramic vistas that constitute the glories of Western culture is an imprint so pervasive and so necessary that its origins have been forgotten. Odyssean "man" has been formalized, limited, and in various ways made safe by and for the contours of Western life and thought. By no means is the "real" (i.e., textual) Odysseus—who leaves Ithaca with Agamemnon, who participates in the demolition of Troy, and who later wanders for ten years before returning home—an ideal realization of human existence. Despite the varying degrees of authenticity of the Odyssean saga, particularly when compared to the bounded and reified structure of a text like the Aeneid, there exists within the mosaic of Odysseus's character the endorsement of a certain sort of human being, and of a certain sort of existence, whose proliferation has haunted the West more overwhelmingly than any of Odysseus's own thoughts of home. And yet, in spite of the insistence on this sort of existence, marked by the thoroughgoing acceptance of cunning and plunder, Odysseus is one whose life eschews eschatological completion. It is from within the tensions of this dialectic—Odysseus as the realization of rationality in a supreme form, and Odysseus as the refusal of rational teleology—that the terrain of the Odyssey is shaped.

IV

Before those tensions can be articulated more fully, it will be necessary to follow a slightly different path. This is the path of the critique of an enlightenment thinking (and consequently of the whole of Western culture) undertaken by the Frankfurt School in general, and by Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, in Dialectic of Enlightenment, in particular. That text, though largely ignored or simply dismissed as paranoiacally radical by a self-preserving capitalist literary and cultural establishment, inaugurates an extraordinary and relentless critique of the hegemonic mechanisms of enlightenment thinking that has forgotten the negative elements of its critical force. The significance of such a text for a reading of Homer may at first seem dubious, but if we pay attention to the Derridean critique of the spatializing, atemporal tendencies informing Platonic thought, and the manifestations of such thought within Western intellectual, literary, and political history, we can see that the "classics" are not so very far from our ideological hearts. Neither are they reserved painlessly upon our library shelves, despite formalist contentions to the contrary. And therein lies the rub, for the ruthless and imperialistic hegemonic-ideological impulses latent not only within the texts of Homer, but also within the various readings of those texts, have participated, on one register or another, in the squelching of difference on a multitude of fronts. It is in this sense that the Odyssey is a monumentally powerful political text—not only by virtue of its content, but also by virtue of its status as a paradigm of a certain sort of literary and cultural productivity, and not only by virtue of its reciprocal relation to the production (or non-production) of new
“classics,” but also as a result of its status as one of the pre-eminent
texts of Western “man.”

The imperialistic force of the Odyssey—a force still further
perfected in the globally transcendent texts of Virgil—should strike no
one8 as a surprise, since these texts merely mark (and implement) the
early phases of a a Western history notable for a continued suppliance
to the forces of a burgeoning, unreflective, and relentless Reason. This
is an essential concern in Dialectic of Enlightenment: that the supreme
rationality espoused in classical texts, particularly in the cleverly
organized person of Odysseus, is in fact one of the earliest recorded
realizations of a necessary but dangerous attitude toward nature. This
attitude is one of incipient humanistic-enlightenment thinking, a method
of thought whose impulse toward domination has rendered the whole
world, in fact the whole realm of Being, vulnerable to its totalizing force.
The Enlightenment and the forces of humanism are hand-in-hand
counterparts in a historically born impulse that seeks to make history
transparent by the totalization and consequent instrumentalization of
all within its field. In this way enlightenment—that is, rationality itself—
forgets its own origins. As Horkheimer and Adorno put it: “Abstraction,
the tool of the enlightenment, treats its objects as did fate, the notion
of which it rejects: it liquidates them.”9

Hence the “levelling domination of abstraction (which makes
everything in nature repeatable),” forgets even itself (DE, p. 13). Its im-
pulse toward rationalistic totality leaves behind the possibility of its
own self-interrogation, for this would demolish the presuppositions of
mastery. As supreme perspective, its own center is left out of the pic-
ture; its own acts of levelling remain invisible to it. This constitutes the
so-called self-destruction of the Enlightenment:

The dilemma that faced us in our work proved to be
the first phenomenon for investigation: the self-
destruction of the Enlightenment. We are wholly
convinced—and therein lies our petitio principii—that
social freedom is inseparable from enlightened
thought. Nevertheless, we believe that we have just as
clearly recognized that the notion of this very way of
thinking, no less than the actual historic forms—the
social institutions—with which it is interwoven,
already contains the seed of the reversal universally
apparent today. If enlightenment does not accom-
modate reflection on this recidivist element, then it
seals its own fate. . . . [T]he prime cause of the retreat
from enlightenment into mythology is not to be sought
so much in the nationalist, pagan, and other
mythologies manufactured precisely in order to con-
trive such a reversal, but in the Enlightenment itself
when paralyzed by fear of the truth. (DE, pp. xiii-xiv)
It is on this register that my reading of the *Odyssey* will evolve, for it is my contention that the emergence of Odyssean man articulates the play of authoritative rationality and teleologically unconquerable being in such a way that the former has "won out," so to speak. Despite the authentic elements of digression and errancy in the *Odyssey* (expressions of the integrity with which it encounters an as yet unmastered nature), that text accords a privilege to a certain model of human being. And still this formulation is too strong; the narrative is compelled, by virtue of its own dynamics, to reject this model of human being just as it privileges it. What we are left with is a model that insistently deconstructs itself, rendering its own integrity in a problematic, non-integral manner. In this way, the *Odyssey* demolishes itself at the moment of its articulation—perhaps the closest narrative approximation of temporality possible. Finally, in this way the model of Odyssean man—which as a character type is the model of the bourgeois individual—is refused by Being itself, in spite of all attempts to master it.9

V

One of the most profound examples of Odyssean self-demolition takes place with regard to the notion and practice of plunder. The whole of the Homeric oeuvre ostensibly endorses plunder as a primal act of survival and supremacy. We see this repeated endlessly in the *Iliad*, where the ritual process of stripping a defeated enemy soldier of his armor—shield, headgear, sword, and so on—is so essential to the premise of warfare that Achilleus (whose armor was lost by Patroklos) is unable to fight until he has acquired a new bounty to carry into battle. In addition, the premise of plundering, which with the kidnap of Helen ignited the Trojan enterprise in the first place, is fundamental to the proto-colonial impulse which guides Agamemnon, Achilleus, Aias, and especially Odysseus. One of Odysseus's first concerns upon his return to Ithaca is not only to hide his "plunder" (actually, gifts given by the unfortunate Phaiakians) from thieves, but also to convince Athene, who has come to him in the figure of a young man, that the riches he has about him are not gifts, but the product of coercive pillagery. It is as though that which is gained through fortune is less worthy of respect than that which has been taken via brute force—a model vaguely reminiscent of the bull-headed capitalist who respects only what is "earned the hard way" and who does so only within a particular field and by virtue of a particular and limited form of behavior: that is, within a specific economy.

Hence acquisitive savagery is firmly endorsed, *but always away from the center*. Nowhere is this clearer than in the case of Odysseus's home on Ithaca, which has, so to speak, been laid siege by suitors in the hope of taking the grandest "booty" of all, the other half of the "center" (away from which all acts of plunder are endorsed); that is, the figure of Penelope. What is peculiar here is the extent to which the Greek colonial impulse one-sidedly affected Homer's reception of his own problematic. The center is located variously, or perhaps ambiguous-
ly, in the place of Ithaca and in the person of Odysseus. Thus is Odysseus the absent center, whose absence verifies the non-colonial status that Ithaca should enjoy, but whose absence is also responsible for the inability to enforce that status. Hence, when the swineherd, talking to the disguised Odysseus, says of the various suitors, “All they want is to prey on his estate, proud dogs; they stop at nothing,” we are in the presence of a recuperation of the very situation Odysseus himself has committed elsewhere, always elsewhere. The modern parallel is not difficult to conceive, the one in which imperialistic activity is not only condemned, but unheard of, at home—be it within the United States, Europe, or the industrialized “West” in general—and yet is all too commonplace, even ordinary, away from the center. This notion is powerfully articulated by Fredric Jameson in Marxism and Form, when he points out that class struggle—that is, the dialectical working out of cultural tensions that exist within the United States—has been “farmed out,” so to speak, to the third world, an act which serves at once to verify and make more tenuous the situation at home:

In existential terms, what this means is that our experience is no longer whole; we are no longer able to make any felt connection between the concerns of private life, as it follows its own course within the walls and confines of the affluent society, and the structural projections of the system in the outside world, in the form of neocolonialism, oppression, and counterinsurgency warfare.

In other words, Odysseus’s absence from Ithaca constitutes a prototype of the notion of dialectical reversal in its most profound form. And this prototype has been perfected to the point that its occurrence in the advanced capitalist cultures of the West has come to be seen as natural, just as for Odysseus the natural impulse to pillage was more respectable than the acceptance of gifts. But what is perhaps most crucial here is the fact that this extension of the center outside itself, this occultation of the force of the center from within its proper domain, serves in fact (to use Jacques Derrida’s language) to remove the center from freeplay. That is, it removes the force of the center, the structurality of the center, from any sort of interrogation. In “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences,” Derrida says:

It has always been thought the center, which is by definition unique [Odysseus], constituted the very thing within a structure which while governing the structure, escapes structurality. This is why classical thought concerning structure could say that the center is, paradoxically, within the structure and outside it. The center is at the center of the totality, and yet, since the center does not belong to the totality (is not part

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of the totality, the totality has its center elsewhere. The center is not the center.

Hence Odysseus as pillager can reassert his authority, his centrality, in Homer’s text as rightful king of Ithaca, just as Penelope—as the occulted articulation of the notion of a rightful center—is able to withstand the so-called “absence” (might one say “presence-by-absence?”) of her husband, in spite of the efforts of the native periphery: the recalcitrant suitors.

And yet the ambivalence and complexity of the Homeric sensibility does not rest even with this formulation, for as was said before, Odysseus’s absence serves not only to verify his presence, but also to exhibit the organizing elements—and consequently both recalcitrant and levelling forces—of Greek (or perhaps Odyssean, or perhaps Western) society. The recuperation of the Odyssean impulse to pillage at home, in the form of the suitors’ patronage, is in fact an exposition (i.e., an ex-position) of the Odyssean problematic. Whether Homer intended this doubling to take place is unimportant. What fascinates is the refusal of the raw materials of the Odyssey to surrender completely to the forces of a well-nigh totalizing center. And so the formal necessity of the center, or of the notion of the center, is undermined at the moment it is endorsed. The Odyssean colonial impulse is exposed in all its ruthlessness and ambiguity each time the suitors sit to dine beneath Penelope’s perfect gaze, a gaze which defies engagement (in more ways than one), for it too is both inside and outside at once, and so beyond the range of freeplay. The suitors’ presence is a refiguration of the Odyssean colonial impulse writ small, and this serves to illustrate the profound ambivalence Homer displayed in the Odyssey with regard to the endlessly reiterated need for the center. Thus, formalist claims that the Odyssey is in fact the tale of Odysseus’s return and of the harmonization of the unruly forces of nature in his Ithaca are acceptable only if one is willing to verify, through an act of exquisite blindness, the Odyssean assault on all that is outside. But one must then be willing to engage in the suppression of the center at the moment it is endorsed, for as soon as Odysseus empties his bag of Phaiakian “plunder” and takes his place on the oaken bed, he reinserts both the need and the force of his presence elsewhere. And in this way a still further reversal takes place, for Odysseus is thus exposed as both master (coercive reason and might) and slave (actor in a system that “plays” him just as he “plays” it). He is exposed as one upon whom the unreflected rationality of reason itself (humanism) has turned back and come to dominate him just as it freed him. But most of all, the need of his coercive force elsewhere suggests the final inadequacy of cunning reason, for it clearly shows the continuing refusal of difference to be finally suppressed. It is this primary impossibility that the Homeric texts reflect through and through.

Put in other words, the apparent coherence and balance of the Homeric texts—this holds true for the Iliad as well, though in a much more complex way—are in fact romantic impositions upon them.
positions that serve more to verify the blindly centered organization and practice of industrial society today than they do to reflect any authentic features of Homer’s work itself. Of course, an exposure of the contradictory impulses of the Odyssey would confront the very model—itself an impositional notion—of the classic that Western culture has increasingly embraced. In addition, a reopening of interpretation, on any level, constitutes a loss of supervisory control—or perhaps of humanistic assertion—and thus blatantly contradicts the colonial and authoritarian impulses that pervade Western culture, and which guide, or inform, its every move. The dialectical suppressions and expressions of ambivalence in the Odyssey express precisely the notion of contradictory coherence expressed by Derrida:

The concept of centered structure—although it represents coherence itself, the condition of the episteme as philosophy or science—is contradictorily coherent. And, as always, coherence in contradiction expresses the force of a desire. The concept of centered structure is in fact the concept of play based on a fundamental ground, a play constituted on the basis of a fundamental immobility and a reassuring certitude which is itself beyond the reach of play.?

What all this suggests is that the forces of desire that expose themselves in the Odyssey—the desire for a reinvigoration of the center by virtue of Odysseus’s return—are contradictory, and cannot contain for long the force of their own problematic. The desire for order and coherence—the figure of King Odysseus himself—cannot be sustained without the surrender of that very figure. Odysseus, as center, is contradictorily coherent; he expresses the dialectical force of a desire, and simultaneously negates and realizes himself.

VI

The dialectical reversal that Odysseus continuously enacts is not only realized in the play between center and periphery that he himself attempts to supervise (always insufficiently), but also in the very interaction he maintains with his shipmates, on one register, and with the unruly world he meets during his return to Ithaca, on another, and finally with his own self identity. These three impulses function in powerful ways throughout the Odyssey, and Adorno and Horkheimer look upon them as paradigmatic of the Western bourgeois individual, a model of man which cites universal reason as its utmost authority:

The hero of the adventure shows himself to be a prototype of the bourgeois individual, a notion originating in the consistent self-affirmation which has its ancient pattern in the figure of the protagonist compelled to wander. . . . The venerable cosmos of the meaningful
Homer's world is shown to be the achievement of regulative reason, which destroys myth by virtue of the same rational order in which it reflects it. (DE, p. 44)

"Regulative reason," then, is the mechanism and proto-evangelical commodity that Odysseus both employs and exports during his imperialistic sojourn to and from Troy. This is not to suggest that Odysseus was a mere messenger for a movement or force larger than himself (the evangelical paradigm), nor that he was solely occupied with the imposition of reason on the "darkened" areas of the world. Rather, reason plays Odysseus as he plays it; he is not Virgil, for whom the providential teleological closure of non-reflexive reason has been completed, and hence for whom the future has been decided. Odysseus's relation to reason is far more complex than this, for in the Odyssey the telos of global absolutism (Virgil) has not yet displaced a custom of experiential insatiability. Put in other words, in the Odyssey reason has yet to fulfill its appetite, at least in a global sense. Just so, the encounter with the Cyclopes is repeated in the Aeneid, but only as a passing gesture; there is no real need for Aeneas to grapple with Polyphemous, for Odysseus had long before mastered this realm in the name of cunning reason, and Aeneas does not need to realize himself by virtue of continued encounters with nature. He will be fulfilled, as he quite well knows, in the coming glory of Rome. All that detracts from this goal is expelled from Virgil's text. Odysseus, of course, cannot bask in the certainty of such a prefigured end.

However, it would be equally inappropriate to suggest that Odysseus is therefore an "authentic" configuration of pragmatic man, of "human-in-the-midst," for this would suggest a naturality to Odyssean intrusion, on all its varied fronts, and thus might be understood as an endorsement of the Odyssean prototype. While the penchant for digression is in fact pervasive in the Odyssey, and while the confrontation with brute nature was undoubtedly a central element in Homeric culture, it does not at all follow that the Odyssean prototype, and especially his colonialism, are "natural" conditions. In fact, the very possibility of Odyssean exploration and exploitation, first with reference to Troy, and later elsewhere, is predicated upon a problematic of domination and submission that Odysseus realizes at every moment in the text. If any so-called "theme" anchors the Odyssey, it is this one: that the wily, cunning, rational Odysseus is in fact not whole, nor can he ever be so, even in his fulfillment at Ithaca. The digressive impulses of the Odyssey are thus more correctly understood as supplementary impulses: Odysseus is trying to fill himself at each moment with just one more experience, a project which can never be completed. Horkheimer and Adorno call this situation the dialectic of myth and enlightenment, but one might also place it on the register of the dialectic of utopia and desire. Odysseus's desire for fulfillment is at odds with the possibility of his wholeness.

This is apparent in many places, but perhaps most notably in Odysseus's encounter with the Sirens, and later, with the Cyclopes. The
first case is telling, for Odysseus is required to relinquish practical command of his ship—and his body—in order to experience the irresistible call of the Sirens. This is an extraordinarily disruptive moment in the text, for it constitutes a reversal or inversion of that which would stand as absolutely and untouchably natural in the Homeric world, for the sole purpose of allowing Odysseus to experience, at one moment, the heights of desire and pain. There is no doubt that throughout the Odyssey the arrangements of the various ships, with a captain that sees all before him, and who thinks for his synchronized proletariat, are in fact necessary and natural arrangements. They constitute the givens of Homeric culture. And yet the existence of the Sirens, with their addicting lament, is the single place where reason, in the face of a new territory, is not equal to the task, at least not on the Sirens’ terms.

But Odysseus has been forewarned, thanks to his mastery of Circe, and he has been given a plan which will allow both immersion in and experience of the Sirens’ song, along with the hitherto impossible corollary: continued existence. As Adorno and Horkheimer point out, this “plan” counts on the rational organization of labor on board the ship, on the continued suppliancy of that same crew, and on Odysseus’s own willingness to undergo a radical reversal. This reversal takes the form of his relinquishment of command of both the ship and his own proper self, by virtue of a temporary suspension of his rational faculties, a suspension which, however, sees itself as a supremely rational act. This entails a dependence upon a reason which foresees all contingencies by virtue of its limitless powers, just as it recognizes that it is powerless in the face of certain forces. Put in simpler terms, reason calls for unreason in order to sustain itself. This suspension of reason is precisely what concerns Horkheimer in Eclipse of Reason, where reason has ceased to function critically in order to perpetuate the forms that reason had established earlier. A similar note is struck by Marcuse, when he points out in Eros and Civilization that the subervience of the technological apparatus to human beings in the quest for a domination of nature has been reversed; it is not clear any longer which entity plays which—machine or man. Nor is it clear where nature itself begins and ends.

Hence comprehensive reason recognizes its limits at the sound of the Sirens’ song, yet refuses to abdicate. The same can be said of the wily Odysseus who, in recognition of a domain that lies beyond his scope, is still driven by his colonizing impulse, and who therefore devises a mechanism to symbolically master the Sirens. That he alone benefits from the supremely rational organization of his ship, that he alone—like the entrepreneur who “organizes” labor and who dines on caviar as a happy result—experiences the Sirens’ wrenching call, only serves to solidify his authoritative position. And this is so despite the fact that at the peak of his anguish, when the plenitude of time signalled by the Sirens’ song utterly overwhelms reason, two of his crew members, Perimedes and Eurylokhos, rise up to tighten his bonds. Thus they further inscribe themselves as slaves while reinforcing the limitless powers of reason. And perhaps most interesting of all, we learn that at the
moment of his victory, at the moment of his endurance of the Sirens’
call, Odysseus must of necessity be “elsewhere,” just as is the case
with his Ithaca. For him, domination and comprehension escape at the
very moment they are realized; totality and plenitude shake under the
very mechanisms designed to produce them, and they are thus recogniz-
ed as impossibilities.

Adorno and Horkheimer cite this episode as paradigmatic of
work relations in capitalist society. What has been described above as
Odysseus’s simultaneous implication in and refusal of the mechanisms
of reason is discussed in terms of labor in Dialectic of Enlightenment.
What is on one register a stringently “rational” organization of labor,
is also a repression of the desire for digression on another. Odysseus
can digress, but only if the underlying conditions that made such digres-
sion possible can be counted on to remain the same:

The laborers must be fresh and concentrate as they
look ahead, and must ignore whatever lies to one side.
They must doggedly sublimate in additional effort the
drive that impels to diversion. And so they become
practical—The other possibility Odysseus ... reserves
to himself. (DE, p. 34)

Hence the digressive impulse is the product of collective labor,
an organization which, however, can never forget itself, especially not
in the way Odysseus forgets himself, albeit temporarily. The digressive
impulse of Odysseus, who has mastered cunning and reason, is thus
dependent upon its opposite among his men, who provide the historical
and materialist foundation upon which the glory of Odysseus (whose
fame, we are told in the Odyssey, “has gone abroad to the sky’s rim”),
is built. This articulates the force behind Walter Benjamin’s sugges-
tion, in his “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” that “there is no docu-
cement of civilization which is not at the same time a document of bar-
barism,”
since the center—brilliant Odysseus—and the digressive im-
pulse are in fact products of subjugation elsewhere. And when Benjamin
says “The products of art and science owe their existence not merely
to the effort of the great geniuses who created them, but also to the
unnamed drudgeries of their contemporaries,”
we can see the extent
to which the exploits of the “great man” are a false cry of transcendence.
But even more importantly, the system or model of the ship’s organiza-
tion of labor ultimately transcends Odysseus himself, along with the
crew. The gnawing agonies of Odysseus at the mast are in fact the col-
lective cries of the laboring crew, or of the factory worker tied to his
machine, but this time with the roar of the blast furnace removed. The
plight of the entrapped, servile masses—for whom desire and survival
are always at odds—is exposed at the very moment that it is entrenched
still further. As we can see, the crew does not hesitate, but continues
to row. To quote Adorno and Horkheimer once again:
What Odysseus hears is without consequence for him; he is able only to nod his head as a sign to be set free from his bonds; but it is too late; his men, who do not listen, know only the song's dangers but none of its beauty, and leave him at the mast in order to save him and themselves. They reproduce the oppressor's life together with their own, and the oppressor is no longer able to escape his social role . . . and his spirited call for liberation fades like applause. (DE, p. 34)

The servile crew continues to row, but they necessarily face backwards, their eyes turned away from that which Odysseus has already seen; and the nod toward his bonds that Odysseus enacts as a plea for freedom is beyond them, for their bonds are veiled behind the ideology of necessity, of survival, of rational practicality, and the notion of freedom under such circumstances is as distant as the call of the Sirens. For the crew, the notion of freedom does not exist at all; to summon it would be to call for the denial of their very existence.

VII

If the episode of the Sirens and their enchanting call outlines the multi-dimensional problematic of desire, necessity, and oppression (particularly with regard to Odysseus's symbolization of the individual trapped within a necessary model), the encounter with the Cyclopes expresses the center-periphery (i.e., colonizing) impulse mentioned earlier. However, this episode also expresses the extraordinary narrative ambiguity of the Odyssey in its most overt form. The encounter with Polyphemous stretches the Odyssean problematic to its very limits, to the point where that problematic snaps, making its force and presence overt. In the encounter with Polyphemous, the Ithacans are confronted by a form of life that on certain levels is diametrically opposed to their own, but whose primary actor—Polyphemous—is able to see through the ambiguities of Odysseus's own life. It is no accident that from Odysseus's perspective it is absolutely necessary that Polyphemous be blinded, for the power of the giant's vision is such that he exposed the brutishness of Odysseus himself. Indeed, this would seem to have been an act far more offensive than the digestion of two or three of Odysseus's nameless sailors.

In the encounter with the Cyclopes, the narrative and ideological dynamics of the Odyssey seem to turn back upon themselves in a gesture much like that of self-demolition. At the moment of this encounter, in Book Nine, the rational, colonizing impulses that have guided Odysseus in all his travels are confronted by the acuitous vision of one-eyed Polyphemous. If the encounter with the Sirens was an illustration of reason's ability to see before-hand, and to abdicate its authority in order to realize it more strongly later, the encounter with Polyphemous is an exercise in Odysseus's gamesmanship. That is, it is a contest of his cleverness, pushed to its limits; it is the question of a reason gone
mad. It is also a moment where Odysseus is once again de-centered as subject, for at the moment of his most clever tactical maneuvers—his decision to renounce his name, to declare himself a “nobody”—Odysseus absents himself from the arena of his power. Odysseus must be outside his own self, so to speak, in order to rescue himself and his men. And just as his presence in Ithaca is in some sense the diminution of his power, so too his status as “Odysseus” in the cave, that is, as master of himself, is the realization of a character less powerful than the one who steps outside of himself in order to win the game.

It is important to recognize the significance of the encounter with Polyphemous, for in it the colonial forces of the West, the cultivating forces of the West, meet a culture of relatively simple but also apparently peaceful ways which has eschewed the quest for greater and greater riches (DE, pp. 64-65). When one considers the relatively decent and blameless nature of Cyclopes culture, especially when compared to Achaian culture, Odysseus’s description of it must be put into question:

In the next land what we found were Kyklopes, Giants, louts, without a law to bless them. In ignorance leaving the fruitage of the earth in mystery To the immortal gods, they neither plow Nor sow by hand, nor till the ground, though grain—Wild wheat and barley—grows untended, and Wine-grapes, in cluster, ripen in heaven’s rain. Kyklopes have no muster and no meeting, No consultation or old tribal ways, But each one dwells in his own mountain cave Dealing out rough justice to wife and child, Indifferent to what the others do. (Od, p. 152)

Later, we learn that neither do the Cyclopes sail the seas:

Good ships like ours with cheekpaint at the bows Are far beyond the Kyklopes. No shipright Toils among them, shaping and building up Symmetrical trim hulls to cross the sea And visit all the seaboard towns, as men do Who go and come in commerce over water. (Od, p. 152)

The upshot of Odysseus’s description is to expose the supposed barbarism and otherness of Cyclopes culture, and indeed that basic conclusion may be somewhat true: after all, Polyphemous does violate a well-nigh universal taboo—he eats human flesh. But Odysseus also points out that the Cyclopes lack laws and governing organizations, that they let the land lie fallow (agriculture, of course, has long been held to be the groundwork of civilized bourgeois culture, even among,
or perhaps especially among, such thinkers as Marx and Engels), that
they are indifferent to one another's qualms and needs, and finally that
they are irreverent. The latter point is of particular significance, for no
sin is more unthinkable to Odysseus than the lack of self-abrogation
and humility before the Gods, since this provides the aura of naturality
to the system of oppression that Odysseus is wholly committed to. Just
so, in contemporary culture the system of economic "laws" is regarded
as a natural one, thus justifying oppression and misery in all its varied
forms; the guilt of the individual is transferred to an order outside the
sphere of human control, outside of freeplay (to use Derrida's language
again), and the existing order entrenches itself still further.

In a word, the Cyclopes are ignorant. According to Odysseus they
fail to see the productive possibilities of a rationally organized world.
It is thus not surprising that Odysseus should also condemn their
culture for its lack of a maritime sector, since shipping has as one of
its primary purposes the extension of commerce via the cultivation of
new markets. On this level Odysseus's ship can be seen as a prototype
of various mechanisms of bourgeois expansionism—mechanisms
which, however, have not yet been fully rationalized. Hence Odysseus's
"capitalism" is as yet an uncertain mixture of trade and pillagery, a mix-
ture in which the latter still reigns. The metaphor of ship building can
be carried still further if one recognizes the extent to which ship
building, in Odysseus's eyes, captures in its most supreme form the
notion of natural balance or symmetry. The form of the ship, thanks to
its necessary structural balance, supplies an organic representation of
cultivation and civilization, those things which are for Odysseus the
standard by which barbarous and civilized cultures can be differentiat-
ed.

Such is the nature of Odysseus's perception of the culture of
the Cyclopes, and it should be clear that his description is a wholly
condemnatory one. In the words of Adorno and Horkheimer: "For Homer,
barbarism can be defined as the absence of any systematic agriculture,
and the lack of any systematic organization of labor and society govern-
ing the disposal of time" (DE, p. xii).

But the facts of Polyphemous's existence defy this description.
Although he is in fact a crude creature, his life and lifestyle contain
a semblance of order and simplicity. The existence of the well-kept herd
of goats, which Odysseus describes with admiration—"pens crowded
with lambs and kids, each in its own class"—suggests that a balance
exists within Polyphemous's life; this directly challenges Odysseus's
earlier characterization of the Cyclopes as "louts," who deal out "rough
justice" as a whim. This is suggested further in the description made
of Polyphemous upon his return form the fields:

Next he took his seat
And milked his bleating ewes. A practiced job
He made of it, giving each ewe her suckling;
Thickened his milk, then, into curds and whey,
Sieved out the curds to drip in withy baskets,
And poured the whey to stand in bowls
Cooling until he drank it for supper. (Od, p. 152)

The meticulous detail with which this pattern is described affronts all descriptions of Polyphemous that have come before. It is as if a new narrator had entered the text. And so the sensitivity of Homer's narrative impulse, its refusal to close completely the play of the text, is manifest. Homer digresses, endorses freplay, precisely when the imperative of unity—the principle of the Aristotelian text, as well as the principle of advanced imperialism—would be most likely to appear. Polyphemous's care for his flock is utterly astounding when juxtaposed to Odysseus's earlier description of the giant's bestial nature. We are thus by no means in the presence of a wholly barbarous culture; rather, we see a culture and region that, despite all of Odysseus's efforts, can never be fully mastered by the Achaians. As such, Odysseus's so-called defeat of Polyphemous is a paltry example of cultural self-aggrandisement. In the face of the refusal of Cyclopes culture (one might think of the American "experience" in Vietnam in this context), Odysseus must generate an ornament of superiority, if nothing else, to return home with. In his "defeat" of the Cyclopes, we find an extreme instance of the mythic self-deception so often practiced by Odysseus.

But there is an even more significant feature of Polyphemous's interaction with Odysseus, and that is that the former sees through the latter, at least initially, and thus makes it absolutely essential for Odysseus to blind him. When Polyphemous first sees the Achaians in his cave, he says to them:

Strangers... Who are you? And where from?
What brings you here by sea ways—a fair traffic?
Or are you wandering rogues, who cast your lives
Like dice, and ravage other folk by the sea? (Od, p. 152)

The acuity of these statements is astounding. The questions strike to the heart of the Odyssean enterprise: "What brings you here... a fair traffic?" Of course, by no means did the Achaians have "fair traffic" in mind when they landed on the Cyclopes' isle. At the very least they sought to take some of the giant's stock; at most they sought to colonize or kill him. Even more important, however, is the following question, which essentially sees through Odysseus's famously deceptive front (an almost fatal mistake for Polyphemous): "Or are you wandering rogues, who... ravage other folk by the sea?"

The force of this last question cannot be overestimated, for it signals, from the perspective of one of those isolated "other" cultures (the sort that Edward Said continuously interrogates), the exposure of the Odyssean problematic of domination, plunder, and "cultivation." Polyphemous sees through the Odyssean smokescreen, and thus seals his own fate. It would be unthinkable, from Odysseus's perspective, to leave the Cyclopes' isle without a victory of some sort. Yet the enormity of Cyclopean culture, in terms of its great physical strength,
precludes the traditional Achaian response—militarily induced plunder. Polyphemous’s questions so perplex Odysseus that the latter responds in just the manner that indicts him more profoundly (there is no cleverness here): He cites the glories of the destruction of Troy. He thus invokes his role as pillager just as he denies it, by simultaneously asking Polyphemous for gifts as he recites the awesome power of his army. Later, it will be no accident that the wine used to numb Polyphemous, that is, to blind the giant’s reason, was a gift given Odysseus by Maron, thus reinscribing the prophetic and redemptive force of charity, itself a constituent of civilized society.

What the supposedly dull-witted Polyphemous has done is to usurp the most vaunted arena of rationality—the field of vision—by making Odysseus transparent. Consequently, his blinding by Odysseus is necessitated, for the panoptic imperatives of Achaian culture have become sedimented, and can only look out from the center. Any gaze that “looks back,” any regard that faces the center, must be destroyed. One-eyed Polyphemous may have lacked the breadth of field of Odyssean vision, but he made up for it with the sharpness of his gaze. Thus he exposes the one-way imperatives of Achaian culture, an imperative that had closed itself to freeplay, an imperative that had “willingly emerged from its critical element to become a mere means at the disposal of an existing order . . . to . . . convert the positive it elected to defend into something negative and destructive” (DE, p. xii). Polyphemous’s vision is therefore the retrieval of difference, of freeplay, from a wholly unexpected source, and its ruthless suppression by Odysseus marks the most forceful example of the “happy” blindness of triumphant thought. It is by no means trivial that, after Polyphemous has been blinded, after he realizes the mythic fulfillment that Odysseus’s arrival had entailed, the now supplicant giant’s call for Odysseus’s return is responded to as follows:

If I could take your life I would, and take  
Your time away, and hurl you down to hell! (Od, p. 161)

Odysseus, of course, could only respond thus, for Polyphemous, like his father Poseidon, is the dangerous principle of Being, of difference, the principle which Odysseus has not, and could not master, just like the periphery of today’s geo-political world which, despite the “best” efforts of the imperialistic West, has refused the authority of the center.

It is in this last sense that William Bennett’s understanding of the “best” that has been written and said must be taken, and it is in this last sense that the subject of Western literature, or the subject as Western literature, must be understood: cunning, imperialist, violent.
NOTES

7. By “necessary,” I mean to suggest that participation in the Odyssean form of man—a form ruthlessly reified in Western culture, but particularly in the last 200 years—has become, despite material and actual conditions to the contrary, a requirement for survival in the world.
8. Particularly not the most famous “no one” of Western culture: the cunning Odysseus, who by virtue of his public renunciation of selfhood, all the while retaining its composite remnants in the secret cache of Western individuality, the soul, is able to pronounce his dialectically improved self and thus gain ascendancy over the “brutish” Cyclopes.
10. The case of the Aeneid, which I shall not discuss in great detail, is both more levelling and less interesting. More levelling because it incorporates a notion of absolute ontotheological destiny with the unfinished notion of Odyssean man; less interesting because it thus skirts a more authentic encounter with the perplexities of being.
14. Which is not accidentally still rooted to the earth. Odysseus’s bed—his unmovable bed—is another example of the “natural” and ahistorical character of Odysseus’s unremovable presence. But is also, by virtue of its rootedness, grants Odysseus, as center, the capacity to escape from the very center he comprises. The rooted bed is Odysseus’s dialectical launching pad: it is, in every sense, the center beyond freplay that grants him the freedom to extend outside the structure, and so to forcefully (i.e., transcendentally) coerce all that his gaze (or desire) reaches.
15. This is a critical point for Herbert Marcuse, who articulates the very impossibility of a final suppression with his notion of the Great Refusal: invoking a moment of dialectical reversal—“the very strength and efficiency of this order may become factors of disintegration” (*Eros and Civilization*, p. xxi)—he suggests that all teleological systems will ultimately succumb to the very forces that generated them initially: “protest will continue because it is a biological neces-
sity” (p. xxv). The bio-logism of Marcuse’s discourse notwithstanding, (nor his sometimes Hegelian penchant for utopianism), the point is a valid one, for it inscribes the essential historicity of life—a movement that defies totalization by virtue of the very forces that totalistic systems generate. In fact, this position serves to undermine some of Marcuse’s own totalizations.

Romantic is meant in the sense that it posits a lost plenitude of balance and harmony and control, as in the Odyssey, or on the other hand a future realization of limit—i.e., the heroic, national, etc.—as in the Aeneid and the Iliad. That these primal conditions of plenitude cannot be gotten to, and that the desire for such is one of the core ingredients of fascism, should be apparent. Derrida makes this clear.

Derrida, Writing and Difference, p. 279.

This is peculiarly reminiscent of Richard Nixon’s purported statement to Henry Kissinger that he hoped the North Vietnamese would think he, the president, was crazy, thus compelling them to negotiate more quickly: With his finger on “the button,” Nixon was the mad man with a “rational” end in mind, thus engaging in the suspension of rationality for its greater recuperation later.
