

Homer's Light: The Odyssey Koan

by Stanley Lombardo

Speak, Memory,
 of the cunning hero,
The wanderer, blown off course time and again
After he plundered Troy's sacred heights.
 Speak,
Of all the cities he saw, the minds he grasped,
The suffering deep in his heart at sea
As he struggled to survive and bring his men home
But could not save them, hard as he tried-
The fools-destroyed by their own recklessness
When they ate the oxen of Hyperion the Sun,
And that god snuffed out their day of return.
 Of all these things,
Speak, Immortal One,
And tell the tale once more in our time.

As a translator my main concern has been to find a voice for Homer in English, to remember my own voice as Homer's and to merge it with his. This is something I have tried to do, without any success at all for decades, since I first encountered Homer in Greek as an undergraduate at Loyola University in New Orleans. Poetry had already become the stream of my life, but here was an immortal river of poetry. What first impressed me was the sound of his Greek verse, and it was immediately apparent to me that the sound of Homer's voice in Greek cannot be found in English. If you listen to the first ten lines of Homer's *Odyssey* you can hear for yourself a kind of music, a sheer physical beauty, that cannot be heard in English.

(Recite Greek)

As the critic Donald Carne-Ross has observed, a translator doesn't have a hope in hell of taking on Homer at the level of verbal music. But other essential qualities of Homer's voice can perhaps be heard in English-his directness, simplicity, immediacy, his deep humanity. These are qualities in Homer's poetry that I became familiar with over time, through long listening. They are really qualities of mind. So finding Homer's voice has become for me finding his mind.

What this has been like for me I can best express in terms of a classical form of Zen meditation known as *kong-an* practice that I

have been deeply involved with for the past thirty-five years. *Kong-an* practice directs our attention to the mind before words and speech appear. The great Sung Dynasty master, Wu Men, who compiled the first classic collection of kong-ans, tells us that if we do this practice, we can lock eyebrows with the masters of old, seeing through their eyes and hearing with their ears. Who would not like to do that?

Kong-ans are an aspect of formal Zen training in which the student, in a face to face interview with a teacher, tries to attain the mind of the teacher and of the great teachers in his lineage. Here is an example:

A monk asked Un Mun, 'What is speech that goes beyond Buddha and the patriarchs?' Un Mun answered, 'Sesame bun.'

The point of working with this kong-an is to grasp Un Mun's mind the moment before he said 'sesame bun,' and to present that mind clearly and directly. Then there is no teacher, no student, only the original mind that we all share. Here is another *kong-an*, a very simple one. This stick, this sound, and your mind, are they the same or different? How can you respond?

Homer has always been one of my teachers, and I realized after I had been doing *kong-an* practice for about ten years that my approach to translation was changing, that I was beginning to go beyond the words, beyond language and style, to the mind that produced them. This made all the difference. I had been trying most of my adult life to lock eyebrows with Homer, trying to attain the mind of the great master of European poetry, and now that mind, and the voice, was beginning to appear.

Who was he? We know so little about him. "A blind man who lives on rugged Chios" is as much as we are told (this almost an aside at the end of the Homeric "Hymn to Delian Apollo"). Some modern scholars have suggested that we should think of "Homer" more as a tradition of epic poetry than an individual composer, but for me there is one mind that runs through both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, one poet at their deep conception—and I can well believe that this poet was blind. Jacques Lusseyran, the French resistance leader, tells us that a few months after he lost his eyesight as a young boy he found that the whole world was filled with light, and that the light came from his mind and was the core of his being. This passage in his autobiography, *And There Was Light*, which describes how he gained a power of inward vision, strikes me as a wonderful expression of how Homer's mind works, peopling a universe and

illuminating everything within it:

At this point some instinct ... made me change my course. I began to look more closely, not at things but at a world closer to myself, looking from an inner a place to one further within, instead of clinging to the movement of sight toward the world outside. Immediately, the substance of the universe drew together, redefined and peopled itself anew. I was aware of a radiance emanating from a place I knew nothing about, a place which might as well have been outside me as within. But radiance was there, or, to put it more precisely, light.. . I could no more have denied it than people with eyes can deny that they see. I was not light myself, I knew that, but I bathed in it as element which blindness had suddenly brought much closer. I could feel light rising, spreading, resting on objects, giving them form, then leaving them.

Homer's mind, too, and his world, are filled with light that rises, spreads, rests on things and on people and gives them form. Light is the esthetic expression of the poet's mind. In the *Iliad* the light is intense, the light of noon, searing and white, the light of Zeus, whose very name means the sky's brightness, illuminating mortal heroes in their hour of glory. Here is Hector in that light:

And Hector needed no urging. Hector
Raged like the War God, the Spear Wielder
Fire that consumes a wooded mountainside,
Foam flecking his mouth, eyes burning
Under fierce brows, and the helmet
Encasing his face a sinister glitter
As Hector fought, as Zeus himself
Shed a core of light from the aether
Around the solitary warrior, but only
For this brief moment

And here is Achilles:

Snow flurries can come so thick and fast
From the cold northern sky that the wind
That bears them becomes an icy, blinding glare.
So too the gleaming, polished weaponry-
The helmets, shields, spears, and plated corselets-
AU the bronze paraphernalia of war
That issued from the ships. The rising glare
Reflected off the coppery sky, and the land beneath

Laughed under the arcing metallic glow.
A deep bass thrumming rose from the marching feet
And, like a bronze bolt in the center, Achilles,
Who now began to arm.

His eyes glowed
Like white-hot steel, and he gritted his teeth
Against the grief that had sunk into his bones,
And every motion he made in putting on the armor
Forged for him in heaven was an act of passion
Directed against the Trojans: clasping on his shins
The greaves trimmed in silver at the ankles,
Strapping the corselet onto his chest, slinging
The silver-studded bronze sword around a shoulder,
And then lifting the massive, heavy shield
That spilled light around it as if it were the moon.

Or a fire that has flared up in a lonely settlement
High in the hills of an island, reflecting light
On the faces of men who have put out to sea
And must watch helplessly as rising winds
Bear them away from their dear ones.

So too the terrible beauty of Achilles' shield,
A fire in the sky.

In the *Odyssey* we see by a softer light, the rose-light of dawn, the firelight in a room. The ancient critic Longinus compares the poet of the *Odyssey* to the setting sun, adding: "The grandeur remains apart from the intensity." Penelope waits and dreams in that quiet light; Telemachus wakes to it; and Odysseus, in the dark of the moon, returns to it and becomes himself again.

The light in the *Odyssey* casts an enchantment over the most ordinary actions in the poem. Here is Penelope making her first appearance in the poem:

They were sitting hushed in silence, listening
To the great harper as he sang the tale
Of the hard journeys home that Pallas Athena
Ordained for the Greeks on their way back from Troy.
His song drifted upstairs, and Penelope,
Wise daughter of Icarius, took it all in.
She came down the steep stairs of her house-
Not alone, two maids trailed behind-
And when she had come among the suitors
She stood shaded in light by a column

That supported the roof of the great house,
Hiding her cheeks behind her silky veils.

And here is Telemachus:

Dawn's pale rose fingers brushed across the sky
And Odysseus' son got out of bed and dressed
He slung his sharp sword around his shoulder,
Then tied oiled leather sandals onto his feet,
And walked out of the bedroom like a god.
Wasting no time, he ordered the heralds
To call an assembly. The heralds' cries
Rang out through the town, and the men
Gathered quickly, their long hair streaming.
Telemachus strode along carrying a spear
And accompanied by two lean hounds.
Athena shed a silver grace upon him,
And everyone marveled at him as he entered.

Penelope walks across a room, Telemachus gets dressed—and these actions are as magical as any of the marvelous adventures Odysseus has. The great poem, again as Longinus puts it, is like the sea at low tide, withdrawn into its solitude, greatness ebbing and flowing, and the poet wanders along the shore where there are many curious things, and into the mythical and incredible: "What else can we call all this" Longinus asks, "but the dreaming of a Zeus?" But it is not only in the midst of the mythical and incredible—the Sirens, the Island of the Sun, the Underworld, the house of Circe that we are entranced. Everywhere the poet turns his mind there is a sense of seeing things as if for the first time, and seeing their essential wholeness. "One by one, each thing is complete;/One by one each thing has it," as an old Zen poem puts it. The spell that we are under is an enlightening enchantment, not the drowsiness of the lotus-eaters, who become forgetful of home, but a waking realization that every moment of experience is our luminous, original home. This is the true *nostos*, the true homecoming, of the *Odyssey*, and the completion of the poetic vision that begins in the raw, brilliant radiance of the *Iliad*.

Nostos,—"return home"—the word appears in the fourth line of the *Odyssey* to announce the poem's genre, theme, and direction. And just before it, in the third line, is the word *noos*, "mind," expressing the essential characteristic of Odysseus, the cunning hero who survives by grasping the minds of others and whose own mind cannot be matched except by Athena and, most memorably, by Penelope. Both words originally meant to move from darkness to light. To

come to the light, to come to consciousness, is to return home. But how final an experience is this? Homer brings Odysseus home, but his return to Ithaca will not be his last voyage.

When Odysseus visits Teiresias in Hades (*Odyssey* 11. 1 19 ff.) to learn the route of his voyage home, the Theban prophet tells him of another journey he must make after his eventual return to Ithaca:

"...when you have slain
The suitors in your hall, by ruse or by sword,
Then you must go off again, carrying a broad-bladed oar,
Until you come to men who know nothing of the sea,
Who eat their food unsalted, and have never seen
Red-prowed ships or oars that wing them along.
And I will tell you a sure sign that you have found them,
One you cannot miss. When you meet another traveler
Who thinks you are carrying a winnowing fan,
Then you must fix your oar in the earth
And offer sacrifice to Lord Poseidon,
A ram, a bull, and a boar in its prime.
Then return to your home and offer
Perfect sacrifice to the immortal gods
Who hold high heaven, to each in turn.
And death will come to you off the sea,
A death so gentle, and carry you off
When you are worn out in sleek old age,
Your people prosperous all around you.
All this will come true for you as I have told."

Odysseus reports Teiresias' prescription to Penelope in the course of his late-night account of his adventures after the two of them are re-united, but Homer's *Odyssey* ends with its hero still home in Ithaca, where his quest and the ever contracting circles of the great poem have brought him. We are left to assume that at some later time Odysseus made his inland journey as Poseidon's missionary, and having discharged that duty, returned to Ithaca and to Penelope to await the prophesied gentle death from the sea (or far from the sea-the Greek is ambiguous). Teiresias' prophecy of a quiet, domestic ending to Odysseus' life is in perfect accordance with Homer's characterization of the wandering hero. Odysseus never wanted to go to Troy, and when the war was over all he wanted to do was return home. The *Odyssey* is a poem of *nostos*, "return," a centripetal poem, a home-seeking poem. Plato understands Homer's Odysseus well when, in a vision of metempsychosis at the end of the Republic, he has the hero select a quiet, domestic life for

his next reincarnation.

But even before Plato, there began a tradition of sequels to Homer's *Odyssey*, prompted at least in part by Teiresias' prophecy, that reactivate the man of many turns and lead him to new destinies, taking him away from home in a centrifugal quest for knowledge, experience and meaning—for *noos*. This tradition began in antiquity just a century or two after Homer and culminated in Nikos Kazantzakis' *Odyssey*, a twentieth century mega-poem—it goes far beyond epic—that synthesizes and transcends everything in the sequel tradition (and just about everything in Eastern and Western philosophy and religion as well). I would like to trace the outlines of this tradition, picking it up with Dante, and then, when we have seen Odysseus off on his last voyage, return to Homer's *Odyssey* and consider a little more deeply the implications of the two cognate, light-seeking words—*nostos*, "return home," and *noos*, "mind"—that stand at the beginning of Homer's *Odyssey* and are at the heart of his poetry.

The sequels to Homer's *Odyssey* in classical Greek and medieval Latin do little more than offer ingenious fulfillments of Teiresias' prophecy of a death from the sea for Odysseus, leaving him spiritually marooned on Ithaca. It was Dante who first launched the hero forth from his home island - or rather from Circe's island before he ever returned home-on a spiritual quest. In the twenty-sixth canto of *Inferno* Dante comes with his guide Virgil to the eighth bolgia of Circle Eight, where the evil counselors move about endlessly, each concealed in a great horn of flame. There, enveloped in a double tongue of flame with his old comrade Diomedes, is Ulysses (the Romans' name for Odysseus), atoning, as Virgil explains, for his career as an arch-deceiver. So far Dante is following a post-Homeric, largely Latin, anti-Ulyssean tradition in which Ulysses is little more than a crafty, even criminal, trickster, the execrable strategist who engineered the theft of the Palladium, devised the Wooden Horse, and so destroyed Troy, Rome's spiritual mother-city. But then the tongue of flame quivers, and Ulysses is made to tell his own story. It is a story of the hero's relentless search for new experience. Here is Dante:

The greater horn of that ancient flame
began to quiver and murmur low
as if it were a candle vexed by the wind;
And then, wagging its tip back and forth
as if it were a speaking tongue, the flame
flung out a voice and said, "When I left

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Circe, who had held me back
 a year or more on her isle near Gaeta,
 before Aeneas gave it that name,
 Neither the sweet thought of my son, nor reverence
 for my old father, nor the love I owed 95
 Penelope, and which would have made her glad,
 Could overcome my burning desire
 for experience of the wide world above
 and of men's vices and their valor.
 I put forth on the deep, open sea 100
 with one ship only, and a skeleton crew
 of companions who had not deserted me.
 I saw one coast, then another, as far as Spain
 as far as Morocco; I saw Sardinia
 and the other islands lapped by the waves. 105
 My crew and I were old and slow
 when we pulled into the narrow straits
 where Hercules had set up his pillars
 To mark where men should not pass beyond. 110
 I had left Seville on the starboard side
 and off the port left Ceuta behind.
 'Brothers,' I said, 'who through a hundred
 thousand perils have reached the West,
 do not deny to the last glimmering shred
 Of consciousness that remains to us 115
 experience of the unpeopled world
 that lies beyond the setting sun.
 Consider the seed from which you were born!
 You were not made to live like brute animals
 but to live in pursuit of virtue and knowledge!' 120
 This little speech steeled my crew's hearts
 and made them so eager for the voyage ahead
 I could hardly have restrained them afterwards.
 We swung the stern toward the morning light
 and made our oars wings for our last, mad run, 125
 the ship's left side always gaining on the right.
 All of the stars around the opposite pole
 now shone in the night, while our own was so low
 it did not rise above the ocean's roll.
 Five times had we seen it wax and wane, 130
 the light on the underside of the moon,
 since we began our journey on the main,
 And then a mountain loomed in the sky,
 still dim and distant, but it seemed to me
 I had never seen any mountain so high. 135
 We shouted for joy, but our joy now

turned into grief, for a whirlwind roared
out of the new land and struck the ship's prow.
Three times it spun her around in the water,
and the fourth time around, up the stern rose
and the prow plunged down, as pleased Another,
Until above us we felt the waters close.”

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This voyage into the Atlantic may have been suggested to Dante by accounts of the Celtic voyages of St. Brendan, but as an ending to Ulysses' adventures it is original with Dante. The moral allegory is clear enough: Ulysses is condemned as much for his inordinate desire for knowledge as for his deception; but it is also clear that Dante admires and identifies with the doomed hero's restless intellect and his passion to extend the horizon of human experience. It is the Renaissance Dante more than the medieval who engenders this new Ulysses, and he makes his next significant appearance in Tennyson's seventy-line lyric monologue, a poem too well known to require extensive quotation here. Tennyson blends into the hero's temper a measure of Byronic restlessness and contempt for domestic life and seasons it with a dash of Romantic wistfulness. His Ulysses broods and postures, but since in fact he never actually gets underway we never learn the outcome of his last voyage. It may be that the gulfs do wash him down—or it may be that he touches the Happy Isles and sees the great Achilles—we don't know. But in the end we are convinced of his Victorian resolve

To follow knowledge like a sinking star
Beyond the utmost bounds of human thought,
and
To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield.

Sixty years later, in 1904, the Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli published in his *Poemi Conviviali* a narrative poem in twenty-four brief cantos (totaling 1200 lines) entitled “Ultimo Viaggio.” Pascoli has Odysseus in his last days seek, find nothing, and finally yield, but he does cast over the hero a beguiling fin de siècle enchantment. In the poem's opening cantos, Odysseus performs the inland pilgrimage prescribed by Teiresias and then returns home to sit by the fireside and wait for the prophesied death from the sea, *morte soave, molto soave*. But death delays nine years, and the old hero gradually sinks into desolate reveries. He begins to doubt the reality of the experiences he had on his journey back from Troy to Ithaca Penelope, shrewd and wise, understands what is happening to her aged husband, rouses him, and in the tenth spring Odysseus meets his old companions on the shore and sails forth with them on waves of nostalgia for the distant lands he visited on his perilous

voyages. His earlier doubts are confirmed. Circe's island is deserted; the Cyclops never existed. Scylla and Charybdis are harmless landmarks, the Sirens are silent, and so forth. But on the rocks near the Sirens he sees the bones and shriveled skins of dead men and is musing silently on the symbolism when his ship cracks up on the reef. And the blue sea that loved Odysseus carries him on to the island of Calypso, and the concealing goddess finds his body on the shore and wraps her old, reluctant lover in the cloud of her hair and wails to the sterile sea, "Better not to be born, not to be at all is a smaller death than to be no more." These are the poem's closing lines, expressive of an existentialist preference for total non-being rather than a futile search for experience and the loss of awareness at death.⁵ The best ending for a veteran hero and the true meaning of his experience is annihilation and absorption into the infinite. And this where we would leave Odysseus were it not for Nikos Kazantzakis.

Kazantzakis published his *Odyssey* in 1938. At 33,333 lines of demotic Greek iambic octameter, Kazantzakis' sequel is nearly three times the length of the Homeric original. Most critics agree that the length is fully justified by the rich development of the theme's content and symbolism. The poem is available in a splendid English translation by Kimon Friar: I will attempt a three minute, thirty three second summary.

After a prologue to the sun, symbol of the ultimate purified spirit, the narrative begins with Odysseus, having just slain his wife's suitors, relaxing in his bath and reflecting on how bored he is already with the whole domestic scene. He puts his son Telemachus in charge of the island, gathers a motley crew, informs them that they are embarking to transform flesh into spirit, and sets sail for Sparta to see if he can interest Menelaus in further adventures. Menelaus has turned fat and lazy, but Helen is ready for action and sails off with Odysseus to Crete. His old crony Idomeneus is king of Knossos, but when he tries to make Helen his bride in the orgiastic bull rituals, Odysseus in disgust successfully leads a slave revolt against Idomeneus and marries Helen off to a young blond Dorian, a mingling of bloods that will engender the Greeks of the Golden Age. Then he sails off to Egypt in search of more adventures and the source of the Nile. In Egypt he unseals the tomb of an ancient pharaoh and appropriates the treasure, but when he finds himself thinking of settling down and building villas and estates on the Nile, he orders all the treasure dumped overboard. He then joins a young communist leader, a Jewish woman named Rala, in an unsuccessful revolt against the pharaoh, is thrown into prison, is released when he frightens the pharaoh with a mask he carved of the tormented face of a new god,

gathers together a following of persecuted outcasts and leads them out of Egypt. They discover the source of the Nile at the foot of a mountain. Odysseus sets his people to building what he hopes will be a utopian city and himself ascends the mountain, communes with his god there for seven days, and then descends, bringing his people new commandments by which to live: 1) cultivate the mind and so impose order on disorder; 2) transcend the mind with the heart and so pierce to the essence of being; 3) become free of the hope that both mind and heart offer; and 4) plumb the atavistic roots of ego, race, and species and enter into a mystic communion with the entire universe. God is a struggling evolutionary growth of the spirit through all phenomena. The city is built in the Land of the Heart's Desire, and on the first day of its inaugural rites, the mountain erupts in a volcanic explosion and destroys the city utterly. All his companions are lost. Odysseus plunges into a timeless contemplation blazing with light and becomes one with all animate and inanimate beings. Fireflies glow in his beard; his feet flow like rivers. He has become a great ascetic now, with the thirty-two marks of the perfect man, abandoning the cult of doing for the cultivation of being. But his travels continue. He begins a long, southward trek through the heart of the dark continent, encountering along the way a succession of various seekers, a Siddhartha, a mystic courtesan, a poet, a Don Quixote, and Epicurean, a sacrificial king, and finally, at the southernmost tip of Africa, a young black Christ-like fisherman. Then the great ascetic builds a coffin-like kayak and embarks on his last journey, sailing past the clashing rocks of Yes and No toward the South Pole. Death, his old and faithful friend, comes and sits on the prow, turning into a Black Swan, into Dante's White Rose, into an iceberg, Odysseus' last ship of Death. The cold South Wind strips him bare, he summons all those whose spirits his own spirit has ever joined, and they all hear the cry of the World Destroyer – Helen also herself dying nursed by her granddaughters on the banks of the Eurotas River near Sparta, and rising up when she hears Odysseus' cry and saying, "Dear God, if only I could wreck my family once more and feel the wind in my face as I stand on the prow"- and then Odysseus' flesh dissolves and the great mind leaps to the peak of its holy freedom. The poem ends with an epilogue to the setting Sun, come home at last, signaling the completion of the transmutation of matter into spirit and light.

Turning now back to Homer's *Odyssey*, from the very beginning Odysseus is preeminently the hero who operates on the level of *noos*, mind. In Homer that mind, with all its cunning and depth, is bent on achieving *nostos*, a return home. In a tradition that begins really with Dante, knowledge and experience become the goal of a quest that leads the hero away from home--or towards his true home,

when we attend to the original meaning of both *noos* and *nostos*. The identity of the words was established in 1978 by Douglas Frame, who derived *noos* and *nostos* from an Indo-European root *NES, meaning to return from darkness to light. Frame sees the psycholinguistic identity of *noos* and *nostos* preserved structurally in Homer's poem, reviving the old idea of Odysseus as a solar hero who comes to light after a period of darkness. This can be seen as the operative archetype in the sequel tradition as well, especially as consummated by Kazantzakis, whose poem is framed and shot through with images of light, and who has his hero exclaim, "O my soul, your voyages have been your native land." The post-Homeric impulse to have Odysseus sail off on one more voyage is more than just nostalgia to see the old pro in action once more. Odysseus' homecoming is not complete until his enlightenment is complete. Neoplatonic philosophers allegorized Homer's *Odyssey* along similar lines, seeing Odysseus as a type of rational man passing through the sublunar universe, acquiring gnosis, and returning to his celestial home.

This long story, developed over several millennia, of Odysseus striving toward and finally achieving cosmic enlightenment ultimately flows from the open quality of Homer's mind, with Odysseus as a kind of emanation from Homer's mind through poetic time. The whole sequel tradition, and Kazantzakis especially, can be seen as a series of responses, or one cumulative response, to a kong-an, a question, that Homer poses in the *Odyssey*: Odysseus' mind, *noos*, and his homecoming, *nostos*, are they the same or different? But that response, culminating in the grand, mystical merging with the world soul in Kazantzakis' sequel, would be judged by any Zen master as fifty per-cent--only halfway there, stuck in the realm of the absolute and lacking the compassionate, functional engagement with the situation and people at hand that characterizes complete enlightenment. And, like many Zen masters, Homer answers his own question, dramatizing his answer in the climactic scene of the *Odyssey*, the scene in which Odysseus and Penelope lock eyebrows after twenty years of separation. Here, finally, Odysseus is stripped of the cunning that enabled him to survive but kept him separate; and Penelope, seeing her husband's total exposure, is able to drop her self-protective caution.

The scene in Odysseus' palace is illuminated by firelight. Odysseus has just slain the band of arrogant and violent young men who had been courting his wife, trying to kill his son, and eating him out of house and home. He is still in the guise of an old beggar, covered with blood from the battle, when Penelope comes down from her quarters to see the man who has killed her suitors.

Penelope descended the stairs, her heart
In turmoil. Should she hold back and question
Her husband? Or should she go up to him,
Embrace him, and kiss his hands and head?
She entered the hall, crossing the stone threshold,
And sat opposite Odysseus, in the firelight
Beside the farther wall. He sat by a column,
Looking down, waiting to see if his incomparable wife
Would say anything to him when she saw him.
She sat a long time in silence, wondering.
She would look at his face and see her husband,
But then fail to know him in his dirty rags.
Telemachus couldn't take it any more:

"Mother, how can you be so hard,
Holding back like that? Why don't you sit
Next to father and talk to him, ask him things?
No other woman would have the heart
To stand off from her husband who has come back
After twenty hard years to his country and home.
But your heart is always colder than stone."

And Penelope, cautious as ever:

"My child, I am lost in wonder
And unable to speak or ask a question
Or look him in the eyes. If he really is
Odysseus come home, the two of us
Will be sure of each other, very sure.
There are secrets between us no one else knows."
Odysseus, who had borne much, smiled,
And his words flew to his son on wings:

"Telemachus, let your mother test me
In our hall. She will soon see more dearly.
Now, because I am dirty and wearing rags,
She is not ready to acknowledge who I am."

Odysseus, meanwhile, was being bathed
By the housekeeper, Eurynome. She
Rubbed him with olive oil and threw about him
A beautiful cloak and tunic. And Athena
Shed beauty upon him, and made him look
Taller and more muscled, and made his hair
Tumble down his head like hyacinth flowers.

*Imagine a craftsman overlaying silver
With pure gold. He has learned his art
From Pallas Athena and Lord Hephaestus,
And creates works of breathtaking beauty.*

So Athena herself made his head and shoulders
Shimmer with grace. He came from the bath
Like a god, and sat down on the chair again
Opposite his wife, and spoke to her and said:

"You're a mystery to me. The gods
Have given to you, more than to any
Other woman, an unyielding heart
No other woman would be able to endure
Standing off from her husband, come back
After twenty hard years to his country and home.
Nurse, make up a bed for me so I can lie down
Alone, since her heart is a cold lump of iron."
And Penelope, cautious and wary:

"You're a mystery to me. I am not being proud
Or scornful, nor am I bewildered—not at all.
I know very well what you looked like
When you left Ithaca on your long-oared ship.
Nurse, bring the bed out from the master bedroom,
The bedstead he made himself, and spread it for him
With fleeces and blankets and silky coverlets."
She was testing her husband.

Odysseus, who had borne much,
Could bear no more, and cried out to his wife:

"By God, woman, now you've cut deep.
Who moved my bed? It would be hard
For anyone, no matter how skilled, to move it.
A god could come down and move it easily,
But not a man alive, however young and strong,
Could ever pry it up. There's something telling
About how that bed's built, and no one else
Built it but me.

There was an olive tree
Growing on the site, long-leaved and full,
Its trunk thick as a post I built my bedroom
Around that tree, and when I had finished
The masonry walls and done the roofing
And set in the jointed, dose-fitting doors,
I lopped off all of the olive's branches,

Trimmed the trunk from the root on up,
And rounded it and trued it with an adze until
I had myself a bedpost. I bored it with an auger,
And starting from this I framed up the whole bed,
Inlaying it with gold and silver and ivory
And stretching across it oxhide thongs dyed purple.
So there's our secret. But I do not know, woman,
Whether my bed is still firmly in place, or if
Some other man has cut through the olive's trunk.”

At this, Penelope finally let go.
Odysseus had shown he knew their old secret
In tears, she ran straight to him, threw her arms
Around him, kissed his face, and said:
"Don't be angry with me, Odysseus. You,
Of all men, know how the world goes.
It is the gods who gave us sorrow, the gods
Who begrudged us a life together, enjoying
Our youth and arriving side by side
To the threshold of old age. Don't hold it against me
That when I first saw you I didn't welcome you
As I do now. My heart has been cold with fear
That an imposter would come and deceive me.
There are many who scheme for ill-gotten gains.
Not even Helen, daughter of Zeus,
Would have slept with a foreigner had she known
The Greeks would go to war to bring her back home.
It was a god who drove her to that dreadful act,
Or she never would have thought of doing what she did, 230
The horror that brought suffering to us as well.
But now, since you have confirmed the secret
Of our marriage bed, which no one has ever seen-
Only you and I and a single servant, Actor's daughter,
Whom my father gave me before I ever came here
And who kept the doors of our bridal chamber-
You have persuaded even my stubborn heart.”

This brought tears from deep within him,
And as he wept he dung to his beloved wife.

*Land is a welcome sight to men swimming
For their lives, after Poseidon has smashed their ship
In heavy seas. Only a few of them escape
And make it to shore. They come out
Of the grey water crusted with brine, glad
To be alive and set foot on dry land.*

So welcome a sight was her husband to her.
She would not loosen her white arms from his neck,
And rose-fingered Dawn would have risen
On their weeping, had not Athena stepped in
And held back the long night at the end of its course
And stopped gold-stitched Dawn at Ocean's shores
From yoking the horses that bring light to men,
Lampus and Phaethon, the colts of Dawn.

Odysseus' homecoming is almost complete. Two minds have become one, but one more step is necessary, and Athena delays the light, the final dawn of the *Odyssey*, until the correct function of Odysseus' and Penelope intimacy can be enacted. Penelope and Odysseus talk.

While they spoke to one another,
Eurynome and the nurse made the bed
By torchlight, spreading it with soft coverlets.
Then the old nurse went to her room to lie down,
And Eurynome, who kept the bedroom,
Led the couple to their bed, lighting the way.
When she had led them in, she withdrew,
And they went with joy to their bed
And to their rituals of old.

The full presentation of a kong-an consists of a story, one or more questions, and a brief commentary in prose or verse. You have just heard the whole story, and the fundamental question—Odysseus' mind (noos) and his homecoming (nostos), are they the same or different? Here are two additional questions:

1. Odysseus' mind and Penelope's mind, which one do you like?
2. What does Homer's light make clear?

And here is the poem, with homage to Mu-mun, the great 12th c. Chinese compiler of the classic kong-an collection:

Eye like a shooting star,
Mind like lightning.
You for the first time will know you are home,
When you welcome the stranger who comes to your door.