

The Curse of the Cyclops

Hubris and the Boundaries of Vengeance*

Nikolaos Varvatakos

Prison Officer/Translator

Member of the administrative section of the Greek Official Centre for the Reintegration of Ex-Prisoners "EPANODOS".

Introduction

The value of the Homeric epics *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey* does not lie only in the definitive impact these two works had on shaping ancient Greek civilization – which, in turn, played a key role in shaping global civilization – but also in that these epics, regardless of how much they are grounded in historical fact, are rife with symbolism of timeless moralistic and philosophical worth. *The Odyssey*, in particular, contains mythological material that can well be considered an allegory of the human condition and the problems all humankind faces.

Both the central theme and the various sub-themes of this epic make up an archetypal allegory of the string of trials that man (symbolized by Odysseus) must go through in order to achieve self-realization and completion (symbolized by Odysseus' return to Ithaca and to his beloved family and friends). These trials roughly correspond to two basic emotions (impulses or instincts) that each person must successfully deal with in order to reach his or her own Ithaca, to evolve, in other words, into a complete personality: fear and pleasure. Indeed, almost every episode of *The Odyssey* can be viewed as a trial inspiring either the former emotion or the latter: encountering the Laestrygones, for instance, the Cicones, or Scylla and Charybdis inspire fear while encountering the Lotus-Eaters and the Sirens or staying on the island of Helios are trials that entail exposure to dangerous and intense pleasures (temptations).

The whole plot of *The Odyssey* revolves around the successful or unsuccessful, as the case may be, handling of the emotions/impulses in question, primarily that of pleasure. This article studies the pivotal episode of Odysseus' confrontation with the Cyclops Polyphemus, which teaches how vastly significant it is for man and society to control yet another emotion: vengefulness. It is upon vengefulness that the official or unofficial treatment of transgressors, of inmates in particular, is founded.

Summary

Before analysing and documenting the meaning of the episode in question, it would be useful to give a summary of the events recounted in the Homeric text. Odysseus' encounter with the Cyclops is given in Book 9 of *The Odyssey*¹ (lines 105-566) immediately following the incident with the Lotus-Eaters.

In this episode, Odysseus initially arrives at a wooded, uninhabited island, opposite the land of the Cyclopes. On the morning after next, he crosses over by ship to the Cyclopes' land

with twelve of his comrades to find out what sort of people inhabit it. There, they enter the cave of Cyclops Polyphemus, who, at that moment, is away grazing his flock. Odysseus' comrades urge him to steal cheese, lambs and kids from the Cyclops' cave and pens and leave immediately. Odysseus refuses. The Cyclops then returns to the cave and, after herding his flock in, seals the entrance with a mighty rock, thus trapping Odysseus and his comrades inside. When the Cyclops catches sight of them and asks them who they are and what they want, Odysseus replies that they have been shipwrecked and, invoking Zeus, entreats Cyclops Polyphemus to grant them hospitality. The latter responds that he does not care about the gods, nor is he afraid of them, and then asks Odysseus where his ship is moored. Suspecting the question is a trap, Odysseus answers that their ship had crashed on the rocks and was swept away by the wind.

The Cyclops then pounces upon them, grabs two of Odysseus' comrades and after killing them, devours them. He does the same the following morning, before leaving the cave with his flock, as he also does in the evening upon his return. That night, after having lost six comrades, Odysseus offers the Cyclops wine he had brought with him and, in return, the Cyclops promises to eat him last. While sleeping in a drunken stupor, the Cyclops is blinded by Odysseus and his comrades, who drive a burning stake of olivewood into his eye.

The next morning, he tries to capture Odysseus and his comrades, who manage to escape, however by hanging onto the undersides of the sheep exiting the cave after the Cyclops who removes the mighty rock from the entrance to take his flock to pasture. While sailing away on his ship, Odysseus calls out to the Cyclops that Zeus is punishing him for his evil deeds. In a rage, the Cyclops snaps off the peak of a large mountain and hurls it at Odysseus' ship. The jagged stone lands in the sea just in front of the ship and the wave washes it back ashore.

When Odysseus and his comrades manage to row the ship twice the distance they had before, he shouts out to the Cyclops once again, saying that he is Odysseus of Ithaca. After responding to him that it was once prophesied he would be blinded by someone of that name, the Cyclops urges him to return so that he can offer him the gifts of hospitality and prays to Poseidon, his father, to grant Odysseus a good journey, thus hoping that his eye will be healed. Instead, Odysseus retorts that he wishes he had the strength to kill him, adding that he hopes no one will heal his eye, not even Poseidon himself. Cyclops Polyphemus then curses Odysseus and beseeches his father Poseidon not to let Odysseus return home or, if it is his fate to return, to arrive after a very long time, having lost all his comrades, in a ship that is another's and to find trouble in his home. Poseidon hears his son's curse. The Cyclops subsequently hurls another even larger rock at Odysseus and his remaining comrades, who manage, nonetheless, to escape and meet the others waiting at the island opposite, from which they set sail to continue their journey.

This is, in brief, the episode that took place between Odysseus and the Cyclops Polyphemus. At this point, I shall attempt to pinpoint and analyse one of the basic morals of this story.

Analysis

Of all the human or non-human characters in *The Odyssey*, it is certain that Cyclops Polyphemus gathers the most anti-social ("monstrous") characteristics and to the highest degree. Firstly, all the Cyclopes in general are described by Homer as arrogant and unjust (Book 9, line 106 "an insolent and lawless folk"), as indifferent to others (9, 115 "they have no regard for one another") and as lacking in the basic features of a civilized lifestyle (9, 112

“Neither assemblies for councils have they, nor appointed laws”), and no seaway transportation (9, 125 “the Cyclopes have at hand no ships”). Their lack of ships underlines their geographical isolation and, by extension, their anti-social personality.

Concerning Polyphemus in particular, the Homeric text mentions that he is huge (9, 187 “a monstrous man”), very strong (9, 214 “clothed in tremendous strength”), that he does not keep company with other Cyclopes (9, 188-189 “[he] did not mingle with others”), that his behaviour is uncouth (9, 189 “[he was] obedient to no law”), recognising neither justice nor law (9, 215 “[...] that knew nothing of rights and laws”). His boorish personality, as outlined by the above characterisations, is confirmed by the events and dialogue of this episode. Although Odysseus initially entreats the Cyclops to offer him and his comrades hospitality in the name of Zeus (9, 266-271 “We [...] have come as suppliants to your knees, in the hope you will give us entertainment, or in some other way be generous to us, as is the due of strangers [...] Zeus is the avenger of suppliants and strangers.”), not only does the Cyclops arrogantly refuse to, but he also derides the gods (9, 275-276 [...] “The Cyclopes pay no heed to Zeus nor to the blessed gods, since truly we are far better than they”). In addition, he slyly asks Odysseus where his ship is moored, something that indicates his behaviour is not merely the product of violent, primitive impulses, but of deceitfulness as well. He then devours two of Odysseus’ comrades after cold-bloodedly killing them by “dashing them to the earth like puppies” (9, 289) as Homer points out, who, obviously wishing to stress the atrocity of the act, adds that “their brains flowed forth upon the ground and wetted the earth” (9, 290). Apart from the primitive act of cannibalism (which he commits three times, according to the text), he mocks Odysseus when the latter offers him wine, telling him that as a reward he will eat him last (9, 369-370 “Nobody [Odysseus] I will eat last among his comrades, and the others before him; this shall be your gift”), testifying to an even more primitive feature: a sadistic streak in his character.

According to the Homeric text, the detailed description of the Cyclops’ character contains almost all the facets that make up atrocious criminal behaviour and actions. It can, therefore, be logically assumed that the Cyclops is the Homeric/mythological archetype of the perpetrator of heinous crimes. As a result, his blinding is not only a legal act of self-defence, which Odysseus must commit out of necessity in order to save himself and his comrades, but also an act of justifiable retaliation for the Cyclops’ wrongdoings. The gravity of the latter’s deeds is equivalent to the gravity of the punishment imposed upon him: the deprivation of his eyesight and all the limitations this entails. The retributive and proportionate relationship between the committed acts on the one hand, and the punishment undergone on the other are obvious; in this light, it can be surmised that the blinding of the Cyclops (who represents the perpetrator of the crime) symbolises the sentence imposed by the state and society (represented by Odysseus and his comrades).

It is at this precise point that one may find the key to comprehending the deeper meaning of this episode. What happens after the blinding/enforcement of the sentence? Odysseus tells the Cyclops that Zeus and the other gods have punished him for his misdeeds (9, 477-479 “Only too surely were your evil deeds to fall on your own head, you stubborn wretch, who did not shrink from eating your guests in your own house. Therefore has Zeus taken vengeance on you, and the other gods.”). The unrepentant Cyclops hurls a rock at Odysseus’ ship, which, as a result of the wave it creates, washes the ship back ashore. After Odysseus’ ship sets sail once again, covering twice the distance it had before, Odysseus again shouts out to the Cyclops and reveals his identity so that the Cyclops will know who blinded him. Then, strangely enough, the Cyclops becomes more temperate: he hurls no more rocks and

addresses Odysseus, begging him to return so that he may grant him the gifts of hospitality (9, 517 “Yet come here, Odysseus, that I may set before you gifts of entertainment”) and entreats his father Poseidon to provide for his safe journey home (9, 518 “[...] and may urge the glorious Earth-shaker to give you conveyance hence.”). At the same time, he expresses the wish that Poseidon will restore his eyesight (9, 520 “and he himself will heal me, if he will”). In other words, the Cyclops (perpetrator/inmate) starts to show signs of remorse: he offers the handshake of friendship to Odysseus and his comrades (the state and society) and expresses the wish to give what he had not given at the outset of their meeting (the gifts of hospitality), hoping at the same time that his eye will be healed. He hopes, in other words, for the two things that would signal in some way a return to the *status quo ante*, that is, to life as it was before he committed the crimes and before he lost his eyesight as a result of these crimes. One might maintain, therefore, that this desire to “go back” symbolizes the wish and intention of a perpetrator/inmate to return and be reintegrated in society by (re)forging mutual, positive relations with it (by offering gifts).

Yet how does Odysseus deal with the Cyclops’ desire for reconciliation? He rejects it and taunts him – and from a safe distance, in fact. No longer afraid, for he and his comrades have put twice the distance between their ship and the Cyclops, he wishes he had the strength to kill him and then he follows this up by assuring him that no one will heal his eye, not even his father Poseidon (9, 525 “[...] as surely as not even the Earth-shaker shall heal your eye.”). In other words, he exacerbates the Cyclops’ pain (for no apparent reason) by sadistically mocking him about what has made him suffer most: the loss of his eyesight. This is Odysseus’ act of hubris.

How does the Cyclops take Odysseus’ rejection of the reconciliation he offered? He curses him, praying to Poseidon either not to let him return home at all or to return after having lost all his comrades on a ship that is not his own and to find troubles at home (9, 530-535 “Grant that Odysseus, the sacker of cities, may never reach his home, the son of Laertes, whose home is in Ithaca; but if it is his fate to see his people and to reach his well-built house and his native land, late may he come, and in distress, after losing all his comrades, in a ship that is another’s; and may he find trouble in his house.”). Poseidon answers the prayer of his son, who immediately hurls a much larger rock at Odysseus. In other words, Odysseus’ rejection not only cuts short the Cyclops’ intention for reconciliation (his social re-integration, that is), but in fact, rekindles his bestial nature to a much larger degree than before. This can be seen not only in the fact the Cyclops throws another rock at Odysseus, but also in that the rock itself is much larger than the previous one – something that in turn implies that the Cyclops must exert more force to throw it and that, by extension, he manifests more catastrophic behaviour than before. **In short, Odysseus’ (state/society) arrogant (from a safe distance) rejection of the Cyclops (perpetrator/inmate) after his blinding (sentencing/serving the sentence) infuriates the latter, driving him to a (graver) relapse (the hurling of the second larger rock), aimed at society (the ship and those aboard it).**

Odysseus’ arrogant, hubristic behaviour towards the blind Cyclops ultimately turned against him. It brought on the wrath of Poseidon, who answered his son’s entreaty (9, 536 “and the dark-haired god heard him”), resulting in Odysseus’ long and troublesome return to his homeland. The cause and effect relation between the episode with the Cyclops and the trials Odysseus underwent in the remainder of his journey is clearly evident in two passages of *The Odyssey*. The first is in the beginning of the epic where Zeus tells Athena that Odysseus has provoked Poseidon’s wrath because he blinded his son and for that reason forces him to wander far from his homeland (1, 68-75 “No, it is Poseidon, the earth-bearer, who is

constantly filled with stubborn wrath because of the Cyclops, whose eye Odysseus blinded [...] From that time forth Poseidon, the Earth-shaker, does not indeed slay Odysseus, but beats him off from his native land.”). The second is in Book 11, where the seer Tiresias’ ghost tells Odysseus that it will be with much difficulty that he will return to his homeland due to Poseidon’s wrath, which he brought upon himself by blinding his son Polyphemus (11, 100-104 “You ask of your honey-sweet return, glorious Odysseus, but this shall the god make hard for you; for I do not think you shall elude the Earth-shaker, seeing that he has laid up wrath in his heart against you, angered because you blinded his own son.”).

It is mentioned in these passages that Poseidon’s wrath is due only to Odysseus’ blinding of his son, and not to his arrogant and dismissive behaviour from a position of superiority. Perhaps in these passages, Homer attributed Poseidon’s wrath only to the blinding itself so as not to interrupt the flow of the narrative. It is more probable, however, that the epic poet did not wish to directly mention the real reason for the god’s wrath so that the readers could draw that conclusion for themselves.

Whatever the case, both the sequence of events as well as the details of the events and dialogue clearly imply that the act of blinding itself was not the real reason for Poseidon’s wrath and, consequently Odysseus’ later torments. Otherwise, Homer would have the Cyclops cursing Odysseus *immediately after* he blinded him, without some expression of remorse having preceded this, which, in such case, would have no meaning in view of the development of the course of events, as it would have no meaning, in general, in the whole dialogue between them after the blinding. On the contrary, the fact that the Cyclops’ entreaty/curse is expressed immediately following Odysseus’ arrogant rejection clearly points to a cause and effect relation. In addition, the fact that Odysseus underwent precisely the torments the Cyclops prayed would befall him connects Odysseus’ trials to the specific curse – and not vaguely to Poseidon’s fury concerning the act of blinding itself. The Homeric text, therefore, clearly implies that Odysseus’ arrogant and dismissive attitude to the Cyclops’ intention for reconciliation is the reason for Odysseus’ torments both in the remainder of his journey home as well as for the troubles he encountered upon return.

Epilogue

The Cyclops’ curse was fulfilled. If we take into consideration the archetypal symbolism of this Homeric episode, as it has been analysed and documented above, we can say that its fulfilment can serve as a warning to all the Odysseuses of history (societies and states) every time they have to deal with their own deviants, their own Cyclopes: *Do not provoke more pain than is absolutely necessary for your defence and never reject the perpetrators if and when they show signs of reconciliation.* This advice should be followed where everyone is concerned – even those characterized by the primitivism and bestiality of the Homeric Cyclops. If it is not followed, then what may be in store for society in its long journey through history is truly an odyssey: wandering and danger, loss and fear.

The Cyclops’ curse and its pivotal role in the development of *The Odyssey* teaches a lesson that holds true both on the individual as well as the collective level: that vengefulness, like all other human instincts and impulses, has boundaries. And these boundaries must be observed to the benefit of all – even those who have crossed them at some time. It also teaches that everyone, without exception, has the right to hope and a future, to a return and acceptance. In today’s world of inflamed passions, of insecurity and victimization, of blind violence and “zero tolerance”, these two lessons acquire particular meaning. And they call upon us to

answer with sincerity as an organized society, as Odysseuses, the following question: “How do we treat our own blind Cyclopes, especially the ones who wish to “see” themselves as part of society once more?”

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Translated from the Greek by Thalia Bisticas

¹ All quotations have been taken from Homer, *The Odyssey*, Books 1-12, trans. A. T. Murray, revised by George E. Dimock, The Loeb Classical Library, Harvard University Press, 1919, reprinted with corrections in 1998.