

Homer, Poet of *Maya*

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In the great epics of Greek antiquity, the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, Homer presents a complete doctrine of what the Hindu's call, *maya*, and of the cycle of Divine manifestation as unfolded and dissolved by *maya*. Together the two poems constitute a mythopoetic *cycle* in the strict sense of that term: the story of the creation and destruction of the universe (a word that means "one turn")—which, in sober fact, is the only story there is.

According to the Hindus, Maya is the Great Mother of manifest existence; She is the creative illusion or magical apparition of Brahman, the Formless Absolute, in terms of the finite field of forms. Maya is not strictly unreal or non-existent; it's simply that She is not what She seems; to use the traditional Hindu simile, She is like "a rope mistaken for a snake." Maya appears in two forms: *avidya-maya* or "ignorance-apparition," and *vidya-maya* or "wisdom-apparition." Since Maya is not what She seems, she seduces us to try and make sense of Her, a task which is both inescapable and ultimately impossible. As *avidya-maya* she lures us into a false identification of Absolute Reality with the relative world, and in so doing creates that world; as *vidya-maya*, she lures us (as in Plato's *Symposium*) toward identification with ever higher and more comprehensive images of Absolute Reality, each of which is progressively discarded in favour of a greater conception, until all images and conceptions are finally transcended and Absolute Reality realised.

The *Illiad* is the epic of *avidya-maya*, the *Odyssey* the epic of *vidya-maya*. Helen, the cause for an expansive, imperialistic war, the 'face that launched a thousand ships,' is *avidya-maya*, the power that lures men into worldly identification, conflict and dissipation. Penelope, the wife of Odysseus 'the cunning,' the image of retreat, of withdrawal from the world, of home, is *vidya-maya*. She is the power of recollection, of return to the "centre in the midst of conditions"; she is of Holy Wisdom. In the epics of Homer, Troy is the "City of This World," and Ithaca is the "City of God." And Athene, the weaver-

goddess who transcends the action of the epics but whose power is immanent everywhere within them, is *Mahamaya* herself.

The end of the expansive and dissipative attempt to “conquer the world,” to control material conditions, to possess and dominate the “ten-thousand things” is, precisely, *apocalypse*—the end of the world—the burning of Troy. And Odysseus knew this. Like any wise and cunning man, he knew that the war to conquer the world would end in destruction and nothing else, that Troy would burn, that the victorious Agamemnon would be murdered—and that Helen, once “rescued,” would simply become irrelevant. And so, of course, he tried to avoid the conflict; he flinched at the call to be born into this relative and conditioned world. He, like many “draft dodgers” in the Vietnam War, feigned madness to avoid service; he tried to plough his field with his plough harnessed to an ox and an ass, expressing the inevitable divergence of intent and division of the will that this world is made of, due to the fragmentation of the original human character (as the giant Ymir, in Norse myth, was dismembered to create the universe). But when his son was placed in front of the plough, he turned it aside—proving that he was not mad enough to destroy his own spiritual centre and destiny. And so he had to go to war. He was wise enough to foresee the inevitable tragedy of the fall into this world of division, conflict and destruction—but Maya, the deceiver, was wiser than he. Only She knew the darkest secret of existence: that the descent into this world is really a *felix culpa*, a “fortunate sin”; that in the depth of the Great Mystery, the loss of God—felt and fought against and suffered through and finally redeemed—is in fact the deepest realisation of God, that after “My God, my God, why hast Thou forsaken me?” comes “Into Thy hands I commend my spirit; it is finished.”

Helen, in the *Iliad*, is shown sitting in Priam’s palace in Troy, weaving a ‘double purple cloak’ upon which appear the scenes of the great war between the Trojans and the Achaeans that she herself precipitated; by this she is revealed precisely as *avidya-maya*, who weaves the pattern of manifest existence. But Penelope, Odysseus wife, is also a weaver. She has told her many suitors that she will wed one of them when the shroud she is weaving, the shroud of her father-in-law Laertes, is finished—but every night, in order to put them off, she unweaves what she had woven during the day. Laertes, father of Odysseus, is his Principle and Origin, the aspect of God that pertains

most directly to him, his archetype *in divinis*. And this world, to the wise, is not a cloak of the living, a purple garment fit for kings, depicting glorious and heroic struggles, but, precisely, the shroud of God, the veil that covers Him in death. This world unfolds in all its convincing multiplicity only when God is dead to us; only then, under the influence of *avidya-maya*, do we mistake this perishing world for Reality itself. Helen weaves the cloak of the world-illusion, but only Penelope shows it for what it is. Only *vidya-maya* can reveal to us the secret of *maya* per se, that the pattern of existence woven on the Day of Brahman is unwoven again in the Night of Brahman, that the world created by *Maya* is not a stable reality, but a coming and going, a wheel of birth and death, an outbreathing and inbreathing of the Great Sleeper who dreams the universe.

The course of *vidya-maya* embraces the many journeys and battles and awakenings and realisations that are the spiritual Path; the *Odyssey*, the epic that depicts the struggles of Odysseus to be reunited with Penelope, with Holy Wisdom (under the guidance of the goddess Athene, the providential manifestation of that Wisdom, and Hermes her emissary), is the story of that Path. The stations of Odysseus' spiritual journey, symbolised by his long return from Troy to Ithaca, are as follows:

1) The raid carried out by Odysseus and his men on the Cicones of Ismarus, in which they are defeated. This symbolises the defeat of worldly ambitions, the proof that this world no longer holds anything of value for those who have embarked upon the spiritual Path.

2) The land of the Lotus Eaters. This station, under the metaphor of drug addiction (possibly to opium) symbolises the overcoming of World Trance, the nearly universal addiction of the human race to the sort of earthly experience that denies any possibility of spiritual experience—either that or the habit of unconsciously translating the dawn of true spiritual experience back into a different kind of worldly experience, notably the intoxicating complacency represented by the Buddhists as *Deva-Loka*, the realm of the long-lived gods where “ignorance is bliss.” In terms of the spiritual Path, Vajrayana practitioners are warned not to fall into “the beautiful Hinayana peace,” into the complacent illusion that Enlightenment has already been achieved; by this they are taught to overcome the curse of the lotus-eaters.

3) The Island of the shepherd Polyphemus, the one-eyed Cyclops, who devours several of Odysseus' men. Jesus said, 'if thine eye become single, thy whole body will be filled with light' (Matt. 6:22); Polyphemus represents the dawning of this truth, the truth of the Absolute One, on too low a level, resulting in the "absolutising of the relative," the precise error that creates religious fanatics, and then devours them. The premature identification with the Transcendent One at the expense of Its multiple manifestation results only in destruction; the rigor of Transcendence can be safely encountered only after the soul has been unified in submission to God's will. Before that time, the Eye of the One—like the "third eye" of Shiva, the opening of which destroys the world illusion—must be blinded, veiled; otherwise it will burn up all the traveller's spiritual potential instead of putting it to effective use. Furthermore, to contemplate Unity at the level of the *head* can never be complete; Unity can be realised in a stable way only at the level of the *heart*. However, what appears to be only a disaster is in fact the secret beginning of that necessary unification of soul. Throughout the *Odyssey*, Odysseus' followers are gradually killed off, until only he remains alive; this symbolises the process of *recollection*, the mortification of the various divergent impulses of the soul, in terms of the affections, the will and the thinking mind, until all that remains is unity of character and one-pointed-ness of spiritual attention and intent. As it says in the *Tao Te Ching*, 'Knowledge is gained by daily increment; the Way is gained by daily loss—loss upon loss, until at last comes rest.'

The name "Polyphemus" means "many-voiced"; what might be the symbolic meaning of a figure with many voices but only one eye? In terms of the contemplative act—one of whose sites, in Hindu *kundalini*- or *raja-yoga*, is the "third eye," the *ajña-chakra* in the centre of the forehead—the Eye of God is One; according to Meister Eckhart, 'the Eye through which I see God and the Eye through which He sees me are the same Eye'—which is to say that, in contemplation, the knower is one with the thing known. However, the *reflection* of this contemplative Unity on the mental level (whose yogic site is the *visshudha-chakra* situated at the throat) is multiple, like the image of the Sun reflected in the waves of the sea. We may be granted—or we may *steal*—a glimpse of spiritual Unity, but if we have not paid the price required for the full and stable realisation of that Unity, this

incandescent glimpse will immediately fall to the level of discursive thought with its many voices; consequently the mental substance will become over-energised, driving us to the obsessive and futile attempt—all-too-clearly in evidence in today's world—to *think every possible thought*. This is what it means to be “devoured by Polyphemus.”

4) Aeolus, the god of the winds, gives Odysseus a bag containing all the winds of the world, so that he will always have a fair wind in his voyage back to Ithaca. But his followers, out of curiosity, open the bag while Odysseus is asleep, let the winds loose, and all their ships are blown off course, back to their starting-point. This represents a wrong relationship to Divine Providence, based on lack of trust in God. If we dig up the seed every day to see if it is growing, the plant will never mature; if we arrogate to ourselves the right to see into the mind and Spirit of God, so as to better understand all the ramifications of our spiritual destiny—as if we could be better guardians and administrators of that destiny than God Himself—then we will be blown far off course. While Wisdom sleeps, curiosity wakes up and starts looking around; in the words of Frithjof Schuon, ‘mental passion pursuing intellectual intuition is like a wind that blows out the light of a candle.’

5) Landing on the Island of the Laestrygones, who are cannibals, Odysseus' men encounter a young girl, daughter of the king of the island, who invites them to her father's court, where many are devoured. The princess symbolises *avidya-maya*, who lures men to eat themselves up in worldly pursuits; spiritual curiosity ultimately results in a regression into worldliness. Nonetheless, the great purification continues. Cannibals are “self-eaters”; under the hidden influence of the Spirit, the divergent tendencies of the soul begin to destroy themselves by their own folly. As William Blake said, ‘If the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise.’

6) Next Odysseus and his men land on the island ruled by the witch Circe, who—weaving at an enormous loom—is Maya incarnate. She transforms half of Odysseus' men into pigs, symbolising their total defeat at the hands of the lower passions. But Odysseus, the centre of the spiritual Heart, is not overcome. Hermes provides him with a “sobriety drug,” an “anti-illusionogenic” called *moly*, which is the exact opposite of the drug taken by the Lotus Eaters. Moly is the power of spiritual vigilance; it is this that allows him to overcome Circe's spells and turn his pigs back into men. And precisely *because* Odysseus resists

her charms, Circe falls in love with him; when the contemplative “Centre in the midst of conditions” is established and maintained, the manifest, conditional world turns to serve that Centre. This is the great enantiodromia, where *avidya-maya* is changed into *vidya-maya*; Circe is here transformed from the *maya* that deludes Odysseus into the *shakti* that empowers and serves him. From now on she is not an enchantress, but a guide.

7) Circe now sends Odysseus to the western edge of the world, the limit of manifestation beyond which nothing remains but the One, where he invokes the shade of the seer Tiresias. Tiresias had been transformed into a woman by the goddess Hera for a period of years, for the crime of striking a pair of copulating snakes with a staff. Later she strikes him blind as well, but gives him in return the gift of foresight. The striking of the snakes with the staff invokes the caduceus of Hermes, who also has an hermaphroditic aspect. The caduceus represents the power to unite opposites, as the *ida* and the *pingala*, the masculine and feminine psychic currents (the two snakes), are united by being woven around the central *sushumna*, the *axis mundi*, in the practice of *kundalini-yoga*. Tiresias, having been changed from a man into a woman and back again, is beyond the pairs-of-opposites which are the warp and the weft of the world illusion. He is blind (like Homer was) to the multiplicity of this world, but his gift of foresight shows him the final end of the spiritual Path. He advises Odysseus on how to travel that Path to reach the final goal.

After Tiresias, Odysseus speaks with the shade of his mother, who reveals to him the plight of his wife Penelope, beset by unwanted suitors in Ithaca, and also encounters the shade of Agamemnon, who tells him of his own murder at the hands of his wife Clytemnestra. Here the necessity of completing the spiritual Path is revealed, along with the final destiny of all who fail to complete it: division and death, in a world woven on nothing but division and death, the world of the double cloak.

Odysseus and his men return to Circe’s island where she advises them further on the journey ahead, and they set sail again.

8) Odysseus and his men encounter the Sirens, symbols of the delusive and destructive side of spiritual Beauty—*al-Jamal*, *al-Malakut*—whose beautiful songs lure sailors to death on the rocks. His men put wax in their ears so they will not hear the Sirens’ songs, but

Odysseus asks to be tied to his ship's mast—the *axis mundi* again—so as to be able to hear the songs, while being restrained from following them. The lesson here is that only those who have fully attained the centrality of the human form can witness the Beauty of God and the esoteric secrets of the spiritual Path without being led to destruction. The Beauty and Mystery of the Divine are gifts that come in their own time; to run after them and try to grasp them—like the lustful brave, in Lakota myth, who wanted to rape the beautiful emissary of Wakan Tanka, White Buffalo Cow Woman—is to be destroyed by the Majesty of God.

9) Next the voyagers encounter Scylla, a many-headed sea-monster, and Charybdis, a whirlpool. The whirlpool is *sangsara* (often compared to a whirlpool by the Buddhists), the engulfing and obliterating power of the world of relativity and formal manifestation; the sea-monster is the division of the soul—mind, affections and will—between many worldly concerns, each of which takes a piece of us. Odysseus chooses to brave Scylla instead of falling into Charybdis, losing only six men instead of the entire ship, and thereby demonstrating that even though the struggle with worldly necessity wounds us, to ignore it is fatal, and that passing beyond the pairs-of-opposites is not accomplished by failing to distinguish between them, but by choosing always “the lesser of two evils.” One does not transcend good and evil by treating them as if they were the same thing, but by always choosing the good, at whatever cost, until the Sovereign Good is won—that Good which lies beyond the opposition of good and evil because, being all good, it has no opposite.

10) The voyagers now land on the Island of Trinacis, where—contrary to the advice of both Circe and Tiresias—Odysseus' men hunt and slaughter the Cattle of the Sun. In punishment, all are drowned in a shipwreck except Odysseus, who is washed up half dead on the island of the goddess Calypso, where he must remain as her lover for seven years. The Cattle of the Sun represent a glimpse into the Divine Intellect and the Majesty of God—*al Jalal, a-Jabarut*—producing a spiritual exaltation that the ego attempts to appropriate, which ultimately results in a titanic inflation and the resultant fall. Odysseus is back in the clutches of this world—the nymph Calypso. Nonetheless, though he seems to have been defeated, the merit he gained through his earlier spiritual victories is still working in secret.

11) Hermes now appears, and convinces Calypso to let Odysseus go; where spiritual *works* (necessary but not sufficient) must fail, the power of *grace* intervenes. So he builds a raft and sails to the island of Scherie. He is washed up on the beach exhausted, and there encounters the princess Nausicaa, symbol of *vidya-maya*. She introduces him to her parents, the rulers of the island, and when he tells them the story of his journey they decide to help him. With their aid he returns to Ithaca, disguised as a *swineherd*—as one who has gained the power to control the impulses of his lower self.

12) Odysseus, in Ithaca, is recognised by his old housekeeper due to a scar on his thigh he received in his youth from a wild boar.¹ He enters his palace, still in disguise. The next day Athene prompts Penelope to issue a challenge to the suitors: to string Odysseus' bow and shoot through the holes of twelve axes placed in a row. (These holes are sometimes called "helve-holes," as if they were holes in the hafts of the axes by which they could be hung on a wall, but I see them rather as the semi-circular spaces between the two upward-curving corners of the Cretan double-axe.) None of the suitors can even string the bow, but Odysseus can; he shoots an arrow through the holes of the twelve axes and wins the contest. He kills all the suitors, as well as the twelve maids who slept with them. He reveals himself to Penelope, who is uncertain of his identity until he describes the bed he built for her when they were first married. They are reunited.

The axes through which Odysseus shoots are double-headed axes with crescent blades, representing the waxing and waning phases of the Moon, the waning phases symbolising the fall into the darkness of this world, under the power of *avidya-maya*, and the waxing phases the stations of the spiritual Path, by the power of *vidya-maya*. According to the *Bhagavad-Gita*, darkened souls destined for rebirth enter the waning Moon after death, while sanctified souls destined for Liberation enter the waxing Moon, and from there pass on through the Door of

¹ A friend of mine (a poet) once showed me, as a more-or-less magical object, a stone taken from the barrow-tomb known as The Grave of Queen Maeve, in Ireland. That night I dreamt I was a sacred swineherd; a boar came and slashed the outside of my right thigh, two or three inches above the knee—a wound I later identified as the wound of Odysseus. This dream took place on the night of the first full moon after the winter solstice—the one night of the year, according to Robert Graves in *The White Goddess*, when the ancient Egyptians ritually consumed swine-flesh.

the Sun. And in Sufi symbolism, the double axe represents the cutting off of attachment both to this world and the next, leading to the realization of God not after death, but in this very life.

The twelve axes, which are twelve moons, are a *zodiac*, an entire cycle of manifestation, like the twelve gates of the Heavenly Jerusalem and the twelve stations of the *Odyssey* itself. That the twelve maids who slept with the suitors are killed symbolises a passing beyond the sphere of the Moon, the cycles of nature and rebirth, and a realisation of full Enlightenment. The number of Penelope's suitors is 108, a sacred number in Hindu and Buddhist lore. Koenraad Elst explains that the number 108, considered purely in mathematical (not necessarily mythological) terms, is the principle of ontological hierarchy, of total possibility, and of repeating pattern. It might be called the number of kosmos; in the *Odyssey* it would seem to represent kosmos considered as *samsara*, as the round of births and deaths (the round of the circling spheres, the generation of repeating patterns in astronomical and human and biological life—i.e., reincarnation) that the philosophical character or spiritual hero seeks to be liberated from. Elst remarks:

[Given the division of the circle into 360 degrees], the angle of 108 has a unique property: the ratio between the straight line uniting two points at 108 degrees from each other on a circle's circumference (in effect, one of the sides of a 10-pointed star) and the radius of that circle equals the Golden Section. Likewise, the inside of every angle of a pentagon measures 108 degrees, and the pentagon is a veritable embodiment of the Golden Section, e.g. the ratio between a side of the 5-pointed star and a side of the pentagon is the Golden Section...

The Golden Section means a proportion between two magnitudes, the major and the minor, such that the minor is to the major as the major is to the whole, i.e. to the sum of minor and major. In living nature, there are plenty of sequences where every member stands to the preceding member in a Golden Proportion or its derivatives (square root etc.), e.g. the distances between or the sizes of the successive twigs growing on a branch, the layers of petals on a flower, the rings of a conch, the generations of a multiplying rabbit population, etc. What this symbolises is the law of invariance: in every stage of a development, the same pattern repeats itself. The son is to the father as the father was to the grandfather. Wheels

within wheels: every whole consisting of parts is itself likewise part of a larger whole. And the principle of order: the underling obeys the orders of his master to the same extent that the master obeys the requirements of the whole ... 9 is the Hindu number of planets, and 12 is the Zodiac, so 108 is the total number of planet-in-Zodiacal-sign combinations. This makes it into the total set of all possible planetary influences taken separately, or in a more generalised symbolism, the matrix containing all possibilities.²

The suitors symbolise the level where worldly multiplicity is always seeking the blessing of spiritual Unity, perpetually struggling to possess the One without first becoming the One—an impossible task. When this level is killed, only Unity remains. The pre-eternal Unity, symbolised by the marriage-bed of Odysseus and Penelope, that held sway before Principle and Manifestation were polarized, is re-established; the spiritual Path is complete.

This is the spiritual principle behind all Greek civilisation. This is the secret that Orpheus knew.

² <http://koenraadelst.bharatvani.org/articles/misc/why108.html>.