

Myth, or the Greek MYTHOS, like the Latin FABULA, was originally any utterance, but the word came to be used especially of tales which were not strictly speaking historical. Thus the Concise Oxford Dictionary defines myth as "purely fictitious narrative". It would of course be a mistake to conclude that myths are pure lies, of no importance or even morally unacceptable. For individuals and for societies, myths may indeed be basic, and convey deeply-held views of reality which can hardly be so well expressed in other forms. It is not unduly paradoxical to suggest that myth, purely fictitious narrative, may embody profound truths about ourselves and the world we live in.

Some mythical figures appear in various forms in many different times and cultures, and seem almost to have an independent life of their own, to be even more real than many figures of actual history. Reality and historicity are not identical. The philosopher and classicist Unamuno has suggested that the fictional character Don Quixote is more real and more alive than his historical creator Cervantes, and that any life and reality that the author has is derived from the mythical Quixote. A figure from classical myth that has unusual vitality is that of Odysseus/Ulysses. He is there at the start of the Greek tradition, and in more than one form is alive and well in the twentieth century. Who is he?

An eminent classicist, W. B. Stanford, has published a volume entitled The Ulysses Theme, (Oxford, 2nd ed. 1963) which combines enormous erudition with lively style, and much of what follows here is based on that work. He shows how, starting with the Homeric Odysseus, this central figure of myth has embodied ambiguity. He is always outstanding for mental vigour, wit, intelligence. In the Greek world, as elsewhere, stupidity was not highly valued; is the reverse true, and was intelligence admired? The answer, even for the intelligent Greeks, was both yes and no. One might think of the modern connotations of the word smart, or the passage in Pride and Prejudice warning intelligent women to mask their intelligence if they are to live comfortably in this world. Odysseus uses intelligence, not muscle, to escape from the Cyclops' cave: but is his lying, even to a monster, legitimate? The Wooden Horse was a clever trick: is it fair to deceive your enemies? Greek opinion on such questions was not unanimous.

The goddess Athene, herself an embodiment of intelligence, loved Odysseus for his wit. After he has just told her a long and convincing lie, she responds admiringly: "A cunning rogue he would be, a master of craft, who would outwit you! Even a god couldn't do it--you are the paragon of mankind at planning and story-telling, and I have a name among the gods for cleverness and intelligence" (Odyssey 13, p. 143 in Rouse's version in the Mentor Classics). Athene, and Homer, clearly admired Odysseus' wit and guile, but by the 5th century the dominant Greek attitude towards Odysseus was one of indignation and scorn. One illustration out of many is the Odysseus in Sophocles' Philoctetes. The Odysseus presented there is, to put it crudely, a villain, who is not only false and unprincipled himself, but also the seducer of noble and innocent youth. The qualities that Homer admires are despised by Sophocles.

Judgements of Odysseus varied outside Greek culture as well as within it. There is no space here to mention more than a very few of these judgements: Stanford describes more than forty major treatments of the hero, down to James Joyce, Giraudoux, and Kazantzakis. Some are favourable, others not. In Dante we find clear condemnation of Ulysses. To this great spokesman for the mediaeval mind, order both in the microcosm and the macrocosm was all-important. God had created an ordered universe, with various spheres and hierarchies and where each individual had a proper position with his own duties and responsibilities. Ulysses went to hell partly because his craft and cunning were evil, but even more because he had refused to accept his allotted position. He would not

remain in Ithaca as king, husband, and father, but insisted on sailing into the unknown, overcome by lust for new knowledge and experience; like Eve in the Garden, he would taste the fruit of the forbidden tree.

To Dante the quest for knowledge exemplified by Ulysses was sinful and destructive of order in society. Our hero, however, is essentially ambiguous, and in Shakespeare he appears as the bulwark of that same order which in Dante he subverts. He is given one of the English poet's greatest speeches, and one that surely expresses Shakespeare's own view. The whole speech in Troilus I.3, line 75 ff, insists on the necessity for degree, rank, and order in human affairs as in the cosmos, and stresses the belief that without this

*. . . appetite, a universal wolf,
So doubly seconded with will and power,
Must make perforce a universal prey,
And last eat up himself.*

The endless search for knowledge symbolized by Ulysses and condemned by Dante was described in a different light by Tennyson, who in a sense saw the search as a goal for mankind:

*I am a part of all that I have met;
Yet all experience is an arch wherethro'
Gleams that untravell'd world, whose margin fades
For ever and forever when I move.*

Tennyson has Ulysses go on to speak of his

*. . . gray spirit yearning in desire
To follow knowledge like a sinking star,
Beyond the utmost bound of human thought.*

Kazantzakis' Modern Odyssey has the same quest for new experience as its central theme. Here Odysseus encounters in his travels the whole range of human life. Like Tennyson's Ulysses, he becomes a part of all that he meets. His Odyssey is growth, but it also leads to death. He meets everything and encompasses everything, he is good and bad, light and dark, spirit and matter. At the end, as he sails alone in the unknown sea, he bursts the bonds of matter to become no longer human but pure spirit.

Odysseus, one may say, is a myth, and the quest for knowledge a fictional theme. Yet the theme with all its ambiguities expresses a profound truth, and such ambiguity may lie at the center of our world. Knowledge is valuable, even supremely valuable. Nonetheless, knowledge is dangerous, to individuals and to society. It may well destroy mental peace and social order, it may raise unanswerable questions. After the atom bomb brought the second World War to an end I returned to a familiar academic community. There, as before, were some of the men who had been largely responsible for the bomb. Their Odyssean search for knowledge, their attempt to discover how things work, had been from one point of view a resounding success. Yet their faces did not suggest the peace of those who have attained what is supremely valuable. What does Ulysses mean? Surely, as the tradition of the myth suggests, no unambiguous answer is adequate, and, as Aristotle suggested long ago, poetry may well embody more truth than history.