

The Messenger Lectures  
Cornell University, Ithaca, NY

**REVIVAL AND METAMORPHOSES OF THE GODS  
IN NINETEENTH CENTURY ART AND LITERATURE**

by

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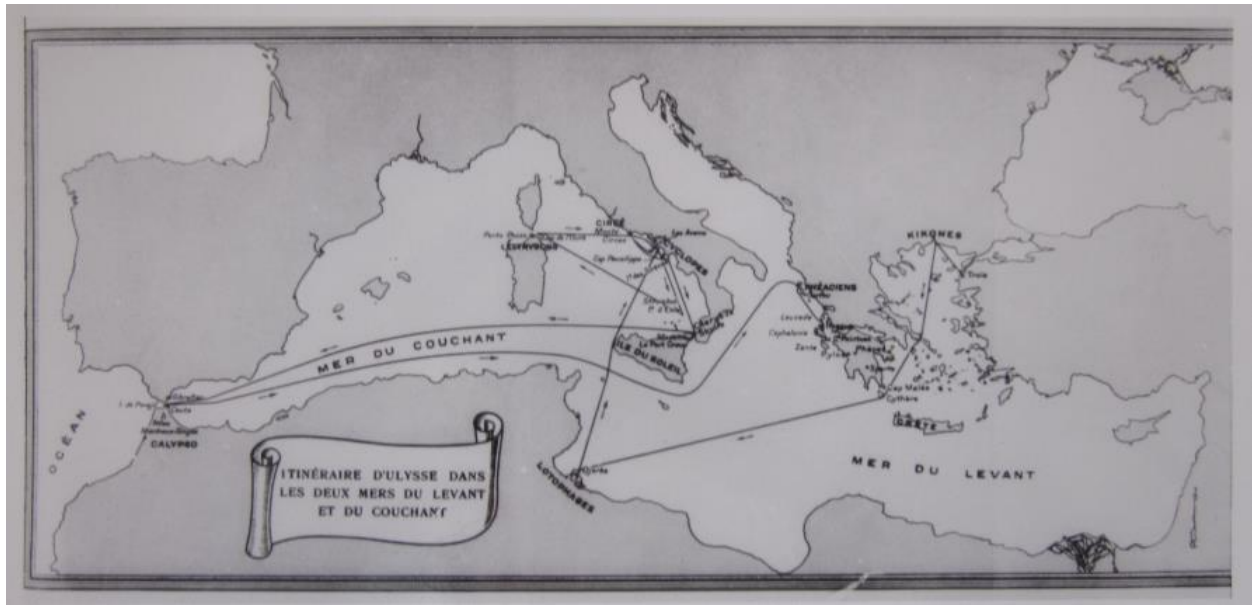
**LECTURE VI**

**THE CAVE AT ITHACA**

Delivered Thursday, April 6, 1978

In this last lecture I will take you to a familiar place: ITHACA.

Let us look at the map of Ulysses' travels, the Odyssey, drawn up by Victor Bard who, many years ago, followed in the wake of Ulysses. Here is Ithaca, his island, which he left to join the great expedition against Troy. It took him many years to come home; he had to undergo many perils and adventures, and to visit many strange and distant lands.



*Itinéraire d'Ulysse* (Jean Seznec Archive, Taylor Institution Library, source unknown)

The story of his navigation is no fiction, in the sense that it rests on a real, geographical basis – this is what Bard demonstrated. The *Odyssey*, in fact, could almost be read as a nautical chart of the Mediterranean, complete with the indication of every harbour, every anchorage, and every landmark. Places seen by Ulysses or visited by him, places where he went ashore, can be identified: for instance, the land of Cicones (the present Bulgaria), that of the Lotophagi (the present Tunisia). The Cyclops and the Lestrygones he met in Sicily, near the Etna; Circe in the south of Rome; the Sirens near Capri. The nymph Calypso, who detained him for seven years must have had her abode somewhere in the vicinity of Gibraltar.

He finally managed to find his way back. The King of the Phaiakians and his daughter, Nausicaa, welcomed him and loaded him with presents, “Gifts untold of bronze and gold, and fine cloth.”

By then he was very close to Ithaca, where he was deposited one morning, fast asleep, on the sand by his sailors, who also unloaded the gifts of the Phaiakians, and piled them off the beach. These sailors knew the cove, as Homer explains:

“Phorkys, the old sea baron, has a cove here in the realm of Ithaca; two points of high rock, breaking sharply, lurch around it, making a haven from the plunging surf that gales at sea. Deep inside, at mooring range, good ships can ride unmoved.”

The sailors also knew of a place where the presents of the Phaiakians could eventually be stored: a cave – but no ordinary cave, as you will see:

There, on the inmost shore, an olive tree  
 Throws wide its boughs over the bay; near by  
 A cave of dusky light is hidden  
 For those immortal girls, the Naiades.

Within are wine bowls in the rock  
And amphorai; bees bring their honey here  
And there are looms of stone, great looms, whereon  
The weaving nymphs make tissues...  
Of two entrances, one on the North allows descent of mortals  
But beings out of light alone; the undying  
Can pass by the South slit; no man came there.

Ulysses, left alone on the beach, now wakes up – but he does not know, at first, where he is: he does not recognize his homeland.

“He could not tell what land it was after so many years away; moreover, Pallas Athena poured a grey mist all around him, hiding him from common sight. The landscape then looked strange, unearthly strange, to the Lord Odysseus” who cried aloud: “What am I in for now. Whose country have I come to this time.’ Rough savages and outlaws, are they, or god fearing people, friendly to castaways. And then he wept, despairing, wary and desolate as the sea...”

“But soon Athena came to him from the nearby air, putting a young man’s figure on... she wore a cloak... A hunting lance lay in her hands. At sight of her, Odysseus took heart, and he went forward to greet the lad. Speaking out fair and clear: “Oh sir, advise me, what is this land and realm, who are the people? Is it an island all distinct, or part of the fertile mainland, sloping to the sea?”

To this the grey-eyed Athena answered:

“Stranger, you must come from the other end of now here; else you are a great booby, having to ask what place this is. Why, everyone has heard of it... The name of Ithaca has made its way even as far as Troy.”

Now, Lord Odysseus, the long-enduring, laughed in his heart, hearing his land described by Pallas Athena, who then revealed herself as a goddess:

“I am Pallas Athena, daughter of Zeus, I that am always with you in times of trial. Now I shall make you see the shape of Ithaca. Here is the cove the sea Lord Phorkys owns; there is the olive spreading out her leaves over the inner bay, and there the cavern, dusky and lovely, hallowed by the feet of those immortal girls, the Naiades...”

Then indeed Odysseus’ heart stirred with joy. He kissed the earth, and lifting up his hands prayed to the nymphs:

“O slim shy Naiades, young maids of Zeus, I had not thought to see you ever again.”

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Now, in the 3rd century A.D. this particular passage of the *Odyssey* was to be reinterpreted in an allegorical sense by a neo-platonist philosopher, Porphyry. Porphyry explains that we must not take the text of Homer literally: it is full of secret meanings – a repository of profound wisdom. This indeed applies to mythological tales in general. Far from being a collection of

absurd and immoral stories, mythology, properly understood, conceals under its surface a treasure of edifying lessons – provided we substitute the symbolic for the literal sense. This was the process through which Emperor Julian the Apostate – himself a neo-platonist – tried to revive the pagan gods, and oppose Christianity: he wanted to demonstrate – through symbolic interpretation – that, contrary to the claim of the Christians, paganism was a deeply moral religion.

This is also Porphyry's process as regards the text of Homer; and he concentrates his demonstration on the episode of the *Odyssey* which I have just quoted: the cave of the nymphs at Ithaca – to which he dedicates a whole dissertation under the title: *De antro Nympharum* (ΠΕΡΙ ΤΟΥ ΕΝ ΟΔΥΣΣΕΙΑΙ ΤΩΝ ΝΥΜΦΩΝ ΑΝΤΡΟΥ). He follows, step by step, Homer's description. The cave, has to be examined with the intellectual eye. It signifies the world, which was generated from matter both beautiful and delightful, obscure and dark, its superficial part, pleasant, the interior profound. Caverns and dens, natural or artificial, are always religious symbols (witness the cave of Mithra). They contain perpetually flowing streams of water – and therefore are sacred to the Naiades. The bowls and the amphorai are eminently suitable to deities who preside over the waters that flow from the rocks; at the same time, all this moisture is attractive to the souls, which are eager to descend into generation. They fly to moisture – and as a result, they are corporalized. Finally, why is there an olive planted at the top of the cavern? This again is no fortuitous detail. Since the world was not produced rashly and casually, but is the work of divine wisdom – hence the olive, the symbol of wisdom – which is the plant of Minerva; and the olive is *at the summit*, because the goddess was produced from the *head* of Jupiter. Also, the olive possesses a peculiarity adopted to the revolution of souls in the world, since the olive is ever flourishing.

Porphyry goes on to explain other features of the cave – such as the two gates – and he concludes: it must not be thought that interpretations of this kind are forced, and nothing more than the conjectures of ingenious men. When we consider the great wisdom of antiquity, and how much Homer excelled in intellectual prudence, and in the accurate knowledge of every virtue, it must not be denied that he has obscurely indicated the images of things of a more divine nature in the fiction of a fable.

Porphyry's dissertation was translated in 1823 by an English neo-platonist, Thomas Taylor. And now is the time to take you to a lovely house in Devon, Arlington Court, once the home of the Chichester family – now under the National Trust.

There is in the drawing room a picture of special interest for us: ● a water colour by William Blake, painted in 1824. Now Blake was a friend of Thomas Taylor: he had read his translation of Porphyry's *The Grotto of the Nymph*; this is what he made of it.

Let us first clarify some details. Here is Ulysses who has just landed in Ithaca. He is casting a veil into the sea. Why?

There was an occasion, during his long and dangerous cruise, when his raft was about to be engulfed by the waves – but then a sea-goddess came to his rescue. I quote Homer:

“Leucothea, who in time past was a maiden of moral speech, but now in the depth of the salt sea enjoys her share of worship from the gods, took pity on Ulysses in his wandering and travail: she rose like a sea-gull on the wing, and said: ‘Here, take this veil immortal and wind it about thy breast, so that there is no fear that you suffer or perish; but when you have laid hold of the land, loose it off from thee, and cast it into the wine dark deeps.’”

This, then, is the goddess, who emerges from the waves to receive it.

Here of course, under the olive tree, is another goddess, Pallas Athena herself; she is about to engage in a playful conversation with Ulysses, who turns around. But what about the nymphs in the cave? Homer explains:

“They are in the cave mixing bowls and jars of stone – and there too the bees store honey; there are also long looms at which the nymphs weave webs of purple dye – a wonder to behold.”

The nymphs are in fact weaving – but for whom, and for what reason? Porphyry comments:

“The instruments pertaining to weaving are appropriate to the souls that descend into generation and are occupied in corporeal energies. These instruments consist of bone – and the formation of flesh is in the bones; and the purple webs mean the blood. The body is a garment, and the nymphs are making garments. As for the honey, it means the pleasure which draws souls downwards to generation. Indeed in the sky you see the souls coming down to earth, then down the steps leading into the cave, where they will receive their corporeal clothing.”

This is how Blake came to produce a Homeric painting. As a mystic, he was naturally attracted by the subject as interpreted by Porphyry – and Taylor. He felt very much at home in that intellectual climate. Ulysses escaping from the stormy sea after so many trials is man leaving the world of matter, the world of senses, for the spiritual one.

By way of a farewell, I am asking your permission to read a short poem by a modern Greek writer, Kavafis, who died in 1933. The title of the poem is: *ITHACA*.

[*Seznec concludes by reading the two stanzas, which open: “When you set out for Ithaca...”*

*and end “...anchor...when you are old, rich with all you have gained on the way.”]*