ODYSSEUS BETWEEN SCYLLA AND CHARYBDIS[1]

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At least in German, in English and French[2], using the phrase «between Scylla and Charybdis» is a way to express the hopeless situation of being caught between two threatening dangers, each of which spells certain doom: fleeing from the one catastrophe will only land you right in the hands of the other.

We all assume to know this motif in precisely this form from the Odyssey; that is, we assume Odysseus' episode with Scylla and Charybdis transmits exactly this message. However, if we take a look at book twelve of the Odyssey (Od. 12, 201-259), we will realize that this motif of a «double danger» is only true to a certain, or rather, uncertain degree. Having been forewarned by Circe (Od. 12, 101-107), Odysseus and his companions sail past Charybdis at a safe distance. Able to detect the danger from afar, they can outmaneuver it without difficulty. Charybdis thus represents no real danger to them. Scylla, on the other hand, carries off six men from the ship – a surprise to the shipmates, and, to an extent, a surprise to Odysseus as well. Yet following this loss, Scylla no longer represents any threat. Odysseus is therefore able to continue his voyage with his remaining companions. Moreover, Odysseus himself was also warned of Scylla by Circe (Od. 12, 73-100). He thus knew in advance that Scylla would be satisfied with carrying off six of his men and that she would thus not pose any threat for him personally, for his ship, or for the remainder of his companions.

Apparently, then, the motif «between Scylla and Charybdis» – such as I have defined it as an existential threat coming from two sides – is present

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in our Odyssey only to a certain extent. During the moment he sails through the straits, the Odysseus of our Odyssey does not find himself between two existential dangers. He avoids the one danger he knows precisely about, and he exposes himself to the other, knowing full well that it can only bring him a programmed loss and at the same time guarantee his overcoming both dangers. The point of the story, then, does not lie so much in the fact that the hero of our Odyssey is caught between two hopeless dangers, but rather that Odysseus must consciously sacrifice six of his companions in order to be able to save the remainder of his crew. This «meaning» of the story could also be seen if the episode were told completely without Charybdis, in the following way:

> Odysseus travels through the straits in full knowledge that he will not be able to avoid Scylla and therefore sacrifices to her six companions in order to save the rest.

Not that such a version of the story would have any special poetic appeal; however, its construction does reveal that in our Odyssey this episode is apparently not told in what could be called its «natural» form.

The Odyssey would thus seem to stage a difference between the simple motif, which provides the basis for the story, and its own many-sided and complex variation of this motif. For us, then, the question automatically becomes one concerning the relationship between the Odyssey and the «simple motif»[3].

Now the answer to this question can be sought in a variety of ways. I would therefore like to mention from the outset the ways I will not be seeking to answer this question in my paper. I will not be looking for an answer in mythological categories. In other words, I will not be asking what the motif of the «double danger» actually has to say in terms of a mythological «Ur-Meaning». I feel entitled to forego this since not even Gabriel Germain treated the Scylla and Charybdis episode in his monumental book on the Odyssey[4].

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[3]   By «simple motif» I mean what Uvo Hölscher calls the «einfache Geschichte» of a narrative: cf. U. Hölscher, *Die Odyssee: Epos zwischen Märchen und Roman*, München 1990, 25-34, referring to A. Jolles, *Einfache Formen*, Tübingen[5] 1974, and to Aristotle's conception of the «simple mythos» in his Poetics (though, when Aristotle speaks about μῦθοι ἁπλοῖ, he denotes a different concept, the straight story without *peripeteia* or *anagnorismos*, as opposed to the μῦθος πεπλεγμένος: Aristot. Poet. 1452a).

[4]   G. Germain, *Genèse de l'Odyssée. Le fantastique et le sacré*, Paris 1954. There is no mention of Scylla or Charybdis in the «Index analytique des principales questions», only a short mention on p. 545f.: Scylla is depicted as «une pieuvre tapie dans son antre»; Charybdis as «un trou de côte rocheuse d'où les vagues,

Yet I am also not interested in the typical method of questioning employed by the old Homer analysis. In other words, I do not believe in an original form of our written text which has been falsified by one or more revisers and which could be restored by working through these «mistakes» in our text[5]. The form my question will take has been influenced by certain discoveries in oral poetry research, neo-analysis and reception aesthetics, and it can be roughly outlined in the following manner:

To my belief, the Odyssey tells, in its entirety as well as in the majority of its episodes, a traditional story which was familiar to its original audience, a familiarity, in fact, which determined the way the story was received. My question thus attempts to make even more precise the relationship of the Odyssey to its tradition. Thus, which form of the story, in our case the episode of Scylla and Charybdis, was assumed to be known in the Odyssey? And does our Odyssey see its own version of this story as a *pars pro toto* representation of the traditional story in all of its potential characteristics? This is the way one today tends to define a poetic of oral-traditional narration in terms of an «oral poetics»[6]. But I think there exists an alternative model. I think our Odyssey rather insists upon a more-or-less exactly defined version which it ascribes to tradition only then to attempt to stand out from just this «traditional version» with a «new» or at least «different» version of its own. If we accept this model, we should ask, in which way our Odyssey modifies this tradition, how it treats the difference, and how it grants this difference a function for its own version of the story[7].

Naturally you will notice that by posing the question in this way, I am taking sides on a central theoretical debate within Homeric scholarship. For me, the Odyssey comprises, on the one hand, an integral moment within the oral-epic tradition, seeing itself to be a part of this tradition and presupposing for its reception the existence of such a living

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par gros temps, rejaillissent en tourbillon.» Thus, Germain did not treat the motif of «Scylla and Charybdis» as a whole, but only the mythological figures of Scylla on the one hand, and Charybdis on the other.

[5] See the latest attempt of H. van Thiel, *Odysseen*, Basel 1988, 160-167, who tries to allocate all the verses of the episode of Scylla and Charybdis within our Odyssey, some to a «Frühodyssee», some to a «Spätodyssee», and some to a «reviser».

[6] This idea was prepared in the work of M. Parry and A.B. Lord, and has been given its most refined form in the work of J.M. Foley, primarily in his *Immanent Art: From Structure to Meaning in Traditional Oral Epic*, Bloomington-Indianapolis 1991. Foley calls the underlying poetic principle «traditional referentiality.»

[7] I have treated these questions at length, together with their theoretical implications, in my book *Epos und Zitat: Studien zu den Quellen der Odyssee*, Wien 1998 (for Scylla and Charybdis, see pp. 257-260).

tradition. On the other hand, however, the Odyssey is characterized by the awareness of its singular achievement. This awareness is in accord with the agonistic principle which is so important for the traditional epic singers[8], revealing even here, however, a new consciousness which is grounded in the singularity of the written text.

I have hereby briefly sketched the theoretical background for my search of a «simple version» of the Scylla-Charybdis story. I will therefore ignore any questions pertaining to the single characters of either Scylla or Charybdis[9], since I assume that even prior to the Odyssey, the story was told as one combining both Scylla and Charybdis. I also assume that the Scylla-Charybdis story was familiar to the traditional audience as being one of the adventures of Odysseus[10].

Should we wish to reduce the version of our Odyssey to a «simple story», we first need to ask by which means a higher level is reached in the complexity of the depiction within the Odyssey. Here I would like to emphasize three factors. First: we learn of the story here not as a report by the primary narrator, but rather in the words of the first-person narrator Odysseus[11]. Second: in this instance, Odysseus has been precisely informed by Circe and is thus already aware of the dangers which Scylla and Charybdis represent, and therefore need not react spontaneously to them. And third: after having lost ship and companions following their crime at Thrinakia, Odysseus, in our Odyssey, gets forced through the straits a second time – now sitting on an improvised raft – and lands in Charybdis' whirlpool from which he just manages to escape. At least for Odysseus himself, the Scylla-Charybdis adventure is separated into two

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[8]   The relationship between the ἀοιδοί is defined as an ἀγαθὴ ἔρις by Hesiod, *Erga* 26. For the agonistic model of epic singing see R. Martin, *The Language of Heroes: Speech and Performance in the Iliad*, Ithaca-London 1989, 227-239; M. Edwards, «Neoanalysis and Beyond,» ClAnt 9 (1990), 311-325; A. Ford, *Homer: The Poetry of the Past*, Ithaca-London 1992, 93-125 (which includes a discussion of the relationship between Odysseus and Demodokos, and of Telemachos' statement that people like the newest song best, Od. 1, 351-2). See also my book (note 7), in the index, *sub voce* «Konkurrenz, poetische».

[9]   For the related questions cf. P. Von der Mühll, *Odyssee*, in: RE (Pauly-Wissowa), Suppl. 7, 1940, 729f.; Germain (note 4), 545f.; R. Merkelbach, *Untersuchungen zur Odyssee*, München ³1969, 205f.; H. Eisenberger, *Studien zur Odyssee*, Wiesbaden 1973, 199.

[10]   Cf. Hölscher (above, note 3), 155: «Sirenen, Skylla und Charybdis, die mit Erfindungskraft und Duldemut zu bestehenden, dürften zum eigensten Bestand der Odysseusgeschichten gehören.»

[11]   For the consequences of presenting Odysseus' adventures in his own voice, see I.J.F. de Jong, «The Subjective Style in Odysseus' Wanderings,» CQ 42 (1992), 1-11.

parts: the first time being confronted only with Scylla, the second time only with Charybdis.

These, then, are the most important factors rendering the depiction of our Odyssey more complex. Our task is now to sketch out a version in which these three factors are eliminated. We thus seek a version in which Odysseus, together with his companions, undergo the confrontation with Scylla and Charybdis as one coherent adventure, a version in which he is not forewarned and has to react spontaneously, and a version in which we, in terms of the depiction, are not bound by the perspective of the protagonist.

It was Karl Reinhardt who attempted to reconstruct such a version in the following manner[12]:

> Without being forewarned, Odysseus first falls into Scylla's realm, costing him several companions. He then travels on and lands *(to express it in Reinhardt's own words)*, from Scylla to Charybdis like from the rain into the storm[13]. Charybdis devours his ship with all his men; he alone is able to save himself thanks to his presence of mind by grabbing onto a fig tree hanging down from the rock over the top of the deck.

This reconstruction seems reasonable, and yet upon closer inspection is ultimately dissatisfying. For in truth, this version as well is unable to provide us with the motif of a double threat since the two adventures are not organically bound to one another. Here the relationship between Scylla and Charybdis is purely temporal. Odysseus is first confronted by Scylla and then by Charybdis, without the two monsters having had anything to do with one another, without there being any causal relationship between the two adventures. And at least as far as the confrontation with Scylla is concerned, it is, in this version, hardly possible to speak of an adventure in which the typical qualities of Odysseus come to the fore.

If the double threat of Scylla and Charybdis is to make up the core of the story, we would expect from our «simple version» that the sequence of events be depicted not as a *post hoc* but rather as a *propter hoc*. And our Odyssey seems to suggest just this causal relationship between Scylla and Charybdis: during the voyage through the straits, Odysseus and his companions are completely concentrated on Charybdis, whom they have already perceived. They fearfully avoid her and are thereby surprised by Scylla. Thus, our Odyssey emphasizes the contrast between the two monsters, the one being visible from afar, the other going unseen until the last

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[12] K. Reinhardt, «Die Abenteuer der Odyssee,» in: *Tradition und Geist*, Göttingen 1960, 47-124 (91f.).

[13] Reinhardt (note 12), 91: «… von der Skylla zur Charybdis wie vom Regen in die Traufe.»

moment. From this, the following «simple version» could be recon-
structed:

> Odysseus unwittingly enters the straits and suddenly notices, on the one
> side, the whirlpool of Charybdis. He is just able to avoid having his ship
> get devoured, whereupon, by this maneuver, he comes into the reach of
> Scylla who carries several of his companions from his ship.

The key to this story can thus be formulated by the following: the
hero, by avoiding one visible danger, winds up in another, which had
gone unseen.

Our Odyssey thus seems to suggest a sequence «from Charybdis to
Scylla», and yet, our text contains a series of references which indicate
the exact opposite sequence, namely «from Scylla to Charybdis». Karl
Reinhardt already noted that the above mentioned fig tree fits much bet-
ter in a version where we find Odysseus standing on deck of his ship, and
not swimming in the sea. The fig tree is thus the relic of a version in
which Odysseus, together with ship and companions, gets caught in
Charybdis[14]. That is to say, in this version he was first confronted by
Scylla and then by Charybdis.

On the other hand, there are references in our text which would seem
to point toward the exact opposite relationship between visible and non-
visible monsters. Circe, for one, describes Scylla as a monster with a
powerful bark and rather unpleasant appearance (Od. 12, 85-100): twelve
legs, six heads atop six overly-long necks, and each head having three
rows of teeth. Scylla herself sits in her cave high on a cliff and fishes with
her heads for dolphins and other animals of the sea in the channel, not
allowing any ship to pass without loss. This is the way how Scylla is
described by Circe, but there is no equivalent to this description in
Odysseus' report of his encounter with Scylla. Odysseus does not become
aware of Scylla until she has already carried off the companions from his
ship. In fact, he apparently does not even have enough time to observe
Scylla in detail (Od. 12, 244-259). If one hopes to find a version in which
the optical and acoustic impressions Scylla makes have a function in the
plot, then one should expect the hero himself to perceive at least some of
these traits. In other words, Odysseus should first see and hear Scylla
before she steals (or tries to steal) his companions. And in such a «sim-
ple version», he should try to avoid her, whereby it can remain to be seen
whether he succeeds in doing so in time, or whether he also suffers loss
at Scylla's «hands» in such a version as well.

Scylla, then, appears in Circe's description to be the «visible monster»;
with Charybdis it is just the opposite. Speaking of Charybdis, Circe says

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[14]   Reinhardt (note 12), 91.

that she sucks in water three times a day and spits out three times. Circe also adds the warning that Odysseus should not be present whenever Charybdis is sucking water in[15]. That would then suggest that, in fact, there are times in which one can pass Charybdis without danger, and more importantly, however, that Charybdis is not always active and thus can not always be seen in time. Now when Odysseus steers through the straits, the situation looks completely different: the companions are able to perceive the roar and spray of the whirlpool from far off, they are given instructions by Odysseus in time, and they can thus observe in detail Charybdis' activities while sailing through. Odysseus describes the action in the iterative form as a repeating sucking in and spitting out[16]. That means that while the ship passes, Charybdis alternates between sucking in and spitting out, and *vice versa*, several times. In other words, what was, according to Circe's warning, the hidden danger of a whirlpool which is only active three times a day, becomes in Odysseus' report a per- manently active danger which, therefore, can be easily perceived and avoided. Charybdis as a « simple motif » has its narrative function, how- ever, in that it can begin working without warning, such that by the time it is noticed, all flight is impossible.

All of these strands fit quite well together into a « simple story » which I would like to sketch in the following way:

> Odysseus enters the straits without forewarning. Suddenly Scylla appears with her loud howling and fishes with her six heads for mates on board. Odysseus reacts with his typical presence of mind by steering the ship towards the other side of the straits. It is precisely this maneuver which leads him into Charybdis' realm exactly at the moment when she happens to become active. Odysseus, as the only one standing on deck, reveals his cleverness a second time by grabbing onto the overhanging fig tree while the ship disappears from under his feet into the whirlpool.

This reconstruction offers us a « simple version » in which the motif of the « double danger » has its most sensible form: Odysseus avoids the one danger and thereby winds up in the other. And we thus obtain a version in which the typical qualities of the « old » Odysseus – that is, of the tra- ditional, pre-Odyssean Odysseus (as Prof. Maronitis has described him so well)[17] – come to light: for example, his skillfulness in all critical sit- uations, as well as his lack of scruples, as when he saves only his own life

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[15] Od. 12, 106: μὴ σύ γε κεῖθι τύχοις ὅτε ῥυβδήσειεν.

[16] Cf. Heubeck, ad Od. 12, 237-43 (A. Heubeck, A. Hoekstra, *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey. Vol. ii, books ix-xvi*, Oxford 1989).

[17] D.N. Maronitis, 'Αναζήτηση καὶ νόστος τοῦ 'Οδυσσέα· 'Η διαλεκτικὴ τῆς 'Οδύσσειας, Athens, 3rd ed., 1980.

while sacrificing ship and crew to Charybdis. It is perhaps this aspect of the «simple story» which Circe recalls when she says to Odysseus: «Better to lose six companions than all at once»[18], suggesting that Odysseus would be saved anyhow, even if the ship would be caught by Charybdis.

I believe we have hereby reconstructed the «simple version» which was familiar to the traditional audience and the one they used as a reference point upon hearing the «new» version of our Odyssey. I do not however wish to suggest that I believe in the existence of a fixed canonical form of this «simple story», be it written or oral[19]. Within the oral narrative tradition, this episode of Scylla and Charybdis was doubtlessly told in countless different variations. Yet I do believe that the story, in spite of its many forms, still tended to return to its «natural» point, that the singers and listeners understood this point as the traditional story's center of gravity, and that all attempts to tell the story at odds with this natural point would still have been received with this «traditional» background in mind. I believe we can here grasp the most important moment of intertextuality within the framework of an oral narrative tradition: a singer evokes by way of his own performance of a story the traditional form of the story, that is, the statistical average of all variations which the tradition has thus far brought forth, and by doing so, the singer differentiates his own version from this background and is thereby able to stand out[20]. In other words, here we have found a poetic principle that is different from the modern concept of «originality», but that still allows us to take a look at the working of «Homer against his tradition»[21].

Assuming then that the traditional listeners of the Odyssey understood the Scylla-Charybdis episode with the «simple story» in mind, we need to ask ourselves to what extent their understanding was thereby altered.

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[18] Od. 12, 109f.: «ἐπεὶ ἦ πολὺ φέρτερόν ἐστιν, ἓξ ἑτάρους ἐν νηὶ ποθήμεναι ἦ ἅμα πάντας.»

[19] Neither does Hölscher (note 3), 27: «Die einfache Geschichte ist eigentlich keine literarische Vorstufe, sondern eine subliterarische Form, die in den literarischen Gestaltungen auf verschiedene Weise enthalten sein kann. Sie verhält sich zu diesen wie die Idee zu ihren Varianten und ist insofern ein Abstraktum. Sie ist weder verbal noch in allen Teilen real zu fixieren...»

[20] This kind of intertextuality must not be dismissed as a sophisticated instrument of referentiality that indicates a writing culture. It can also be shown to be used by the best singers of the South-Slavic epic tradition, cf. my book (note 7), 7-23. So I think that we can here grasp an important aspect of a typical «oral» kind of intertextuality, the allusions referring neither to «texts» in the modern sense, nor to typology, but to the idea of a «story-line».

[21] I take this catchword (which seems outdated today) from J. Russo, «Homer against his Tradition,» Arion 7 (1968), 275-295.

We need to read the account of our Odyssey once again, this time with the traditional series of events in mind.

From the outset, Circe presents Scylla and Charybdis as an alternative route to the Clashing Rocks of the Planctae, and, like them, as an obstacle made of rocks which threatens to sink each and every seafarer. Thus, Scylla and Charybdis are announced as a singular adventure, although Circe then immediately separates the dangers. In her description, she concentrates wholly upon instructions concerning Scylla and passes over Charybdis with the simple warning that she represents too great a danger and therefore must be avoided at all costs. Here we notice something new as opposed to the «simple story» insofar as Circe describes Scylla as a calculatable risk. Carrying away exactly six companions from the ship, Scylla will be satisfied and allow the remainder to sail on. Nonetheless, Odysseus refuses to accept even this: he hopes it possible that even the loss of these six companions can be avoided by fighting against Scylla, but Circe advises him against it because he would then risk losing more than the six already counted on (Od. 12, 111-126). And yet, when it comes to it, Odysseus will nonetheless prepare to fight, though without success – however without negative consequences, either (Od. 12, 226-233). Therefore our text does not indicate that Odysseus puts the life of his companions at stake out of *hybris*[22]. On the contrary, he is willing to do the impossible even in order to save the six men he knows must be sacrificed[23].

In our Odyssey, what is expected of Odysseus is no longer his presence of mind, but rather planning, conviction, subordination to the will of the gods (Scylla being of divine origin) and stamina, τλημοσύνη. Odysseus must also prove this τλημοσύνη when, following the loss of his companions, he winds up alone in Charybdis, for what is foregrounded in the depiction is not Odysseus' cleverness in grasping the fig tree, but rather the great length of time he humbly hangs onto the tree until Charybdis returns his raft and he may swim again. At the end of his wanderings, Odysseus has gone from πολύτροπος, from δολόμητις, to becoming πολύμητις and τλήμων.

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[22] Odysseus' arming has been seen as the same kind of a spontaneous, Iliadic heroic reflex as his boastings towards Polyphemus (Od. 9, 263-266; 502-505), cf. C. Segal, *Singers, Heroes, and Gods in the Odyssey*, Ithaca-London 1994, 89: «...reveal the inappropriateness of the traditional heroic response of straightforward battle in this strange world of fabulous monsters.» For Odysseus' boasting as an instance of *hybris*, see R. Friedrich, «The Hybris of Odysseus,» JHS 109 (1991), 16-28.

[23] Cf. Heubeck (note 16), ad Od. 12, 226-35.

In summary, you could say that, on different levels, our Odyssey tells us three different versions of the story of Scylla and Charybdis: first, Odysseus tries to avoid the one danger (Charybdis), but in so doing, gets into the reach of the second one (Scylla); second, Odysseus sacrifices six companions to save the rest; and third, Odysseus tries to save even these six companions and so proves himself as the best possible leader of his men. The mixture of these three versions gives the audience the same story that they knew as the traditional story, but a story in which the roles of Scylla and Charybdis have been changed; they get a story in which Odysseus tries to save all his companions; and they are shown, once again, that Odysseus cannot change his fate, but must suffer it. And they are offered a last point, when they expect this episode already to be over. Although Odysseus was able to save his companions from Charybdis' whirlpool, he cannot escape the fate that was provided for him by the traditional story. It is only on his way back from Thrinakia, after the loss of his companions, that he is forced to pass the straits for a second time, and now he gets caught by Charybdis (Od. 12, 426-446) and has to show his τλημοσύνη once again.

If I compare my interpretation with interpretations of the Odyssey gotten by methods which adhere close to the text, the gain is perhaps small. My interpretation confirms the character portrait of Odysseus which has been wrought by the best Odyssey interpretations within the last several decades. I do believe, however, that this portrait of Odysseus can first be grasped in all of its meaning when we see it in terms of the traditional portrait of Odysseus. The Moderns, in their fascination with the mythical hero Odysseus, always concentrated on his traditional characteristics: his desire for adventure, his voyages as metaphor for human knowledge, his lack of scruples in achieving his own goals[24]. On the other hand, the Moderns had difficulties in completely accepting the Odysseus of our Odyssey. They always stressed his dark sides, refusing to acknowledge any positive claims: that he did not stay away from home out of a desire for adventure, that he did long for his wife, that he did take responsibility for his companions, and that he killed the suitors only in self-defense.

Perhaps we can come to grips with our own portrait of Odysseus better when we accept the Odysseus of our Odyssey as a man who, with

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[24]   These traits of Odysseus are, of course, already present in ancient literature, most forcefully in some Attic tragedies (Soph. Philoct.; Eur. Tro.) and in the works of most Roman authors (Virgil, Ovid). For a «history» of Odysseus' character, see W.B. Stanford, *The Ulysses Theme*, Oxford ³1963. It is this «negative» view of our hero that prevails in the medieval and modern adaptations of the story of the Odyssey.

regards to his own tradition (that means, in modern jargon: in terms of his image as trickster)[25] suddenly feels the need to take responsibility and who therefore allows his former strengths to recede while allowing newer ones to take their place: the δολόμητις makes room for the πολύμητις, and the πολυτροπίη yields to τλημοσύνη. Odysseus has become a new hero in our Odyssey, though only due to the stories, of which he is the center, themselves becoming new[26]. These new stories still contain within themselves the older ones – though not as a hidden core which interpretations must somehow excavate in order to reveal their true meanings, but rather simply as a remembrance of how the old Odysseus in the traditional version once was and how he in the present version no longer is.

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[25] For the notion of the traditional Odysseus as a trickster, cf. J. Russo, «A Jungian Analysis of Homer's Odyssey,» in: P. Young Eisendrath, T. Dawson (edd.), *The Cambridge Companion to Jung*, Cambridge 1997, 240-254.

[26] I have tried to elucidate this poetic principle in my paper «Odysseus and the Bow,» in: M. Païzi-Apostolopoulou (ed.), *Homerica: Proceedings of the 8th International Symposium on the Odyssey (1-5 September 1996)*, Ithaca (Greece) 1998, 151-163.