

## THE SOCIAL CONTROL OF SEXUALITY: ODYSSEAN DIALOGICS<sup>1</sup>

JOHN PERADOTTO

It is clear that the *Odyssey* was put together out of a variety of pre-existing tales, itself the fullest embodiment of Odysseus' epithet πολύαινος in both the active and passive senses of that word: "the man about whom many tales (*ainoi*) are told" and "the man who (himself) has many tales to tell." But the multiplicity of these *ainoi*, "tales," reduces ultimately to two models: one is *Märchen*, the tale-type of the master trickster (*polymêtis*) and master technician (*polymêchanos*) who achieves his purposes in a hostile environment; and the other is what I shall here refer to as myth, the tale-type of one who has little choice other than to endure the full load of the world's intractability (*polytlas*). However, what I am here calling "myth" and "*Märchen*" are not disengaged tale-types, nor are they merely abstract analytical models. They are not, in other words, ideologically innocent. They are, or are at least vehicles for, *opinions on the world*, discourses that shape and justify behavior, empowering some and disempowering others. The phrase "opinions on the world" derives from Mikhail Bakhtin, and it is by reference to his concept of "dialogism" that a view of the *Odyssey* as a collision of contrasting ideological opinions on the world can, I think, be elucidated.

The term "dialogism" denotes generally the epistemological mode of opposed and mutually conditioning voices or viewpoints which is

---

<sup>1</sup> This essay is an expanded version of a discussion published in Peradotto 1990.51-58. Like so many who have no access to Bakhtin in his own language, I owe a heavy debt of gratitude to people like Caryl Emerson, Michael Holquist, and Gary Morson for finally bringing him within range.

found in discourse dominated by what Bakhtin calls "heteroglossia," and the presence of which in the *Odyssey* it is the purpose of this paper to articulate.<sup>2</sup> As distinct kinds of narrative "heteroglossia" involves two forces, called respectively "centripetal" and "centrifugal." By "centripetal" Bakhtin means forces in any language or culture which exert a unifying, centralizing, homogenizing, and hierarchizing influence: such forces tend to be closely associated with dominant political power, with the official and heroic, with the serious and the proper, with an ascetical and sanitized body, with "high" literary genres and "correct" language. By "centrifugal" he means those forces which exert a disunifying, decentralizing, stratifying, denormalizing influence: these forces tend to be associated with the disempowered, the popular, and carnivalesque, with the antics of the Autolycean trickster, rogue, clown, and outlaw, with laughter and tomfoolery, with a coarse and carnal body, and with "low" literary genres and dialects.

Some cultures, discourses, narratives display the collision of the centripetal and centrifugal more openly and comfortably than others, but the centripetal tendency, which Bakhtin considers correlative to all power, favors the creation of what he calls an "authoritative discourse," as opposed to—again his words—an "internally persuasive discourse." "A word, discourse, language or culture undergoes 'dialogization,'" says one of Bakhtin's editors, "when it becomes relativized, de-privileged, aware of competing definitions for the same things. Undialogized language is authoritative or absolute."<sup>3</sup> An individual's development, an ideological process in Bakhtin's view, is characterized by a sharp gap between the categories of "authoritative discourse" and "internally persuasive discourse": "in the one," he says,

the authoritative word (religious, political, moral; the word of the father, of adults and of teachers, etc.) that

---

<sup>2</sup> In an essay likely to be of great interest to Hellenists, "Epic and Novel" (1981.3–40), Bakhtin argues that among literary genres the novel tends to be the most dialogical, while epic tends to be monological. But readers of Bakhtin have been troubled by this as indeed by his entire attempt to distinguish the novel from the epic. See, for example, Todorov 1984.80–93. Even Bakhtin himself appears to have found his distinction problematical. "Epic and Novel" was first published in 1970, but it was written in 1941. Twenty years later, he is calling the epic one among several aspects of the novelistic (Todorov 1984.90). In any case, I would venture to say that close readers of Homer are far more likely to recognize the *Odyssey* in Bakhtin's characterization of the novel than in his account of epic.

<sup>3</sup> Michael Holquist in Bakhtin 1981.427.

does not know internal persuasiveness, in the other the internally persuasive word that is denied all privilege, backed up by no authority at all, and is frequently not even acknowledged in society (not in public opinion, nor by scholarly norms, nor by criticism), not even in the legal code.<sup>4</sup>

“Word” in the quote above (Russian *slovo*), and the *-log-* in Bakhtin’s “dialogism” (*dialogizm*) refers, like its forebear the Greek *logos*, to discourse in the broadest sense, and so signifies not simply individual words but also ways of using words, such as utterances, arguments, ideas, narratives, plots.<sup>5</sup> When I speak of the two “voices” in the *Odyssey*, I mean, like Bakhtin, not only actual instantiations of the narrative structures I am calling myth and *Märchen*, but any use of language which belongs to or emerges from the particular *opinion on the world* sustained by one or the other of these narrative types. Two examples will serve to concretize what is meant here.

The first is in *Odyssey* 5, where Zeus dispatches Hermes to Calypso to order Odysseus’ release. Calypso’s response lays bare the asymmetry in the norms of sexual conduct governing males and females (118–20):

σχέτλιοί ἐστε, θεοί, ζηλήμονες ἔξοχον ἄλλων  
οἷ τε θεαῖς ἀγάασθε παρ’ ἀνδράσιν εὐνάζεσθαι  
ἀμφαδίην, ἣν τίς τε φίλον ποιήσεται ἀκοίτην.

You [male] gods are unbearable, surpassing all others in your jealousy: you stand aghast at goddesses who openly sleep with men, if ever any one of them wants to make a bedmate for herself.

When we place that statement against the larger backdrop of female sexual conduct and of the “centripetal” social reaction and comment it elicits, not only in the *Odyssey* but indeed also in the rest of archaic epos, it is not easy to conceive how what Calypso is allowed to say could have been placed on the lips of a *human* character. It has already been lent

---

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 342.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

definite if muted prolepsis in this book's opening lines, with the image of the goddess Eos rising up from the side of her mortal lover Tithonus. It is hard not to see this as representing a revolt against a system whose order is made to depend on the suppression of female sexual desire in a way that is not expected of males.<sup>6</sup> It would not have appeared at all in a less dialogic text. Even here, it is muted by a narrative environment dominated by the conventional, "centripetal" voice which requires tight constraints on female libido. It is hardly accidental that Calypso's island is made to occupy the center of the formless sea, distant from all forms of social, political, or religious normativeness, where even Hermes, the divine crosser of borders, is ill at ease (100–102):

τίς δ' ἄν ἐκὼν τοσσόνδε διαδράμοι ἀλμυρὸν ὕδωρ  
ἄσπετον; οὐδέ τις ἄγχι βροτῶν πόλις, οἳ τε θεοῖσιν  
ἰερά τε ῥέζουσι καὶ ἑξαίτους ἑκατόμβας.

Who, unless against his will, would make so long a passage as this over the boundless salt sea? There is no human community hereabout, and so no sacrifices and choice hecatombs for the gods.

Furthermore, in offering the paradigmatic fates of Orion and Iasion to support her charge of divine male jealousy, Calypso is also made to enunciate the powerful sanction against forbidden conduct. Her revolt ends limply, and as she gives voice to the grand, "centripetal" principle already enunciated by Hermes, "the mind of Zeus is uncircumventable," she is made to suppress, along with her desire, all traces even of her *grammatical* gender, the traditional formula *allon theon* here stripped of its genericness by being lodged in a context where it is precisely the revolt of *goddesses*, not (male) gods, that is at issue (103–04 = 137–38).

---

<sup>6</sup> It could be argued that the social purpose of this practice is to maintain the value of women as a kind of currency in a system of exchange between otherwise potentially hostile *oikoi*. Their value as currency depends on their sexual partners being determined for them in the best interests of the *oikos*, irrespective of their own desire. A number of examples clearly point this way: the susceptibility of Helen; the seduction of Clytemnestra as the first step in subverting Agamemnon's *oikos*; the danger associated with Circe's social isolation, her independence from males, and her assertive sexuality; the indignation of Odysseus at his female slaves' fornication with the suitors.

ἀλλὰ μάλ' οὐ πως ἔστι Διὸς νόον αἰγιόχοιο  
οὔτε παρεξελθεῖν ἄλλον θεὸν οὔθ' ἀλιῶσαι.

Thus Calypso's rebel, "centrifugal" voice, though it is allowed to surface, is not allowed to stray very far from the center; it is, like her island, lost in the surrounding sea of "centripetal" voices. The voice of the enveloper is itself enveloped.

There is, however, a not so subtle irony here that needs to be underscored, for it serves to caution us not to oversimplify dialogism as a process involving two utterly polarized voices, each characterized by wholly disparate ends, rather than to see them as two inseparable sides of the same coin. Calypso charges the male gods with a double standard in exercising superior force to suppress female sexuality. Taken at face value, this seems like a simple case of power over powerlessness. But if we step back for a look at the larger context, something else comes through. Calypso's charge is set within a context in which she is herself using superior force on Odysseus, a mortal, in achieving her will. Her pouting reluctance to let him go, and the sense of frustrated domination that lies behind it, will find all the more emphasis when set against the foil of Circe's unforced hospitality and gracious sendoff.<sup>7</sup> In fact, the Circe episode seems to respond, across five books, to the imperfect conclusion of the problem raised by the Calypso episode. Circe begins with a manifestation of power at once more domineering and more dangerous than Calypso's. Odysseus, forewarned and forearmed by Hermes, responds with the threat of superior force, to which Circe yields with an oath to do him no harm. Her power to dominate is not merely suppressed, or even neutralized, but transmuted to beneficence. The result is one in which, unlike the encounter with Calypso, desire is achieved on both sides without domination.

The god Hermes, consummate embodiment of *mētis*, "cunning intelligence," figures prominently in this model of how power and desire get negotiated, even as he will play a prominent role in our second example below. In the Homeric Hymn that bears his name, a similar message of power and desire negotiated is conveyed. What we find there, briefly stated, is a playful and nonviolent demand by the infant Hermes for equal status in the society of the other gods. He proceeds to establish his place among his physically more powerful peers, on his own terms, paradoxically by the

---

<sup>7</sup> See Segal 1968.424.

exercise of unconventional and even antisocial skills, the very same he will later give to Odysseus' grandfather, the arch-trickster Autolycus, namely *kleptosynê* and *horkos*, stealth and equivocation.<sup>8</sup> He manages all this without grim confrontation, defusing every step of the way his father Zeus' ponderous authoritativeness and his elder brother Apollo's rigidity and violence. That same whimsicality and iconoclasm characterize his behavior in our second example of dialogism.

This second example of dialogism in the *Odyssey*<sup>9</sup> is more daring than what we find in book 5. It allows the "centrifugal" voice nearly equivalent status, so much so, in fact, that it came under vigorous censure in antiquity, notably by Xenophanes (fr.11) and the Platonic Socrates (*Republic* 390c). Even its language displays not a few departures from conventional Homeric forms and usages (see Hainsworth 1988 *ad* 8.266–369). It is the story of Ares, Aphrodite, and Hephaestus sung by Demodocus in book 8. As has often been observed, this tale of the triumph of cunning craft (Hephaestus) over boorish strength (Ares) reiterates the point made in Odysseus' encounter with the handsome but uncivil Euryalus earlier in this book, and looks ahead to the hero's own account of his victory over the Cyclops in book 9 and ultimately to his conquest of the careless suitors. At first sight, the "centripetal" voice appears to be the stronger, affirming the sanctity of the marriage bond and the sanctions taken against adulterers. An assembly of the gods gathers to determine the fate of the trapped adulterers:

---

<sup>8</sup> Although we cannot here devote to the subject the full exploration it deserves, it is worth noting that Autolycus' divinely bestowed powers of equivocation must be associated with another important Bakhtinian theme, the "word with a loophole" (*slovo s laz'eikoi*). In *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (233), Bakhtin says "a loophole is the retention for oneself of the possibility of altering the ultimate, final meaning of one's words. . . . This potential other meaning, that is, the loophole left open, accompanies the word like a shadow. Judged by its meaning alone, the word with a loophole should be an ultimate word and does present itself as such, but in fact it is only the penultimate word and places after itself only a conditional, not a final period" (cited in Morson and Emerson 1990.160; see further their discussion of the loophole, 159–61, 223–29). Autolycus is the unsocialized individualist (*autos*) par excellence, living wolf-like (*lykos*) on the fringes of society, a cunning predator. One of his two greatest skills, a gift of Hermes, is proficiency in so phrasing an oath (*horkos*) that he profits, no matter what the outcome—a subversion of the social fixity and finality one thinks of as the essence of an oath. There is also a tradition in which his linguistic agility is matched by his power to transform himself, like Proteus, into any shape at will. He is thus a walking symbol of the unfinalizable. See further Peradotto 1990.128–35.

<sup>9</sup> For a stimulating, lengthier analysis of this passage, see Olson 1989, where many of the same issues are raised without the use of Bakhtinian terminology.

the goddesses, in the conventional modesty expected of them, remain at home (323), incidentally, like the Phaeacian wives who seem to have been deliberately excluded from the social context, with its male club atmosphere, in which this kind of bawdy tale serves as entertainment. There is a great deal of fussing about proper procedure, as a sober, unsmiling, “centripetal” Poseidon promises to give the injured husband Hephaestus lawful satisfaction, should the adulterer Ares fail to pay his fine. A terse apothegm of conventional, “centripetal” wisdom serves as moral to the tale:

οὐκ ἀρετᾶ κακὰ ἔργα· κικάνει τοι βραδύς ὠκύν.

Crime wins no prizes; the gimp outstrips the sprinter.

A purely conventional, moral fable would have ended there. But Demodocus’ story gives an uninhibited, uncensored, and unanswered voice to unlawful sexual desire of the very kind Ares is punished for. So startlingly uninhibited is this “centrifugal” voice, especially following as hard as it does on the heels of the moral just mentioned, that it became a target for censorship at least as early as the Alexandrians.<sup>10</sup> Apollo asks Hermes if he would want to lie with Aphrodite in bonds as tight and constraining as these. The Bordercrosser answers (338–42):

αἶ γὰρ τοῦτο γένοιτο, ἄναξ ἑκατηβόλ’ Ἄπολλον·  
δεσμοὶ μὲν τρεῖς τόσσοι ἀπείρονες ἀμφὶς ἔχοιεν,  
ὕμεις δ’ εἰσορόωτε θεοὶ πᾶσαι τε θέαιναι,  
αὐτὰρ ἐγὼν εὐδοίμι παρὰ χρυσῆν Ἀφροδίτην.

Exactly what I crave for, Lord Apollo, Shooter from afar!  
The bonds wrapped round us could be three times as  
strong, infinite in length, and this in full view of all you  
gaping gods, and all the goddesses as well; no matter, I’d  
still want to sleep with golden Aphrodite.

From a Bakhtinian perspective, it is not accidental that the mouthpiece for this voice should again be Hermes, playful arch-trickster, polytropic crosser of borders, who had served as intermediary between the voice of

---

<sup>10</sup> Hainsworth 1988 *ad* 333–42; Bolling 1925.237; Apthorp 1980.87–91.

authority and the voice of desire in the Calypso episode and as instrument of accord between potential adversaries, Circe and Odysseus. At the center of Bakhtin's complicated concept of the carnivalesque, where the competitive edge is given to the centrifugal in its clash with the centripetal, pride of place is given to the trickster, clown, and rogue, whose essential trait is to be free of essential traits, unconstrained by the conventions associated with class, status, profession, or any other social category. This figure, Bakhtin claims, is the world's primordial laugher, laughing not only at others but at himself.<sup>11</sup> "The principle of laughter," Bakhtin declares in his study of Rabelais, "destroys . . . all pretense of an extratemporal meaning and an unconditional value of necessity. It frees human consciousness, thought, and imagination for new potentialities."<sup>12</sup> Demodocus' story in *Odyssey* 8 twice puts the gods into a fit of laughter: once at the stratagem that traps the adulterous lovers and Hephaestus' pagliacciosque exposé of his own cuckolding; the second time at Hermes' irreverent remark, as if to endorse each voice.

Comic heroes like Hermes who embody this principle of laughter are figures of "free improvisation," representing a "life process that is imperishable and forever renewing itself."<sup>13</sup> Hermes, in the *Homeric Hymn* (54–59), within hours of his birth, takes up the lyre, instrument of his own recent invention, and *improvises* a song on the theme of his own procreation:

θεός δ' ὑπὸ καλὸν ἄειδεν  
ἐξ αὐτοσχεδῆς πειρώμενος, ἥύτε κοῦροι  
ἤβηται θαλίησι παραιβόλα κερτομέουσιν  
ἄμφι Δία Κρονίδην καὶ Μαιάδα καλλιπέδιλον  
ὡς πάρος ὠρίζεσκον ἑταιρείῃ φιλότητι.  
ἦν τ' αὐτοῦ γενεὴν ὄνομακλυτὸν ἔξονομάζων.

<sup>11</sup> Morson and Emerson 1990.436. Morson and Emerson (454–55) also alert us to Bakhtin's account of the decline of folk humor in *Rabelais and His World* (102–36). The post-Homeric failure, especially of the Alexandrians, to be amused by Demodocus' comic song is a good example of that decline in the ancient Greek context.

<sup>12</sup> Bakhtin 1968.49. Compare what the anthropologist Mary Douglas (1975.103) has to say about jokes: "The message of a standard rite is that the ordained patterns of social life are inescapable. The message of a joke is that they are escapable. The joke is by nature an anti-rite." See also Olson 1989.142, who speaks of appreciating a joke as a "covert intellectual conspiracy."

<sup>13</sup> Bakhtin 1981.36 in the essay "Epic and Novel," cited in Morson and Emerson 1990.225.



As he tested it [the lyre], the god sang a sweet, impromptu song, the way young men bandy insults at festivals. His song was about Zeus, son of Cronus, and fair-sandalled Maia, and the light talk the lovers spoke before, in the intimacy of their lovemaking, all this as he narrated the famous story of his own begetting.

In all this he shows himself to be not only *polytropos* (13, 439), “infinitely versatile,” but *autotropos*, capable of the absolutely unique (αὐτοτροπήσας, 86).<sup>14</sup>

And how does the whole tale in book 8 end? With the moralist’s maxim confirming convention? No. With arrangements for legal compensation by Poseidon, steadfastly incapable of laughter (344), too stuffy to share in the general merriment? No. It ends with a controlled leer: Demodocus’ and Homer’s audience invited to share the gods’ vision of that body, the embodiment of untrammelled carnality so dear to Bakhtin’s notion of the carnival: Aphrodite the laughter-loving (this the only occurrence of φιλομειδής in the *Odyssey*) on Paphos, still centrifugal, still remote from her husband and now from home as well, still untouched by punishment, freshly bathed, “a marvelous thing to look at” (θαῦμα ιδέσθαι, 8.366).

*State University of New York at Buffalo*

---

<sup>14</sup> So unique, in fact, that it is not at all clear what Hermes is actually doing at this point in the *Hymn* (. . . οἷά τ’ ἐπειγόμενος δολιχὴν ὁδόν, αὐτοτροπήσας). And it is altogether appropriate and not a little amusing that the word, *autotropésas*, used to designate this absolutely unique action, should itself be a *hapax legomenon*!

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Apthorp, M. J. 1980. *The Manuscript Evidence for Interpolation in Homer*. Heidelberg.
- Bakhtin, Mikhail. 1968. *Rabelais and His World*. Trans. Hélène Iswolsky. Cambridge, Mass.
- . 1981. *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*. Ed. Michael Holquist. Trans. Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist. Austin.
- . 1984. *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*. Trans. Caryl Emerson. Minneapolis.
- Bolling, G. M. 1925. *External Evidence for Interpolation in Homer*. Oxford.
- Douglas, Mary. 1975. "Jokes," in *Implicit Meanings*. London.
- Hainsworth, J. B., Alfred Heubeck and Stephanie West. 1988. *A Commentary on Homer's Odyssey: Vol. 1 Introduction and Books i–viii*. Oxford.
- Morson, Gary S. and Caryl Emerson. 1990. *Mikhail Bakhtin: Creation of a Poetics*. Stanford.
- Olson, S. Douglas. 1989. "Odyssey 8: Guile, Force, and the Subversive Poetics of Desire." *Arethusa* 22.135–43.
- Peradotto, John. 1990. *Man in the Middle Voice: Name and Narration in the Odyssey*. Princeton.
- Segal, Charles. 1968. "Circean Temptations: Homer, Vergil, Ovid." *TAPA* 99.419–42.
- Todorov, Tzvetan. 1984. *Mikhail Bakhtin: The Dialogical Principle*. Trans. Wlad Godzich. Minneapolis.