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The Odyssey: The Fitzgerald Translation

Homer

★★★★★

63 Reviews

Macmillan, Nov 15, 1998 - 510 pages

Robert Fitzgerald's translation of Homer's *Odyssey* is the best and bestloved modern translation of the greatest of all epic poems. Since 1961, this *Odyssey* has sold more than two million copies, and it is the standard translation for three generations of students and poets. The Noonday Press is delighted to publish a new edition of this classic work. Fitzgerald's supple verse is ideally suited to the story of Odysseus' long journey back to his wife and home after the Trojan War. Homer's tale of love, adventure, food and drink, sensual pleasure, and mortal danger reaches the English-language reader in all its glory. Of the many translations published since World War II only Fitzgerald's has won admiration as a great poem in English. The noted classicist D. S.

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User Review ★★★★★ - Kenneth Bailey - Goodreads

Robert Fitzgerald's translation of Homer's *Odyssey* is simply amazing. The first time I read it in High School I absolutely enjoyed it, and reading it for a second time earlier this year it was still ... [Read full review](#)

Review: *The Odyssey*

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Ten years after the Trojan War Odysseus the tactician left Troy and wound up on Calypso's island for seven years. After being trapped for all that time and fed up with his home sickness Odysseus ... [Read full review](#)

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cisions" that Pound saw in it. At all events a very different poem from *The Iliad*, a huge tragic masterpiece that must be taken on its own terms before it will speak to ours. *The Odyssey* is an amenable poem open to all comers in search of delight, and from antiquity onwards has lent itself to a wide range of interpretation. And yet, strangely it must seem, we have had no really satisfactory translation, certainly nothing to stand beside Pope's *Iliad*, "that poetical wonder," as Johnson called it. In 1961 Robert Fitzgerald's *Odyssey* appeared. Here at last was a translator who could "lift the great song again," to borrow words from the prelude to his version, because he caught the music of Homer's Greek and heard the way his characters speak to each other. This is our classic version, effortlessly surpassing its several successors.

PRELUDE AND THE VOYAGES

We first hear of Odysseus in the opening scene of the poem as the gods gathered in council listen to Athena complain of the way they have neglected the great hero. The Trojan War ended years ago and he should have been back home; instead he has been detained by a minor goddess, Kalypso, in her island of Ogygia. Zeus, a Zeus more concerned with justice on earth than the somewhat pococurante supreme deity of *The Iliad*, assures her that he has Odysseus well in mind—the divine messenger Hermes is to go to the island and see to it that he is allowed to set out for home. We expect at this point to turn directly to the hero of the poem, but instead we follow Athena to Ithaka, where, disguised as a family friend called Mentes, she proposes to send Odysseus' son Telemakhos on a mission abroad to seek news of his father. The goddess is displeased by what she sees in Ithaka, a crowd of men living it up and behaving as though they owned the place. They "are here courting my mother," Telemakhos tells her, "and they use/our house as if it were a house to plunder." Bad behavior, we agree, but the poet takes a graver view. He is in love with civilization, with the courtesies and seemly usages that could not play much part in wartime. He delights to be able to report that even in this disorderly ménage a few

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decent practices still prevail. As Telemakhos sits down with his guest, a maid

brought them a silver finger bowl and filled it
out of a beautiful spouting golden jug,
then drew a polished table to their side.
The larder mistress with her tray came by
and served them generously. A carver lifted
cuts of each roast meat to put on trenchers
before the two.

These lines will be repeated a number of times in the poem. Even in Kirke's house in the woods the same civilities are observed (Book 10, 411 ff. in Fitzgerald's translation, with some variations). The ceremonies of civilization do not mean much to us today; we tend to see them as insincere, a gloss laid over the realities of human relations. To Homer they are very beautiful and their violation a more serious matter than we can imagine.

If there is a touch of a Bronze Age Miss Manners about the poet of *The Odyssey*, and some justification for calling his poem the first novel, it must be said that it reaches well beyond the competence of that instructive lady and beyond the normal reach of the novel. There the natural world acts primarily as a background (in Jane Austen, bad weather means that a lady taking a walk may get the hem of her dress wet) against which the complexities of human relations can be explored. Being a poem *The Odyssey* cannot but be open to the forces of nature and the fierce west wind can go shouting over the wine-dark sea. We feel that when a novelist lets nature speak out in this way he is poaching on the poet's preserve, as Hardy does in the pastoral episode at Talbothays dairy in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles*, beginning a chapter with "On a thyme-scented, bird-hatching morning in May."

And there is another large region that *The Odyssey* claims as its own, one ignored by the poet of *The Iliad* and open only to the novelist if he first transforms it for his own sophisticated purposes: the region of faerie and folktale and fable—the world of myth. Myth the novel can hardly do without. In *The Europeans* Henry James re-creates an earlier America that is

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