
THE MEDITERRANEAN STORY-TELLING SAILOR: ODYSSEUS AND SINBAD*

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I WISH, in the first place, to thank the organizers of the Third Assembly of the Community of Mediterranean Universities for giving me the honour and pleasure of addressing them.

One of the reasons why I have always admired the work of the Community since its birth, even when I was in exile from this University, is that the Community of Mediterranean Universities was never a mere talking-shop. The main work it has undertaken has been concerned with joint collaborative projects – in research, in teaching, in management arrangements, such as staff and student exchanges; all the three main aspects of university activity – but this practical orientation can never be dissociated, by university people, from fundamental theoretical reflection – especially from reflection on the question of identity – of the identity of Man – and, more particularly for us, of Mediterranean Man.

Consequently, when I was asked to give an address with the only proviso that it was to be on a *humanistic* topic, I felt immediately that I should provide some reflections on the undoubtedly prototypical figure of Mediterranean man – namely Odysseus; and equally that I should do so by comparing and contrasting him with another prototypical figure admirably cast, I think, to function as a foil to Odysseus – namely Sinbad from the *Elf lajla u wahda*.

I was recently almost compelled to reflect on these prototypical figures of Mediterranean culture in the course of contributing to the compilation of a core syllabus for a common cultural background course to be taken by all future university students in our Island. In this context, I will recall that, for centuries, in Britain at least, it was thought that there could be only one kind of foundational university course – namely the study of classical civilization in its wholeness – i.e. including also its mathematical and scientific components. Unfortunately, a technological dimension is lacking in classical civilization. But the point was that you studied a finite civilization as a whole.

For many years now, I have maintained and sought to implement the idea that in our context, it is more profitable to take a larger unit of study, namely

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Mediterranean civilization; and this for two main reasons: firstly, it comprehends the study of the instruments of Mediterranean civilization, essentially the study of dialogue between different cultures, co-existing or subsisting within a common environmental framework; secondly, it substitutes the study of a dynamic and open process, for that of a somewhat statically conceived (because of the small time-frame) and finitely bounded, closed system, such as the classical world. In practice, adopting the Mediterranean civilization as a whole instead of the classical age as a unit of foundational study means considering our heritage from the classical age in its historic interplay with the other great heritage of the Mediterranean, of Near Eastern origin, that is the Biblical tradition, in its Jewish, Christian, and Muslim forms. It means, for instance, as I propose very briefly to sketch out now, trying to understand the figure of Odysseus better by looking at him against the foil of Sinbad – the ancient, classical Mediterranean story-telling sailor against the foil of his Muslim successor.

I am taking a Muslim foil to the pagan prototype because of time restrictions. However, I wish to remark in a preliminary way that I was, incidentally, very struck yesterday by the fact that the presenter of the first paper, our distinguished Turkish colleague, in talking of that great historical Mediterranean hero, Suleiman the Great, whose magnificence has recently been the object of a great celebration at the British Museum in London, and whose memories are undying in our own Island, should have referred to the legend of the Christian *St Brandan*. The reference was made to the story of the Saint's landing on the back of a big fish mistaken for an island. The story actually links this to a stone-throwing episode by demonic creatures from the 'smithy of hell'. I would like here to recall also that the oldest known text of the story of *St Brandan* is a tenth-century Latin source; and there is also an Old French version of it, of the twelfth century. Since the *St Brandan* episode has, as has been always recognized, a very precise parallel in *Sinbad the Sailor*, a Dutch scholar, De Goeje (1889) used it to establish the *terminus ante quem* for the composition of the *Sinbad* component of the *Elf lajla u wahda*. But, as another scholar, Mia I. Gerhardt,¹ has pointed out, the story derives almost certainly from an older oral tradition – in fact, both its key elements are of at least Homeric origin. The idea of a moving island derives from the *Aiolos* episode in the *Odyssey*, while the stone-throwing demonic creatures clearly come from the *Polyphemus* episode. Thus, there are here mythical elements which appear first in a classical pagan context; next in a Muslim context with their meaning correspondingly transformed; and then in a Christian context, which again metamorphoses their meaning. This is the pattern of the process which

1. Mia I. Gerhardt, *The Art of Story Telling*, (Brill, 1963), 241.

we find in the history of Mediterranean civilization. Here I am going, however, to stick mainly to the first two contexts – the Classical and the Muslim.

I want now to come quickly to the substance of my talk with the question, in the first place, why the unquestioned prototype of Mediterranean Man is not just a sailor, but he is above all a *story-telling* sailor. The answer is in fact given in the *Odyssey* itself.

It has been obvious to all scholars and students of the Homeric epic that, in the carefully architected structure of the work as we have it today, Canto 11 – containing the visit by Odysseus to the Kingdom of the Dead (the *Nekya*) – has been deliberately placed at the topographic and ideological centre of the whole epic.

There are two main reasons for this:

First, the episode gives us a picture of a view of the afterlife, the other world beyond death; and it establishes the very important point that, given the shadowiness of the *post mortem* existence, it is reasonable to expect (in the absence of any Biblical revelation) that the present life and the present world, with all the hardships and trials it entails, is in the last analysis preferable to the ghostly existence of Hades. This is the first lesson which Odysseus draws and it is, in itself, a sufficient reason why the gods friendly to Odysseus had compelled him to undertake the dangerous expedition, in tears and anguish, to the underworld. Odysseus had been told that this was to enable him to get some indications from the soothsayer Tiresias about his journey back home; but, actually, what he is told eventually by Tiresias is very meagre from the practical point of view. The really important lesson that Odysseus learns is to overcome the haunting death-wish that plagues every man – that the other world is preferable to Ithaca.

But there is a second and more important reason for the centrality of the episode. Odysseus is praised and admired by the listeners of his tale in the underworld – and we too are hearing it from his own lips for the first time, given the structure of the epic – he is praised for his narrative power, for his story-telling ability, for his bardlike qualities, even more than for the heroism and wisdom of his actual doings. It is the ability of Odysseus to extract the meaning, the significance of his experience, that is seen to be his greater greatness. It is because the man of action doubles up, as it were, into a reflexive philosopher, because Odysseus is capable of transforming creatively his suffering into beauty, his ordeals into a poem, that the denizens of the *Nekya* praise him most – and in this we are meant to identify ourselves with them.

It has been very clearly shown, especially by recent scholars such as Vidal-Nacquet, that the *Odyssey* is the story of the return of Odysseus to human normality and of his ultimate, deliberate acceptance of the human condition through the experience of his travels, during which he faces a double set of worlds – each

illustrating some monstrous abnormality, a conjunction of human and inhuman elements, each the converse of the other. But these experiences would have been valueless, had Odysseus not had the ability to interpret them, to draw out their relevance to the definition and clearer understanding of what it really is to be a man, to the definition of a human being – a being who is above other animals, but still less than a god.

From this point of view it is interesting to compare very briefly the structure of the *Odyssey*, especially this narrative function, with the different narrative framework which we find in Sinbad almost as carefully architected as in the *Odyssey*. Very roughly, as is well known, the *Odyssey* has a first part which describes the disorder reigning in Ithaca as a result of Odysseus' absence. It is only in Canto V that Odysseus himself appears and we hear, narrated mainly by himself, precisely in the *Nekya* episode, how he had been exposed to the circumambient chaos, to the monstrosities found away from home. And then, finally, there are the last cantos in which order is restored; so that the whole epic is centred, as I have said, on Odysseus' self-narration in which he appears as a protagonist and his superiority emerges even over his own men, who are destroyed by their own foolishness in the course of their exposure to the monstrous surroundings before reaching home.

If we turn to the framework of the Sinbad story we find that it is made up of seven narrative parts corresponding to the seven voyages, and it is enclosed in a framework provided by the modest listener called Sinbad the Landlubber (sometimes translated the Porter, in any case the word signifies that he is somebody who sticks to the land; he is the non-sailor). And Sinbad the non-Sailor provides Sinbad the Sailor with an audience. It is Sinbad the Landlubber, the non-Sailor, who laments about inequality in front of the rich house of Sinbad the Sailor, and who provokes the latter to recount the hardships which led to the acquisition of his wealth. Both Sinbads have the same name and the same humanity, although one is rich and the other poor; one gives and the other receives hospitality; one narrates and the other listens. They are united precisely by the communication of the (moralistic) narrative. In the fourth voyage Sinbad the Sailor tells Sinbad the Landlubber (the non-Sailor): 'Be not abashed, you have become my brother now.' This relation between the two Sinbads binds the seven stories into a coherent whole.

But even the stronger personality of the Sailor does not dominate the action any more than that of the Landlubber. There is hardly a protagonist. Sinbad the Sailor is hardly a 'character' in the sense that Odysseus is. Sinbad is courageous, and shows some of the wiliness of Odysseus, but, on the whole, he is defensive, he will not harm anyone if he can avoid it. Only when he is buried alive, in the climatic adventure of the fourth voyage, does he act savagely. This restrained

mode of behaviour tallies with the philosophy of life he expresses which is opposed to the protagonism of Odysseus; it expresses typical Muslim piety, resignation to the will of Allah, a hope in divine mercy that is never disappointed, praise to God for all the 'wonders' he experiences in his voyages. The initial urge to travel, as we shall see, is the profit-motive; but soon this yields place to a deeper urge, which is just to *see* the wonders of the world – and, when calamities befall him, he bemoans his 'curiosity' – but it proves irresistible time and time again. It is essentially the desire to see the wonders of God's creation which prompts him to set sail again.

I have so far tried to emphasize the importance of the narrative function, and already the way in which the narrative structure of the two stories is arranged begins to express the basic difference between the world-visions which the two epics expound. Basically, in the first epic, the story of Odysseus, there is the view that despite the chaotic experiences to which he is exposed, there is in the world itself, in the present world, a fixed and stable nature, return to which is salvation, while despite the outwardly more peaceful impression which Sinbad gives, the implication is of a deeper instability in the present earth and that the only fixed and stable point is outside the present earth: it is Heaven, it is Supernature; it is a view of the after-life which implies not the shadowy existence of the mind, the immortality of the soul, but which implies the resurrection of the body: which implies a home in which man as a whole, body and mind, will survive, identified as his real home. This difference in the concept of Nature and Supernature is the basic difference between the two archetypal figures which I have chosen to consider.

Having first considered the implication suggested by the difference in the narrative structure of the two stories, I want to pass on to my second point which is the consideration of precisely the mobility/stability duality, which is the main theme of the two stories: the use of the image of travelling and its relation to story-telling in order to bring out what Man is.

Very obviously, the key paradox of the human condition as represented by Odysseus, and as taken up by Sinbad, is the dialectical tension between the urge to mobility, to change, and hence to travel on the one hand, and the yearning for stability (or home) on the other. Travelling is, indeed, one of the most characterizing features of human existence: travelling with a home-destination. On the one hand, travelling is a basic mark of the *animality* of man. Mobility, no less than sleep and nutrition, are among the biological needs of animal existence. In the least-developed species of animals, the ability to move is most limited; but it increases as one ascends the ladder of evolution. The marvels of the migrations of birds across continents and fish across the oceans are well known, if so far little understood.

There is a perspective within which human travelling can be seen to be in continuity with these physical and biological developments. Geographers have compared the movements of prehistoric man to the natural dispersion of animal and even vegetal species across the surface of the earth. Demographers have noted that human mobility is possible because of man's biological capacity to adapt himself to life in most geographical milieux.

Interesting hypotheses have been formulated about the journeys of the most primitive men. The material conditions of life in the Stone Age did not allow cavemen to stick to their caves. The silicious stones, which were his only tools, were not to be found everywhere. The traces which our first ancestors have left outline the routes followed in search of appropriate raw materials – silex, bronze, ivory, amber, gold, rare shells – over the surface of the earth.

On the other hand, human habits of travelling differentiate man from other animals. Just as Man has transformed nutrition into gastronomy, sexual activity into marriage and love, gregariousness into politics, stones into statues, noise into music, so he has transformed travelling into an art.

Man, the weak, terrestrial biped – because of his ability to transform material objects into tools and signs, media of production and communication – lacking the fins of fish, invented boats, and, lacking the wings of birds, invented aircraft. It took him millennia, but eventually he accomplished the old dream of Icarus and walked on the moon. Likewise, he has plumbed the abysses of the ocean and the deep crevices of the earth.

Thus, while on the one hand Man on a journey is an animal submitting himself to the necessities of nature, on the other hand he is also engaged in sublimating this animal function, by reading into it the call to transcend himself; and he has often understood this to be a divine call. Thus, on the one hand man became a sailor; on the other hand, the sailor also became a story-teller. Man narrates his voyages. In the course of this narration, he reflects not only on the history of his species, but also on the significance and purpose, if any, of his existence. The point of the narrative is that it does not leave mobility to be a meaningless satisfaction of a biological need but it shows it to be teleological, to have a destination and a purpose. The sailor's stories can therefore be seen to have two main dimensions. In the first place, the literature of voyages has always more or less reflected the history of voyages. And this is partly the interest of works like those of modern voyagers who have retraced the voyages of fictional heroes, such as Odysseus or Sinbad. The historical context is essential to the meaning, as I shall continue to emphasize as I go on, but the second and perhaps greater, although dependent, interest resides in the reflective themes that are intertwined with the historical references to make of the travel stories contrasting meditations on the human condition.

Indeed the power of these stories is related to their *mythical* quality. By 'mythical', I mean a story which narrates events that have the power to transcend time and so, in a sense, express some permanent-looking structures of human experience through the narratives of time-bound experiences. Odysseus and Sinbad, in fact, illustrate the two main aspects of the human journey. On the one hand, in the case of Odysseus, the dominant feeling at the core of the human heart is seen to be that of a nostalgia for a stable home. On the other hand, Sinbad's main theme is the restlessness of the human heart, eager to seek marvels and meetings with the extraordinary. Here, however, in the case of Sinbad, man feels himself to be in exile, not when he is travelling abroad but rather as long as he is locked in a humdrum and banal existential routine. But in the two main types of travel-stories, the journey gives birth to a literary work precisely because of its anchorage to a fixed point, to a 'home' where the voyager can feel free to 'exhibit' himself as he really is. Basically the traveller's tale is about the human 'home', the human destination, but where that really is turns out to be located differently for travellers at different times and places, and with different philosophies.

A first explanation, in fact, of the contrast between Odysseus and Sinbad stems from the historical and the geographical location of their different voyages. Odysseus belongs to the ancient world, Sinbad to the medieval. It is typical of most ancient travel stories that in them man rarely consoles himself when travelling by imagining a welcoming new country.

His thoughts are fed and his writing instinct is stimulated rather by the hope of returning from exile to his native land, a return to the origin, and it is this hope of a return to a lost golden age or state which inspires the beauty of his tale. The wanderings are always less important than the evocation of the distant fireplace. The charm of foreign lands is discounted by demistification, as we saw even the charm of the afterworld, and the end of the voyage is the cause of celebration.

On the contrary, medieval stories, like the Sinbad story, reflect a different context. The situation is now no longer one in which man is essentially a hunter or a farmer, as Mediterranean men were in the Homeric and indeed in the ancient age where their life was essentially bound by a very limited spatial context, bound to the earth which was the only source of food and riches. On the contrary in the medieval Mediterranean world, we are in a world in which trade, commerce, has become the paramount factor in the material conditions of life.

The classical Mediterranean world undoubtedly owes its prosperity to the unique geographical feature which is the Mediterranean Sea, the only large inland sea existing on the surface of the earth. It was this lake in the middle of the Mediterranean lands which explains the extraordinary radiance of classical

civilization. It was this sea which made possible rapid and cheap communication between its parts. One has only to remember that it cost less to transport wheat from Egypt to Rome by sea than to transport that same wheat from the port of Ostia to Rome, a short distance of about twenty miles.

Essentially, the classical world was an enclosed world with bounds which were impassable to the people of their age: the deserts and the mountains to the South and to the North respectively. The prosperity, on the contrary, of the medieval world was due to the fact that it had become a communication link between two different worlds: North-Western feudal Europe, especially because of its production of wool, and the Far East, India and China, with their production of silk and spices. Both the European Mediterranean nations and the Muslim nations built their economic fortunes, which allowed the cultural flourishing of both civilizations, on their functioning as links, as traders, as sailors and also land-travellers, between these two worlds.

So in this perspective, the sailor called Sinbad, unlike the sailor who was Odysseus, does not travel in the Mediterranean; he travels on the other side, in the Indian Ocean. His travels are not a circulatory punishment preventing him from reaching home but are undertaken precisely to establish a communication link with a distant, outside world; and by functioning as this communicating link establishing both his material and his spiritual greatness.

There is a symmetry in the structure of the Sinbad stories which is reflected in its ethics. It is true that there is no gain without pain (Sinbad the Sailor's wealth has not been gained without hardship), but equally there is no pain without gain (the sailor's hardship always and amply lead to financial reward). But this second maxim is held to be true, apparently, by implication in the story only in the world of maritime trade. Here, the Arabs had created a credit system and a reliability of the market that contrasted very favourably with the absence of organized 'banking' and the untrustworthiness of the land-based trading system. 'Sinbad the Sailor' is a hymn to the beauty of overseas commerce – which bathes the visited countries themselves in an aura of honesty and generosity. The dangers faced by Sinbad are caused by physical nature, by natural elements, but not by humans, unlike those of Odysseus. So we have here a reflection in this different concept of the voyage which is clearly related to the difference in historical circumstances. Odysseus' considerations of his troubles as impediments on the way to his reaching home are an expression of the human condition in a world in which hunting and agriculture dominate, that is in which there is a bond tying man to a particular spot on earth. The attitude of Sinbad, which regards staying at home a condemnation to a humdrum and banal existence and travelling as the exposure of man to the opportunities of widening his experience, of accumulating wealth, of growing beyond himself, is the reflection of the civilization which has

established not just trade but cross-cultural exchange in both material and intellectual goods as the basic structure of its economic and material wealth.

This change is also reflected in different attitudes to the sea itself. In the *Odyssey*, as is well known, the great enemy of Odysseus is Poseidon, the god of the sea. This hostility of the Sea-god is attributed to Odysseus' having blinded the son of Poseidon, Polyphemus – i.e. to his having literally taken the light out of the monstrous son of Chaos. The Sea is the obvious symbol of mobility, of the changefulness which is the opposite pole to the stability of home that is Odysseus' lodestar.

On the contrary, for Sinbad, the sea is the positive stimulant out of the rut of the landlubber. Again here we have an expression of the difference between the seas in question: on one hand the Mediterranean – in the classical world, an enclosed sea – on the other hand the Indian Ocean – an open sea, a link to another world. Thus, I think, the difference in the historical location and in the geographical location of the journey goes a good deal to showing how the historical and spatial contextualization contributes to the establishment of the meaning not only of travelling as such but also of human life conceived as a journey; as a journey the end of which is either return to a home on earth or the anticipation in this world of a home in another world, in a supernatural world, i.e. in a world which is the transfiguration, the transcendence, of our present world and also of our present nature. A view of life which is quite absent from the classical, pagan view but which is, of course, dominant in the biblical, Jewish, Christian, and Muslim view of life.

I have so far looked very rapidly over three aspects of Odysseus in contrast with Sinbad: his function as a narrator, as a traveller in a particular space-time context, as an existential philosopher. I want now in order to conclude, to go briefly over these three aspects from a present-day perspective.

It has been (I think rightly) said that Muslim philosophy is essentially Greek philosophy carried over into the Arabic language. I think it can be said with some exaggeration that the Sinbad stories are the *Odyssey* carried over into a Muslim context.

Let us look, for instance, quickly at the Sinbad story which is most clearly a version of an *Odyssey* episode. (It is the story told during the 551st night of the *Elf lajla u wahda*.)² Sinbad's vessel was shipwrecked, and with some of his companions Sinbad manages to reach a strange island. Here, they are taken over by a king and his naked subjects who first stupefy their captives with food and drink, and then they kill and eat them – raw. What is most striking in this episode, as George Sarton has observed,³ is not so much the cannibalism, but the

2. In the so-called Second Calcutta Arabic edition (1839–42).

3. George Sarton, 'A story from the Arabian Nights', in *Isis*, XXVIII (1938), 325–6.

stupefaction of the captives, and their degradation from the status of individual human beings into a cattle-like condition.

Sarton went on to note the obvious parallelism with notorious events in modern history – in supposedly civilized countries – where also human beings have been reduced by various techniques of conditioning – not excluding drugs – into ‘cells of a larger and fiendish entity’ – the totalitarian state which Hobbes labelled with the name of the mythical Biblical, marine monster, Leviathan.

This consideration, in both the *Odyssey* and Sinbad, of monstrosity represented not only by features such as cannibalism but especially by mind-conditioning, is, as is well-known, frequent. It occurs in at least three of the main episodes of the *Odyssey* where it is the human mind or the human memory which is affected in order to lead to the destruction of the body. But the difference between the two is that, while there is an implicit dualism in the Greek picture, that is the body is seen as not really representing the human being which on the contrary is represented by the mind or the spirit, in the Muslim story there is a unitary picture of man by which man is seen as a whole being, essentially a body which has a mind. This different concept of man as a thinking animal rather than as a ghost imprisoned in an animal shape is still linked to the different view of the after-life which, as I tried to show at the beginning, explains the different narrative framework adopted in the *Odyssey* on the one hand and in the Sinbad stories on the other. The concept of the after-life, in the first, Greek, case, is essentially one of the immortality of the soul, of shadowy, purely spiritual, mental survival; in the Sinbad story, the view of the after-life is of man’s eventual home after death being one in which it is the whole man, a body which has a mind, that enjoys life, indeed a super-life, precisely because the human being can identify himself with his own resurrected self, in a way in which the Greek hero could not identify himself with the shades, with the shadows, with the ghosts whom he encounters in the *Nekya*. This different concept of man, dualistic or monistic, in however qualified a way, is, I think, the most basic difference between the two stories. It is the difference in the definition of Man.

In the second place, I considered the interpretation of travelling in the two stories related to these two concepts of the ultimate human home as the teleological dimension which story-telling gave to travelling.

Today we are living in an age of tourism. Never have human beings travelled as much, for a large variety of reasons, from exile and emigration to exploration and enjoyment, than in our age. And in this massive touristic movement, of course, the Mediterranean occupies a special place, precisely because of its historic heritage as well as of its environmental characteristics. I stressed in this context how the dominance of first hunting and then an agricultural civilization conditioned the experience and the interpretation of human habitation, and how this changed

when commerce and trade became more important in the Mediterranean context.

In the subsequent phase of the history of Mediterranean civilization, that is the industrial phase, the Mediterranean went into a period of eclipse in comparison with its centrality and flourishing in both the Ancient agricultural age and the Medieval commercial age. The importance of the development of the tertiary sector and especially of media of communication, both in the sense of transport and of the transfer of information are precisely the historical conditions which are at the present moment, I think, creating the conditions for the Mediterranean to reassume an advanced position in the progressive history of civilization. Thirdly, this position will only be ensured if the mere physical travelling and the physical transfer of information is coupled with that reflexive ability, the doubling-up ability, which the inhabitants of the *Nekya* recognized as Odysseus' greatest quality: the ability to interpret the significance of these material and physical developments in a teleological perspective, that is in relation to the questions about the purpose, the why and the wherefore of human existence, with its paradox of constant mobility and yearning for a stable fixed point, an end and goal which would give meaning to the mobility.

In this search, I think that the first aspect which I considered, that is the story-telling aspect, is something which needs reevaluation. It was an illusion began by Aristotle that mythical explanations, that is explanations in terms of stories, narratives of events which were contingent, which happened the way they did but might have happened in a different and other way, explanations which leave room for free decisions by the individual, although they are necessarily taken within a conditioning framework of natural laws, are completely replaceable by scientific explanations, that is in language which describes happenings exclusively as determined by natural and universal laws. I think that recovering awareness of the irreplaceable value of myth, of story-telling, of narrative, as the only kind of language which can bring out one essential aspect of human existence, that is its range, however narrow, of freedom, is a necessity. The telling of mythical stories is complementary to the scientific and technological pursuits which create the material basis for the exercise of human freedom in the cosmic context.

I think that the re-evaluation of this humanistic heritage of the Mediterranean, its literary and artistic heritage, its wealth of symbolic resources, is a task of equal importance as the development of the scientific and technological language which it is absolutely necessary that we also acquire. It can still be a singular contribution which the Mediterranean world can make to world civilization today.