

Athena and the Paradigm of the Teacher

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WE BEGIN this Principals' Institute with a look at the teacher in a divine light. Who better than Athena herself could manifest those characteristics that have in the past elevated the teacher to the highest level in the human understanding of a true hierarchy? According to an ancient Greek myth, Athena's mother was Metis, whose name means counsel. When Zeus swallowed the pregnant Metis in fear that, if she bore a son, that child would depose him, he absorbed her qualities and, all unknowing, continued in his own head the pregnancy. Athena's birth in full armor from Zeus' head emphasizes her association with Metis as well as with her father's powerful intellect. As Aeschylus tells us in the *Eumenides*, only she knows where Zeus' thunder-bolts are kept. And in her temple burns the sacred fire which Prometheus stole for mortals, thereby saving them from destruction. In peace and war, she provides wise counsel, the kind of counsel that issues in right decisions and proper conduct. Like Prometheus, she educates human beings and thereby elevates them to godlike states.

Walter Otto has written that what Athena most inspires is the will to victory, courage, and above all "directing reason

and illuminating clarity." It is these qualities that are, he continues, "the true fountainheads of worthy deeds," complementing the character of this goddess of victory:

This light of hers illumines not alone the warrior in battle: wherever in a life of action and heroism great things must be wrought, perfected and struggled for, there Athena is present. Broad indeed is the spirit of a battle-loving people when it recognizes the same perfection wherever a clear and intelligent glance shows the path to achievement, and when no mere maid of battle can be adequate. . . . She is the ever-near whose word and whose lightning glance encounter the hero of the right moment and summon him to his most intelligent and manly prowess. (*The Homeric Gods*)

Staring into her bright grey eyes, heroes are startled into recognition, stopped in mid-action, or spurred to glory. In the *Iliad*, Athena demonstrates her authority as goddess and teacher; her flashing glance serves a profound tutelary function. When, for instance, at the very beginning of the epic Achilles intends to kill Agamemnon over a violation of his honor, the goddess catches him "by the fair hair":

Achilleus in amazement turned about, and straightway knew Pallas Athena and the terrible eyes shining. He uttered winged words and addressed her: "Why have you come now, O child of Zeus of the Aegis, once more? Is it that you may see the outrageousness of the son of Atreus, Agamemnon? Yet will I tell you this thing, and I think it shall be accomplished. By such acts of arrogance he may lose his own life."

Nonetheless Athena's admonition to hold his hand stops Achilles cold: he admits that it is necessary to obey the goddess. "So it will be better. / If any man obeys the gods, they listen to him also."

One of the characteristics of the paradigmatic teachers to be found in the works we are studying is that they intervene, taking direct action to inspire and to instruct. Their teachings are often difficult, so that they make their pupils uncomfortable-

able. The very word *mentor*, in fact, which is synonymous with teacher as advisor or guide or inspiration, comes from Homer's second epic, the *Odyssey*. The *Odyssey* is, on an important level, about the education of the young. For this reason, its first four books are known as the Telemachy, since their primary theme is the development of Telemachos, Odysseus' son, as he comes into manhood. This part of the epic shows us a youth who has grown up without a father's guidance. In this sense, Telemachos has much in common with many modern students, who have come from single-parent homes. Odysseus had left for the Trojan war when Telemachos was an infant, and, nineteen years later (when the epic narrative begins), the father has yet to return home. The father's absence is symptomatic of a deep cultural crisis. Without a heroic ruler, lawless and riotous men in the community have encroached on Odysseus' palace, feasting and carrying on disreputably at the expense of the estate. They put increasing pressure on Penelope, the wife, to accept the death of Odysseus and choose one of them as husband, thereby taking the patrimony away from the young heir. Similarly, we could say, speaking analogically, the heritage of our own nation's youth is jeopardized by a violence and lawlessness in an environment providing few guideposts to that adult world in which it is possible to take charge of one's own destiny. At such moments of crisis, the figure of the teacher emerges, like a god in disguise, to provide a direction which absent father and captive mother cannot bestow.

In a notable speech about human freedom and its consequences, Zeus makes clear at the beginning of the epic the problem Telemachos faces in its universal applications:

Oh for shame, how the mortals put the blame upon us
gods, for they say evils come from us, but it is they, rather,
who by their own recklessness win sorrow beyond what is given,
as now lately, beyond what was given, Aigisthos married
the wife of Atreus' son and murdered him on his homecoming,

though he knew it was sheer destruction, for we ourselves had told
him.

Zeus is referring here to Aigisthos' murder of Agamemnon, which will be avenged by Orestes, the faithful son who, having come of sufficient age to understand the crime done his father, took action to right that wrong. Evils come about, Zeus implies, through human recklessness, which produces its own consequences. The responsible exercise of freedom is most fully developed through the kind of education that allows the imagination to grasp the fullness of the world and the chain of cause and effect that the smallest movement unleashes. Homer gives the education of Telemachos so much importance in the first four books of this epic because it illustrates Zeus' point in this opening speech.

Athena herself, the goddess of wisdom, takes matters into her own hands in bringing about Odysseus' homecoming and Telemachos' leadership in the father's absence, so that the son can greet his long-lost father as a young hero in his own right. In Zeus' assembly in Book 1, Athena reveals that Telemachos' development is as important to her as Odysseus' homecoming. Being Odysseus' son requires more than a passive acceptance of the father's glory; it mandates a course of action that will ensure a future worthy of the past. As Athena comments to Zeus:

But I shall make my way to Ithaka, so that I may
stir up his son a little, and put some confidence in him
to summon into assembly the flowing-haired Achaians
and make a statement to all the suitors, who now forever
slaughter his crowding sheep and lumbering horn-curved cattle;
and I will convey him into Sparta and to sandy Pylos
to ask after his dear father's homecoming, if he can hear something,
and so that among people he may win a good reputation.

That desire to "ask after his dear father's homecoming . . . so that among people he may win a good reputation" is charac-

teristic of Athena as teacher. She is the goddess of wisdom and knows that one must be a seeker, not a mere passive receiver. But she also understands that without inspiration few human beings can find their way—or even start to look for it. Homer's first image of Telemachos suggests the perennial posture of the student in a chaotic world: He sees Athena in her first disguise, not as Mentor but as Mentès, the Taphian warrior, coming toward the disorderly feasting hall:

Now far the first to see Athene was godlike Telemachos,
as he sat among the suitors, his heart deep grieving within him,
imagining in his mind his great father, how he might come back
and all throughout the house might cause the suitors to scatter
and hold his rightful place and be lord of his own possessions.

Telemachos' boyish daydream is typical of the lack of a sense of destiny from which, by and large, most young people suffer. He yearns for someone else, in this case the lost father, to come home and make everything right. It is the job of Athena the teacher to help him see his own place in the scheme of things.

In her initial conversation with Telemachos, Athena in part achieves her aim by letting the boy know that he resembles his father:

Are you, big as you are, the very child of Odysseus?
Indeed, you are strangely like him about the head, the fine eyes
as I remember; we used to meet so often together
before he went away to Troy.

This recognition by the teacher of the potential for greatness in a young person is essential to the transformative function of both teaching and learning. Although at first Telemachos can only respond,

My mother says I am indeed his; I for my part do not know.
Nobody really knows his own father.
But how I wish I could have rather been son to some fortunate
man, whom old age overlooked among his possessions.

But of mortal men, that man has proved the most ill-fated
Whose son they say I am.

To know one's own father is to be part of the continuum of the human race and to see one's place in its future. The youthful daydream of deliverance by someone else has to be replaced by a vision that requires action and volition. Telemachos' description of his position in his father's house suggests the passivity that Athena must conquer:

there was a time this house was one that might be prosperous
and above reproach, when a certain man was here in his country.
But now the gods, with evil intention, have willed it otherwise,
and they have caused him to disappear, in a way no other man has
done.

He would not have grieved so over losing his father, Telemachos maintains, if Odysseus had been killed in the Trojan War, or afterward. He would then have been a war hero, and would have won honors for himself and his son. "But now ingloriously the stormwinds have caught and carried him away," Telemachos laments, "out of sight, out of knowledge," leaving only pain and grief to his son.

Athena makes the young man see that he can take steps himself, that "clinging to his childhood" or blaming the gods for his trouble is no excuse for inaction. She tells him to call the islanders to assembly and "publish your word to all, let the gods be your witnesses." She suggests a direction for him that is tantamount to that quest for knowledge toward which every teacher steers the student: "Fit out a ship, with twenty oars, the best you can come by / and go out to ask about your father, who is so long absent." She tells him to go to Pylos, where he should question Nestor, and to Sparta to talk with Menelaos. If he hears that his father is still alive, he should hold out for another year; but if Odysseus is reported dead, then Telemachos should come home to Ithaka, "pile up a tomb in his

honor," and give his mother to a husband, planning a way in which he can kill the suitors.

It is important to our notion of teacherhood that a divinity seems to be at the source of the kind of inspiration the teacher provides. The goddess speaks through the human form and encourages the young man to be heroic, like Orestes, and to be eloquent in spite of feelings of inadequacy. At the end of this first encounter with the son of Odysseus, Athena leaves Telemachos "like a bird soaring high in the air." But she has engendered in his spirit "determination and courage" and caused him to remember his father "even more than he had before." For the first time, he speaks out with his own authority, an inner strength that the great teacher has awakened in him. He even talks back to his mother, who asks the minstrel Phemios not to sing of Odysseus. Telemachos has come to learn that it is good to hear even that which is painful. He is far removed from the daydream of his uneducated self and is beginning to move toward genuine understanding. The suitors are shocked at his rebuke of their rudeness and demonstrate that truth does not always win universal acclaim for its speaker:

"Telemachos, surely it must be the very gods who prompt you to take the imperious line and speak so daringly to us.
I hope the son of Kronos never makes you our king in seagirt Ithaka. Though to be sure that is your right by inheritance."

Telemachos' insistence that he only wants to rule in his own house does not assuage their discomfort at this manifestation of character; the gang of suitors must look at themselves in contrast to Telemachos, and they wish simply to be rid of the reminder of anything finer than themselves. But Telemachos' transformation is an ongoing process once Athena has set it in motion. After he goes to bed that night, he continues to take into his imagination what he has heard from Athena in that brief conversation: "There, all night long, wrapped in a soft

sheepskin, he pondered / in his heart the journey that Pallas Athene had counseled." In that state of imagination represented by sleep, he changes even further:

Now when the young Dawn showed again with her rosy fingers,
the dear son of Odysseus stirred from where he was sleeping
and put on his clothes, and slung a sharp sword over his shoulder.
Underneath his shining feet he bound the fair sandals
and went on his way from the chamber, like a god in presence.

The boy who had not known, except by his mother's word for it, who his father was becomes the "true son." This son has a courage and imagination of which the unawakened and unenlightened boy could hardly have dreamed. He can summon the assembly, which no one has called since Odysseus' departure. It is the gift of Athena, we are told, that lavishes "an enchantment of grace upon him, / and all the people had their eyes on him as he came forward. / He sat in his father's seat, and the elders made way before him." But Ithaka's troubles are not yet over. Though "pity holds all the people," no one has the nerve to stand up against the forces of chaos represented by the suitors. The hero must take his sustenance not from them but from the teacher. Mentor rebukes the city for this conduct:

Now it is not so much the proud suitors I resent
for doing their violent acts by their minds' evil devising;
for they lay their heads on the line when violently they eat up
the house of Odysseus, who, they say to themselves, will not come
back;
but now I hold it against you other people, how you all
sit there in silence, and never with an assault of words try
to check the suitors, though they are so few, and you so many.

It is through Athena's tutelage that Telemachos develops his full potential so that old friends of his father comment when he comes to their courts seeking news of him that he resembles the older hero in every aspect of his character. First

Athena inspires him to think imaginatively about the pursuit of knowledge so that he will not set out blindly. In contrast, it is the suitors' failure to recognize the prophecy of Halietherses, to take in imaginatively the outward signs around them, that foreshadows very early in the epic their doom. They feel that they have nothing and no reason to learn.

In such a world, where lessons remain unlearned, Mentor can prophesy a bad rule:

Hear me now, men of Ithaka, what I have to tell you.
No longer now let one who is a sceptered king be eager
to be gentle and kind, be one whose thought is schooled in justice,
but let him always rather be harsh, and act severely,
seeing the way no one of the people he was lord over
remembers godlike Odysseus, and he was kind, like a father.

This statement suggests that none of these young people, symbolically speaking, remembers his father. As Athena, now disguised as Mentor suggests to Telemachos, "But if you are not the seed begotten of him and Penelope, / I have no hope that you will accomplish all that you strive for. / For few are the children who turn out to be equals of their fathers, / and the greater number are worse; few are better than their father is." But since, as she says, "the mind of Odysseus has not altogether given out in you, / there is some hope that you can bring all these things to fulfillment." She takes the place as teacher of the absent father—"such a companion am I to you, as of your father."

The pupil follows in the footsteps of a god when he embarks on his curriculum: "she led the way swiftly, and the man followed behind her walking in the god's footsteps." She "encourages" him in all the early stages of his learning. When he protests that he has "no experience in close discourse," an essential element if there ever was one, she responds: "Telemachos, some of it you yourself will see in your own heart, / and some the divinity will put in your mind. I do not /

think you could have been born and reared without the gods' will."

At Nestor's palace in Pylos, Telemachos begins truly to learn who his father is and what his patrimony means, not simply its measure in property. Nestor lets the youth know something of the dead heroes lost at Troy—Achilles, Aias, Patroklos, his own son Antilochos. And he tells him of the "cunning" of his own great father, pointing to the resemblance the boy bears to this hero so that internal recognition can begin to grow in him. He also gives Telemachos, who does not yet understand the analogy, the pattern for the future in the past by recounting the blasphemy of the Achaians, whom the gods had favored and who because of their sacrilege against Athena lost the right to a happy homecoming:

"But after we had sacked the sheer citadel of Priam
and were going away in our ships, and the god scattered the Achaians,
then Zeus in his mind devised a sorry homecoming
for the Argives, since not all were considerate nor righteous;
therefore many of them found a bad way home, because of
the ruinous anger of the Gray-eyed One, whose father is mighty.
It was she who made a quarrel between the two sons of Atreus."

Telemachos will learn even from this bad example, a mistake he will not repeat in his own life—for he has gone beyond private experience in this realm of learning by analogy. The Agamemnon story, throughout the epic, is repeated to Telemachos and to Odysseus as a reminder of the disastrous ends that await those untutored in prophecy and reverence to the sacred powers.

At Sparta, the teacher removes herself from Telemachos' side, symbolically suggesting that the purpose of teaching is to turn the pupil into a master. Here, amidst the wedding feast of Menelaos' daughter Hermione to the son of Achilles and of his son to a worthy bride—suggesting the continuation of culture in the next generation—Telemachos will learn from the principals of the Trojan War, Menelaos and Helen, of his

father and of the conflict. This curriculum, too, we might say is a course in property and world culture.

Menelaos protests at Telemachos' compliment that his palace is like that on Olympos: "So it is with no pleasure I am lord over all these possessions / . . . I wish I lived in my house with only a third part of all / these goods, and that the men were alive who died in those days / in wide Troy land far away from horse-pasturing Argos." Throughout this interlude with Menelaos and Helen runs the motif of Egypt. Helen is surrounded by the precious gifts bestowed by Egyptians. The drug she gives Telemachos, which will allow him to learn without weeping, came from there:

Such were
the subtle medicines Zeus' daughter had in her possessions,
good things, and given to her by the wife of Thon, Polydamna
of Egypt, where the fertile earth produces the greatest number
of medicines, many good in mixture, many malignant,
and every man is a doctor there and more understanding than men
elsewhere.

Herodotus in his history commented that all of the gods of Greece came from Egypt. And, indeed, Homer's emphasis on the wisdom of those learned Egyptians suggests the inclusivity of the Greek mind, able to admire and assimilate from other cultures.

Indeed Menelaos gives Telemachos the benefit of his own encounter with the "ever-truthful" Old Man of the Sea: "This is the Egyptian, immortal Proteus, / and he knows all the depths of the sea." This story of Menelaos' help by the foreign god's daughter to lay hold on the god of truth provides an important paradigm for learning. One must first grasp at truth which appears ever-changing—as a lion, for instance, or a leopard, or water. Once Proteus stands in his own shape, however, the hero must let go and be receptive to what he will say. Homer seems to suggest that submission, as well as skill, is essential in the struggle for truth—which must finally

reveal itself. Menelaos' docility is rewarded by answers and also by a prophecy of what awaits him when he returns home. He also learns of Odysseus' sojourn on Kalypso's isle. Like Menelaos, Odysseus is another docile student who will be rewarded with a good homecoming. Both heroes are promised a good end. Menelaos will go to Elysian Fields at the end of his long life, and, as we later learn, Odysseus will have a peaceful death from the sea, not the brutal end of the intrac-table Agamemnon. But as the Egyptian god tells Menelaos, he must first go back to Egypt and make the proper sacrifices to the gods, propitiating all the deities, before he can return home. And Odysseus, too, will have to make another journey after his homecoming to make peace with Poseidon, the one god whom he failed to revere, the one aspect of being he failed to learn properly to honor.

This course is a liberal one for Telemachos, one that does not appear immediately relevant to the task at hand, yet which forms the patterns in his own imagination that will allow him the flexibility of judgment in any situation to use ingenuity and clear-sightedness. And Athena oversees it all. The teacher has always been more than a parent figure to the young. Fathers and mothers in our own society have often been expected to bear the most important burdens in the education of their offspring. Yet, as the *Odyssey* shows us, the teacher seems to bring out the best qualities of the parents in the children. As Mentor, Athena answers Telemachos' prayer for guidance from the gods: "You'll never be fainthearted or a fool, Telemachos, if you have your father's spirit; he finished what he cared to say, and what he took in hand he brought to pass." The teacher does not encourage, as often parents do, mere imitation, but instead the spirit that engenders rather than copies. For the teacher's job is to bring out, to lead forth—as the root of the word *education* suggests—inner resources in the student's responding to situations or objects of contemplation. Athena's long relationship with Odysseus

shows her preference for the kind of imagination that ultimately liberates by rendering the person capable of survival in the most difficult of situations. Too often educational theorists have emphasized only the element of self-expression without regard for the external validity of what the student expresses. But the Athena/Telemachos model shows that inner resources are never developed properly unless they are discovered in the process of coming to terms with a reality outside the self. Telemachos must confront a situation that is potentially life-threatening: the plot of Penelope's suitors to ambush him as he returns from his travels. Thus his encounter with the goddess of wisdom and instruction entails for him not only a dangerous journey to Pylos and Sparta, but, on his return, a fierce battle at the side of his father to expel the suitors, against all odds. For Telemachos, learning is a matter of life and death. That is why the tendency in modern education to place the teacher in the role of a mere arbiter of opinions, one of which is as good as another, militates against a student's ever learning the difference between good and bad judgment. Of course, I am not suggesting that a teacher should dismiss judgments summarily, but, instead, should act, as Athena did, as a guide helping the pupil to see imaginatively and thereby to recognize the difference between mere opinion and judgments that can stand up to the test of reality.

When the teacher ceased to be regarded as a vessel of wisdom and model of judgment, the profession lost its substance. As education relinquished its immediate value as a means of self-preservation in a complicated and sometimes hostile environment, the role of the teacher began to seem less critical than in the past. Hence, society began to place less value on the content of the teacher's mind and imagination and more on the gratification of the pupil and the development of skills for which there appeared no demonstrably earth-shaking importance. Russell Kirk once wrote that men read and write only because there is something worth reading

and writing about. He knew that literacy alone was not enough to keep a culture alive and that the old verities of which Faulkner spoke in his Nobel Prize Address were far more important than learning to form letters or read words. When the teacher opens the student's mind and imagination to that great world of the best that has been known or thought or made, those intellectual and imaginative skills become comfortably associated with an encompassing desire to form letters and read words that can shape the destiny of civilization as well as private lives.