

Examens écrits session 2- semestre 1 - 2022-2023

Langue : anglais	Niveau : N6	Durée : 1h30
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It is not for nothing that, in the original Greek, the first word in the first line of the twelve thousand one hundred and ten that make up the *Odyssey* is *andra*: “man”. The epic begins with the story of Odysseus' son, a youth in search of his long-lost father, the hero of the poem; it then focuses on the hero himself, first as he recalls the fabulous adventures he has experienced after leaving Troy, then as he struggles to return home, where he will reclaim his identity as father, husband, and king, taking terrible vengeance on the Suitors who tried to woo his wife and usurp his home and realm; then, in its final book, it gives us a vision of what “a man” might look like once his life's adventures are over: the hero's elderly father, the last person with whom Odysseus is reunited, now a decrepit old man alone in his orchard, tired of life. The boy, the man, the ancient, the three ages of man. Which is to say that, among the journeys that this poem charts, there is, too, a man's journey through life, from birth to death. How do you get there? What is the journey like? And how do you tell the story of it?

The answers are deeply connected with Odysseus' own nature. The first adjective used to describe the man with whom the poem begins – *polytropos*. The literal meaning of this word is “of many turns”: *poly* means “many”, and a *tropos* is a “turning”. English words containing the element *-trope* are derived, ultimately, from *tropos*. “Heliotrope,” for instance, is a flower that turns toward the sun. “Apotropaic,” to take a less cheery example, is an adjective that means “turning away evil”: it is used of superstitious rites that are intended to avert bad luck – such as the custom, common among eastern European Jews of my grandparents' era, of tying a red ribbon around the wrists of an infant in order to keep the Evil Eye away. *Oh, my mother loved you so much*, my mother will occasionally say to me, even now, *when she took you to the park she would tie a red ribbon around your wrist!* And then she'll cluck her tongue sadly, *tskkk*, and sigh. The anecdote, I am aware, is not just about my grandmother's great devotion to me: her deep emotion in this story is meant to stand in contrast to the relative lack of interest in me shown by my father's parents, who didn't meet me until I was two years old as the result of one of the grim silences that occasionally arose between my father and his brothers and his parents.

It is difficult to resist the notion that there is something suggestive, programmatic, about making this particular adjective, “of many turns”, the first modifier in the first line of a twelve-thousand-line poem about a journey home. Odysseus, we know, is a tricky character, famed for his shady dealings and evasions and lies and above all his sly way with words; he is, after all, the man who dreamed up the Trojan Horse, a disguise that was also an ambush. So in one sense *polytropos* is figurative : this is a poem about someone whose mind has many turns, many twists, not all of them strictly legitimate. And yet there is a plainer sense of *polytropos*. For “of many turns” also refers to the shape of the hero's motion through space: he is the man who gets to where he is going by traveling in circles. In more than one of his adventures, he leaves a place only to return to it, sometimes inadvertently. And then of course, there is the biggest circle of all, the one that brings him back to Ithaca, the place he left so long ago that when he finally comes home, he and his loved ones are unrecognizable to one another.

The *Odyssey* narrative itself moves through time in the same convoluted way that Odysseus himself moves through space. The epic begins in a present in which Odysseus' son, grown to manhood in his father's absence, goes searching for news of his long-lost parent (Books 1 through 4); it then abandons the son for the father, zooming in on Odysseus at the moment when the gods, having decided that he has wandered enough to go home, free him at long last from the clutches of Calypso and bring him to the island kingdom of a hospitable people called the Phaeacians (Books 5 through 8); then, in a flashback that lasts four full books (9 through 12), Odysseus himself relates to the Phaeacians all of the adventures he has had since leaving Troy. The narrative then comes back to the son in the present, briefly picking up the tale of the youth's adventures only to return once more to Odysseus himself as he finally reaches home; then, at last, it brings the father and the son together as they work to reestablish mastery of their home and punish the Suitors and their accomplices (Books 13 through 22). Only after this does the poem reunite the husband and his wife (Book 23) and conclude, finally, with a vision of the men of the family, the son, the father, the grandfather, standing together after vanquishing the Suitors and their families (Book 24): the future and the present and the past juxtaposed in a single climactic moment as the epic draws to its close.

These elaborate circlings in space and time are mirrored in a certain technique found in many works of Greek literature, called *ring composition*. In ring composition, the narrator will start to tell a story only to pause and loop back to some earlier moment that helps explain an aspect of the story he's telling – a bit of personal or family history, say – and afterward might even loop back to some earlier moment or object or incident that will help account for that slightly less early moment, thereafter gradually winding his way back to the present, the moment in the narrative that he left in order to provide all his background. Herodotus, for instance, often relies on the technique in his *Histories*, that sprawling account of the great war between the Greeks and the Persian Empire (a conflict that Herodotus himself saw as a latter-day successor to the Trojan War). At one point, for example, the historian digresses from his military saga to give a book-long history of Egypt, its government, culture, religion, customs, because Egypt was part of the Persian Empire, whose invasion of Greece in 490 B.C. and the conflicts that ensued from it are the ostensible subjects of the *Histories*. The vast length of his Egyptian digression suggests that the ancients might have had a very different idea from our own about what it means for a book to be “about” something.

The most famous example of the technique is, in fact, to be found in the *Odyssey*: a passage in Book 19, which I shall discuss in greater detail later on, that begins with someone noticing a telltale scar on Odysseus' leg, at a moment when he is trying to remain incognito. But when the scar is noticed, Homer pauses to tell us how Odysseus, as a youth, got the wound that would become the scar; then goes back even further in time to provide details about an episode in the hero's infancy (featuring his mother's father, a notorious trickster); then returns to the incident during which Odysseus got the wound; and finally circles all the way back to the moment when the scar is noticed. Only then, after all the history, does he describe the reaction of the character who noticed it to begin with. As complex as it is to describe this technique, the associative spirals that are its hallmark in fact recreate the way we tell stories in everyday life, looping from one tale to another as we seek to clarify and explain the story with which we started, which is the story to which, eventually, we will return – even if it is sometimes the case that we need to be nudged, to be reminded to get back to our starting point. For this reason, ring composition might remind you of nothing so much as a leisurely homeward journey, interrupted by detours and attractions so alluring that you might forget to stay your homeward course.

And so ring composition, which might at first glance appear to be a digression, reveals itself as an efficient means for a story to embrace the past and the present and sometimes even the future – since some “rings” can loop forward, anticipating events that take place *after* the conclusion of the main story. In this way a single narrative, even a single moment, can contain a character's entire biography.

Hence the occurrence of the word *polytropos*, “of many turns,” “many circled,” in the first line of the *Odyssey* is a hint as to the nature not only of the poem's hero but of the poem itself, suggesting as it does that the best way to tell a certain kind of story is to move not straight ahead but in wide and history-laden circles.

Answer the following questions in English **using your own words**:

1. Explain in your own words what Daniel Mendelsohn means when he writes that the word *polytropos* is programmatic in the *Odyssey*? What are the different ways in which the word can be understood? (6 pts) (150 words or more)

2. Would you say Mendelsohn himself practices ring composition? (6 pts) (150 words or more)

3. Choose one of the following subjects: (8 pts) (250 words or more)
 - a. Using examples taken from literature or cinema, explain to what extent a narrative aims at returning?

 - b. Do we tell stories to come to terms with our experience of time?

 - c. Mendelsohn mentions Herodotus : does history necessarily have to be told in a straight chronological line?