

The Swedish *Odyssey*
Scott D. Richardson (St. John's University)

Among the post-Homeric treatments of Odysseus, the Swedish novel, *Strändernas svall* (1946), by Nobel-prize winner Eyvind Johnson has gone largely unnoticed by Homeric scholars. Even Stanford gives it only a brief mention in his comprehensive *The Ulysses Theme* published two years after the novel's English translation (dubbed *The Return to Ithaca*, 1952), now out of print. Yet this novel not only covers almost the entire plot of Homer's *Odyssey* but it also gives us a fresh and penetrating exploration of the principal characters compatible with both the ancient epic and the post-WWII world. My goal is twofold: first, to introduce this excellent novel to those who love the *Odyssey* and, second, to demonstrate how Johnson's fascinating alterations and embellishments actually draw out features in Homer's portrayal that can shed rich insight into the characters and plotlines of the epic.

When we meet Odysseus outside of Homer, we usually see a single episode in his life, sometimes from the *Odyssey* years, sometimes beforehand. Dante and Tennyson take us beyond his return to Ithaca, as does Kazantsakis' mammoth sequel. Not many have tried to cover the same ground as Homer. Two 20th-century efforts are Johnson's novel (literally, *Surge of the Shores*) and Margaret Atwood's recent *Penelopiad*, which looks at the Ithacan portion of the *Odyssey* story largely through Penelope's eyes and voice. Both use Homer as a launching pad for their explorations of contemporary concerns, and both surprise us with quite unHomeric facts and incidents. Unlike Atwood, however, whose contentions about Penelope seem to stray from some important assumptions an *Odyssey* reader makes, Johnson's fanciful portrayal, while it might at times make Homer cringe, seems largely consistent with the characters and tone of the epic. With some euhemerism, a lot of psychologizing, and a Eurykleia with a great deal of power and entrepreneurship, Johnson follows Odysseus from Kalypso's island to the Phaiakians' island and on to Ithaca (with frequent references to the preceding adventures) and, in alternating chapters, explores the situation of the Ithakan household in a novel way yet without going completely beyond the spirit of the *Odyssey*. I contend that Johnson's characterizations and plot developments help us see Homer's characters, episodes, and themes in a new light that does not override but rather illuminates Homer.

Johnson's subtitle is "A Novel about the Present," and indeed we can read it as a story about war and its consequences such as many parts of the world had so recently lived through. Yet in creating his own version of the *Odyssey* to suit the contemporary scene, Johnson also gives us a world-weary Odysseus, a conflicted Penelope, a bewildered Telemakhos, a carefully contrived network of spies and traders, and a world of lost hope and little confidence in the possibility of renewal that accentuate notes in Homer and can affect a rereading of the *Odyssey*. The eventual resolution that restores hope does not diminish the sense throughout of there being no point in carrying on. Homer is not so gloomy but this novel does highlight aspects of the *Odyssey* that optimistic readers tend to gloss over.