

## The Open-Mouthed Condition: Odysseus' Transition from Warrior to Ruler

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Every text has a background. To know where one stands not only in his or her story but also in relation to the subtext is to know, in essence, under which god one consciously lives. This (albeit simplified) process of post-Jungian archetypal psychology of *seeing through* any experience to the god at core might be equally understood in terms of figurative language, and most particularly metaphor. Metaphor in Greek means “to transfer” or to “carry over” and when we get stuck in any one story (or on any one side of the sentence), we miss the subtexts (sub-gods), and lose our ability to make effective transitions.

Thus we find our hero, Odysseus, staring out at sea, trapped on the paradisiacal island of Ogygia with the queenly nymph Calypso (“cover”). The problem here is not with Calypso—Odysseus concedes her beauty above all others, including his long-waiting Penelope—but with her promise of immortality. Odysseus' epic prototype Gilgamesh, in questing after immortality, will meet up for a beer with Siduri, the tavern-keeper goddess at the edge of the world, who will tell him to give up on the possibility of immortality and to live life to the fullest every day—the best any mortal can hope for. Unlike Gilgamesh, Odysseus will find immortality, but the larger truth—more so than Siduri's *carpe diem*—is that immortality is a stuck place, too, if not the most stuck place of all. To live under cover in immortality is to choose to be always “connected,” as

Jung says, “by an umbilical cord as thick as a ship’s rope to the pleroma, the archetypal world of splendor” (29).

Jungians and post-Jungians will have much to say about the power of a goddess (also mother, or Mother) like Calypso, in whose lair the *puer*, the eternal youth, will be stuck in passivity, obscurity, inertia—all traits of immortality, as I’m describing it here. James Hillman writes that the “mother, as giver and nourisher, as natural life itself, supplies the puer with an overdose of energetic supplies, and by reinforcing certain of the puer’s basic instincts she claims him as her dependent son” (“The Great Mother” 122). Odysseus, our puer-esque hero, “has maimed femininity” (137), and thus finds himself trapped in the subject of his/her being, literalized (frozen, parallelized, crystallized, concretized) in his “I-ness” and unable, therefore, to bridge to the predicate, to find movement, to add verb. In his disconnection with *is*—the mediating term, or linking verb, between subject and object, noun and predicate—he has lost his ability to recreate meaning through metaphor, the necessary moistening agent to experience. Metaphors are naturally psychological, according to William Franke, “for the figurative sense has to do only with how the words are used and understood, not with what they properly mean” (144). The understanding is carried away, in metaphor, in “an attempt to extend language,” as Jack Miles writes. “When none of the *right* ways of saying a thing is adequate, we choose a *wrong* way so as to have access to some deeper rightness that we desire” (171). Sometimes the right thing is to choose the wrong way. For any such man or woman, the task is to cut the umbilical cord—aptly compared by Jung to a ship’s rope—and cross the sea.

This crossing requires, for impetus, the intervention of another goddess, in this case, Athena, the daughter of Zeus and Metis. In Greek, *metis* means “ingenuity,” “resourcefulness,” or “situational intelligence.” Warned that such wisdom—greater as Hesiod says, “than all the

gods and men put together” (qtd. in Paris 85)—could be passed onto their offspring, Zeus swallowed Metis, and from then on, as Ginette Paris says, “feminine intelligence, ... called intuition, [was] imprisoned in the belly of Zeus.” Paris makes much of this shadow that “was cast onto the notion of intuition” (85), but might there be another way of looking at it? Athena, the daughter of their union, was born fully armed from Zeus’ forehead—a necessary clue as to where this displaced energy wants to go. From the perspective of Kundalini yoga, this is the sixth chakra, *ajna*, “the third eye,” most associated with clairvoyance, deep seeing, spiritual insight. Athena is the patron goddess who will give Odysseus the impetus to rise above his own situation, to understand, indeed, *why* he must do so (i.e., to find purpose in his suffering), and later, to help him form the story that will reverse Poseidon’s curse. In this way, Athena, as Michael Silk rightly says, “is both Odysseus’ divine protectress and his poetic-creative exemplar” (33).

But why such an investment in Odysseus’ future? Athena, patron goddess of the wanderer, seems concerned not so much with Odysseus’ particular home as she is with the larger home of the *polis*, “the city ruled by reason and justice” (Cowen 18). Mary Lou Hoyle writes that if had he “been allowed to reach home immediately after the wanderings, [Odysseus] would certainly have provoked civil war, for he would have found the suitors in his home and dealt with them rashly without the goddess’ direction” (61). In order for Odysseus to be the wise ruler that Athena needs him to be upon his return to Ithaca, he must first learn the skill of diplomacy—that of storytelling, a form of persuasion—which can come only in stasis, those moments where the words themselves take back the text, reversing the order of the journey from quenching to thirst, in what Hillman will call the open-mouthed condition (“Of Milk” 328). This open-mouthed condition of thirst before quenching runs contrary to everything Odysseus has known up until this point. The warrior code, after all, is all about attacking, proving, thrusting—the forward

motion of sentencing oneself into the world, with exclamation point. But what happens when the metaphors—for example, “Odysseus is warrior”—no longer work? The open-mouthed condition requires Odysseus to step out of the script, to rest assuredly—as tenuously as that assuredness is—on the unknown *is* between subject and object, and to learn what it is like to be forged in the terrifying realm “of dependency and need,” a necessary prerequisite of renewal (328). What is asked of him is, as Heinrich Zimmer writes,

to be not only the sacrificer but the victim; for what he must annihilate is his own cherished character, and there is no self-conquest more arduous for the truly virtuous than this one of recreancy to the higher nature, sacrifice of the ideal, denial of the model rule that one has striven always to represent. (42)

At the end of his seven years with Calypso, we see the goddess in her preparation for his departure, bathing and then clothing Odysseus “in fragrant garments” (5.264), as if in preparation for burial. I’m brought back to Utnapishtim’s symbolic redressing of Gilgamesh (signifying the death of the old role of the warrior king). Like the earlier epic *Gilgamesh*, thematically concerned with the process of humanization, the *Odyssey*, too, is concerned with humanization and for the aim of protecting the order of the ancient city—as psychological and as socially literal as that was, and continues to be. How do we help our young men and women coming home from a war of ambiguity, when the enemy is unclear or hidden? How do we help our young soldiers re-enter their cities that have continued on without them, and in some cases, like the suitors in the house of Odysseus, seem to have grown fat on borrowed meat and wine?

If we can learn anything from epic literature, it is that our warriors need help in this transitioning process, but how in actuality does this happen? Although much has been written about the mimetic power of epic literature—“the surest safeguard against the onset of a cultural amnesia,” according to Dennis Slattery (“Narrative” 331) —we must also remember its power to help forget, or leave behind, to shed. Odysseus must surrender the metaphor of himself as

warrior—to surrender, in essence, his defenses—and endure (that is, suffer) the crossing of the sea, something he hasn't been willing to do for seven years. Without facing this bareness of the between state, however, to remain behind, under “cover,” without courage or resolve to face the “is-ness” between noun and verb, would be death of a different order—a life without libido. The danger is how we sentence ourselves into the world, and more dangerous still (that is, on the figurative and, therefore, the psychological level) is to become fixated, like Narcissus, on the reflection of any one particular predicate (or predicament).

And yet nowhere is this interplay of subject and predicate more tenuous than in the moment of arrival. Beginnings, as Hillman writes again, are “the most vulnerable; first steps are tentative and uncertain. The whole project stands or falls with the first stroke since everything after that is but a further development of that initial act” (“Puer Wounds” 218). Wet and naked, shipwrecked on the shore of Scheria, Odysseus finds a place to sleep beneath two olive bushes, “one of wild olive, one of tame” (5.477), suggesting that the place of his rebirth is half the wild world of nature, that of the unknown world, and half that of the tame world of men. Odysseus will have to learn to balance the two sides of his nature, should he see home, and here Homer employs a rare, sustained simile:

He lay down in the middle, heaping the fallen leaves over him,  
As a man may cover a torch with black embers  
At the edge of a field, where no neighbors may be by,  
And save the fire's seed, so he need not light it from elsewhere. (5.487-490)

Surprising it is to find the metaphor—“the fire's seed” (another translation reads “a hot ember”)—hidden within the simile, especially considering, as Michael Silk points out, that Homeric metaphors are generally discouraged by the “formulaic idiom,” and are therefore rare. The metaphor, furthermore, “interacts with the vehicle of the simile—the *farmer* [i.e., “a man” in Cook's translation above] now sowing a special kind of ‘seed’” (34). The poetry here acts as a

mediator between the literal experience and the figurative sense of that experience, as “a whole new landscape of... expression” (36), according to Silk, further suggested by the shift from myth to fairytale. This fairytale atmosphere is most recognizable in Nausicaa’s encounter with Odysseus the next morning; that is, “a young princess in faraway land dreaming of husband meets mysterious stranger,” and even Odysseus arrives on the scene amphibian-like, fresh from the sea (35). Metaphors, therefore, within similes, and out of myth and into fairytale—but why, or for what purpose? Rather than run after Nausicaa and her maidens, he steps out of the brush and wonders—*ponders*, according to Silk—and even if momentarily then, Odysseus *is*, and, therefore, is *not* simply warrior. By refusing to step into old, one-dimensional Cyclopean appetites, Odysseus avoids stillbirth and “as in all poetry,” as Franke writes, “something objective is made that helps communicate an experience of what is not properly objectifiable at all” (212).

Only because he has rejected Calypso, furthermore, albeit after seven years, can he reject the nubile (Penelope-like) Nausicaa, and step into another tale-type. No longer the human subject with divine lover, here we enter folk terrain of the battered beggar on the road to reclaim his throne. Later, as he will show in more of a deliberate if not conscious manner, with the swineherd, if Odysseus has taught us anything, it is that to become a wise ruler, and to be recognized as such in one’s hometown, means first to become a beggar, to put on the beggar’s clothes and live with pigs. The frog does turn into a prince, and sometimes quicker than we imagine, but to keep his prince-like nature requires him to remain faithful to the goal, a struggle that is accomplished with the help of Athena, as an *is* figure herself. Athena provides, as Nancy Felson and Laura Slatkin write, “a bridge for Odysseus between his erotic liaisons, which seem to occur outside of time [with goddesses], and his very human erotic encounter with Penelope”

(110). “Wondering” does not make a warrior. Plundering, yes, but not pausing, pondering. These latter traits are that of the wise ruler. He is operating under the guidance of Athena, his patron goddess, with insight, and only, once again, because he is able to cut the umbilical cord and recognize mortality as his true reward, can he stay focused on his goal: homecoming.

In this way, we see him quite unlike the warrior ten years earlier emerging from the belly of the beast—the horse at Troy’s door. Now stepping out from this different belly—the two olive bushes the image for a womb, as many have suggested—we see the possibility of the twice-born Odysseus, *polytropus*, his epithet, “man of many turns.” The olive as a life-giving bush suggests that his story is not tragic, but comic, whereby the hero, according to Hoyle, “is guided to a consequence beyond the personal. In Odysseus’ case, his purpose is the restoration of Ithaka [sic] by a hero large enough to give up the personal for the good of his people” (64). Psychologically, this second-born Odysseus might be read as a move from warrior to ruler, from raw physicality to a new spirituality, the end of power and the beginning of wisdom (Hillman, “Of Milk” 327).

There is yet something else that might give us further clue to his ponderous nature: the scar. Not yet “seen” by the reader (or listener), the scar is most certainly seen by Nausicaa, who with Athena’s help stands her ground before the animal instincts of Odysseus, much akin to Penelope standing her ground in front of the equally raucous suitors. If the nubile princess, furthermore, might be seen as “a different and renewed relationship to soul” (Hillman, “Of Milk” 330), then here we have an image of an earlier Odysseus standing before the boar that charges, and wounds, and wounds for years, sending him, in turn, charging into the world. Odysseus “*is* the boar,” according to Slattery (“Nature” 36), and as boar, he is—or has been—the wounding object, and yet something new here is born, if only at first at the bodily level—that is, at the level of experience not yet made into event, into story. The wound is a symbolic vulva, according to

Hillman (“Puer Wounds” 236). His wound, however, has scarred, meaning closed, shut, sealed. Only while staring at the princess does the wound, at least psychically—reopen. It’s here, in other words, that he remembers his vulnerability, his own Nausicaa-like nature, and his suffering begins to have purpose, to make (at least figurative) sense.

The object in this case reverses itself (turning, or pivoting, on the *is*) to objectify the “seeing” subject. The doing (as in Heidegger’s Being) becomes the noun. We can become at any moment the subject of our own objectivity by way of the linking verb “to be.” By the mediation of figurative language, the generative world of poetry, in turn, generates worlds. Language captivates and creates culture. Through simile, we find likenesses, and metaphor, bridges, linking us by way of the figurative sense to what lies beyond our literal experiences, but not for the purpose of denouement, as in story consciousness, so much as the experience and amplification of the image—the beginning of soul-making, according to Hillman. He writes, “Image-consciousness heals. The sense of ourselves as images in which all parts belong and are co-relatively necessary keeps ends and beginnings together, like the wound remembered by the scar” (“Puer Wounds” 240). Out of story, and into image, out of sentence and into sentience, or out of transience and into transparency. I am naked, I stand before you, I am scarred.

Odysseus steps out of his role as warrior hero, and the “manic seizure of slaughter” (225), and in this ponderous moment, he has the ability to staunch the blood of his memories; he has developed the capacity to feel—for himself, first, of course, for the boy who once stood as Nausicaa now does, looking into the brush, poised, and for the man who has to follow the wound—that is, the need for revenge—around the world for twenty years. He has developed, as Hillman writes, “the *psychic container* for holding in, keeping back, stopping short, the moment of reflection that keeps events within so that they can be realized as psychic facts” (229). The



opposite is that “without a proper feminine vessel [i.e., the wound = womb], we can gestate nothing, nourish nothing, bring nothing to complete birth” (229).

From out of the psychic conception made possible by the sense-making of metaphor, Odysseus begins to birth his new role in the stories he tells the Phaeacians. What makes this interesting, as Edwin Dolin writes, is that “the stranger begging for the Phaeacians’ help is the enemy of the Phaeacians’ stern god, on whose good will they depend absolutely” (387). Most remarkably then will be the divulgence of his name. “I am Odysseus, son of Laertes,” Odysseus says to Alcinoos and the gathering throng of Phaeacians, after hearing his story sung by the blind bard Demodocus. But why reveal his true nature, and name, at this point in the epic, when up until now, his cunning and deceit have served him well? Some of this no doubt has to do with his relationship to the god himself. Why does Poseidon hate Odysseus? Of course we know of the blinding of Poseidon’s son, the Cyclops—but is it as ever as simple as that? Does Poseidon really hate him for this act alone? I am *Outis*, “No-man,” he will tell the Cyclops, after blinding him in the eye, to secure his escape. “‘Friends,’ Polyphemus will yell to the Cyclopes who lived around him, ‘Noman is murdering me by craft, not by force’” (9.408). Polyphemus’ name means “much-speaking.” In essence then, Odysseus as the former warrior is “no-man” (or no-match) to “much-speaking.”

From *Outis* (No-man) to Odysseus, or “much suffering,” as Paolo Vivante writes, “his very name evokes his destiny” (375). The gods—especially if we might also see gods as psychic energies (represented best by the figurative sense, through metaphor)—respond to our language. Odysseus *is* much suffering, a choice of the old warrior code, wounded and wounder. Suffering is not death, for him, so much as transience (Cook 326). “No-man,” the pun, is a pundit on punishment, for he will be condemned to timelessness, without community, to nowhere, a no-

man in Calypso's lair. Immortality is the greatest suffering of all. How does the immortal hero warrior go home and live with others? He simply can't unless he learns to tell his story, to be "somebody" in the face of "much-speaking." This reversal requires Odysseus not entirely to dismiss his warrior code (as later will be seen in his treatment of the suitors), but to balance it with wisdom, which begins with Nausicaa, or before that, with the funereal departure from Ogygia, his island paradise, and the crossing of the sea and ends here, with the Phaeacians. Like Gilgamesh approaching the walls of Ukuk after his "failed" adventure, so, too, will Odysseus' duty be to live in Ithaca, as a mortal somebody, cutting all ties to the "archetypal [no-man] world of splendor."

His honest reporting is, as Dolin suggests, "to confess a personal guilt which lays bare the whole ambiguous nature of the heroic life" (387). "I am Odysseus, son of Laertes, who for my wiles / Am of note among all men, and my fame reaches heaven" (9.19-20). Thus he begins his story, no doubt a foreshadow of the taunting he gives the Cyclops in the story he is about to tell:

"Cyclops, if someone among mortal men should inquire  
Of you about the unseemly blindness in your eye,  
Say that Odysseus, sacker of cities, blinded it,  
The son of Laertes, whose home is in Ithaca." (9.502-05)

This "proclamation had originally been act of pride and hate," Dolin writes. "But now, repeated in the context of his helplessness of Scheria, it is an act of humility. The contrast between the arrogant conqueror represented in the narrative and the lonely wanderer who speaks the narrative is total" (388). From taunting to telling, Odysseus has learned to harness his Zeus-like drive for bloodshed, justice, revenge, and take on the softer qualities of Metis, his patron goddesses' mother. Such situational intelligence is necessary in order to discern when to hold the sword and when to take up the pen and when, between sword and pen, the disguise is best. In the progression from name to name to name, from the belly of the horse, the cave, and finally the

bush, Odysseus emerges into the belly of his own story. He has gained what Hoyle calls the “philosophical basis” (70), and only then, finally, is he ready to face home.

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