

Epic Fathering:  
Homer's Odyssey as Healer of the Puer-Senex Split  
and Restorer of Mythic Movement

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“Opposites cooperate.

The beautifullest harmonies come from opposition...”

-Heraclitus, *Fragments*

Stories move like rivers. When a reader penetrates rich and solid narratives, it is relatively easy to perceive the plot in motion, the fiction flowing, the storyline pushing through. Even if the origins, paths, and destinations of such currents may be unclear, multiple, or distant, there is usually a sense of direction: stories do not merely move; they also go somewhere. Movement brings with it a sense of meaning and purpose that situates the reader in a specific place and furnishes an incentive to follow the plot. A good narrative – through a book, a movie, a story, or a personal experience – provides whoever is witnessing or experiencing it both this fictional river and a good reason to swim in it.

Sometimes, however, movement and meaning are lost, the stream is interrupted, and stories enter vicious circles: histories get stuck and become mere anecdotes, images are fixated and turn into dry stereotypes, and values grow stale and degenerate into

hollow habits. All these are signals of decaying storylines, which may occur in several contexts: In art, they can result in bad novels or trite films. In culture they can be reflected in oppressive societal structures or sterile collective practices. And on a personal level they can produce dull, rigid, and lifeless lives.

But how is it possible to identify this interruption of narrative rhythm? What causes it, and how can we overcome it? How does one restart the flux and recover significance after an episode of mythic paralysis? And by the term “mythic paralysis,” let us understand a state in which the stories that sustained a given system – a person, a novel, a society, a culture – no longer perform their function of providing such a system with meaning. Mythic paralysis is the blocking or drying out of the fictional rivers on which the boats of our lives and our cultures float. When the narratives that usually keep us on course go sterile, there is a rise in the feelings of randomness, meaninglessness, impotence, and futility; the myths that once held us together lose their power, leaving the culture without either the motor that moved it or the course on which it moved. The river is deprived of water and of bed. This imaginative stagnation, this need for movement and for meaning, is to a great extent a desperate call for an epic intervention.

If we are going to imagine stories as journeys or rivers, it is impossible not to bring in, almost immediately, the epic discourse: Ahab’s pursuit of the white whale, Aeneas’ quest for Italy, Odysseus’ voyage towards Ithaca. In all of these works we can feel the flowing force of a well-woven plot; it is clear that the story is going somewhere. Epics can be very vigorous rivers. If we look closely, however – in spite of this feeling of forward motion or perhaps precisely because of it – the storylines of these narratives are always surrounded by an aura of rigidity and fixation: they are permeated by events that

point towards the risks of becoming stuck. Ahab is unmovable in his obsession for Moby Dick, and Aeneas forgets about Rome and his mission when he finds Dido in Carthage. It seems that epic literature is very much aware of mythic paralysis and has plenty to say about the reactivation of mythic imagination. Homer's *Odyssey*, the poem around which this essay will revolve, is particularly illustrative in regard to this conflict. Maybe if we review the text carefully we can find at least some clues about the dynamics that take place in the comings, goings, twists, turns, and mishaps of the mythic river.

Turning to the beginning of the story, where Homer is probably laying out conflicts that are central to the poem, one of the first things that we notice is how critical the situation is in Odysseus' homeland. As Mary Lou Hoyle says, "The first five books of the *Odyssey* reveal the desperate conditions in Ithaka and thus the need for Odysseus the husband and father to return" (66). The situation on the island is very alarming: stagnant, vitiated, and stale. Its inhabitants, lacking a proper leader, have fallen into a vicious circle, and their behavioral patterns have become so chronically fixed that the community is literally going nowhere. What is worse, the heir to the throne is utterly incapable of defending the land. Still innocent and inexperienced, Telemachos does not have the solidity required to reestablish order in Ithaka. The young prince, who is initially described by Homer as "he who dreamed in the crowd" (1.149) – an epithet that evinces his insubstantial presence and lack of differentiation – is the first mortal to appear in the poem. Athena comes down from Olympus and finds Telemachos:

[...] sitting there unhappy among the suitors,  
 a boy, daydreaming. What if his great father  
 came from the unknown world and drove this men  
 like dead leaves through the place, recovering  
 honor and lordship in his own domains? (1.144-48).

This image is very important. If we combine it with the entire context in Ithaka, we can see that there are at least three elements that appear to be missing in the realm: order, movement, and direction. Indeed, a king is urgently needed. If we use Telemachos' image as a starting point, maybe we could frame it a bit more simply: one of the most pressing needs of the island is, as Hoyle rightly stated, a father. Now, James Hillman defines father as "the spirit that guarantees the existential role, the sustaining myth that tells one 'how to be'" (*Myth of Analysis* 16). Following this definition, it is easy to imagine how problematic fatherlessness can be, both for a person and for a country. Without fathering, says Hillman, we are "uncertain about what we are about, because we are uncertain of our author, from whom would come both our authority and our authenticity" (*Myth of Analysis* 15). In Ithaka, indeed, the characters have lost track of who they are and "what they are about," at least in a deeper sense, and have thus fallen into stereotyped and powerless performances of their social roles. Because the old myth has dried out, it is enacted rigidly, and all are incapable of escaping its cage: drunken suitors cut off from marriage, an ever-waiting wife separated from her husband, and an impotent prince unable to own his manhood and assume the leadership of his kingdom. Everything is stuck and dissociated from its purpose and/or destiny. There is no force to push them out of their situation – no guide to tell them which path to follow.

We could then argue that mythic paralysis occurs when there is a failure in the ordering, moving, or directive function of a story. When a narrative structure detaches itself from the father principle it becomes stagnant and loses its meaning. Psychologically, this makes sense, for developmentally it is the father (or at least the fathering function) that situates us in the world. It is the father who validates us as a part

of society and certifies that our personal history is inserted within the fabric constituted by the larger stories of our culture – a very Athena-like role considering that it weaves us into the “fabric” of civilization. By giving us a place in the human race, and thus handing us a role to play in the collective drama, father introduces us into an established order, one within which we can move in this or that direction. In short, father gives us meaning by helping us figure out who we are.

A good story, then, has to be a good father. A good story sets our psyche in motion by giving us a sense of direction: a place to go and a motivation to go there. It offers a direction of flow and a course to follow. The epic genre performs this function, providing a sense of meaning and focus to entire civilizations, as is the case with the *Odyssey*. The epic poet, according to Cowan, is a “conscious artist [that] lets society know its identity and its mission” (10). Epic poetry creates a space – a cosmos, Cowan would say – which can hold cultures by providing them with the myths and the stories that can serve as course and compass – as father – in the life of the collective. Homer is laying out the *patterns* that will configure social and psychological life. His story is a father to our culture, because it contains, within its plot, the patterns that dictate what it means to be a father – and a mother, and a king, and a queen, and a monster. Furthermore, he illustrates the relationships between these patterns (marriages, enmities, mentorships, rivalries) and the energies that hold these relationships together (love, betrayal, resentment, longing, despair). He is describing the inner psychic dynamics that will also pattern the outer relationships of everyday life. This poet is a father, and so is his text. And here I cannot emphasize sufficiently the word *pattern* – because of its etymological relationship with father, because of its reference to ordering, and because of

its allusion to the weaving of Athena, the archetypal “father’s daughter,” who also happens to be Odysseus’s protector and guide.

Allow me then to summarize. When there is a break in a foundational myth, there is a break in meaning for whoever was sustained by that myth. Such a break constitutes a failure in the fathering function of stories and manifests in a narrative *stasis* and a crisis in meaning. The river overflows, or dries, or clots. Healing this break requires the intervention of a new story that can perform such fathering in order to restore the motion: we have to remember who we are and where we are going. According to Hillman, to discover the father is to discover “the collective pattern,” “the essential root metaphor,” “the general myth [...] within which our individual specific varieties fit and function.” To set things in motion again, we need to discover “the father who creates and is the creative principle in us” (*Myth of Analysis* 14). Speaking in literary terms, when it comes to fathering, there is no better genre than epic, and there is no better epic than the *Odyssey*. It would be advisable, then, to return to the story, but in order to do so, let us add a second, very useful, frame for fatherlessness.

Archetypally speaking, a deficiency in fathering will manifest in a split between two archetypes very well known to the epic genre: puer and senex. An archetypal configuration in which these two images are at odds with each other is a story guaranteed to fail. To put it in simple terms, the puer is the archetype of the new, and the senex is the archetype of the old. They are the divine child and the wise man, Hermes and Saturn, the lost wanderer and the old king. Both have positive and negative aspects, and when they work rhythmically and in unison, as we will see later, they are a source of vitality and movement. But when the constellation is split, as is the case in the beginning of the

*Odyssey*, we will mostly have the negative expressions of both archetypes, creating the inert, jammed environment that we have already described. Let us enter into the negative aspects of both archetypes and see how these appear in Homer's poem.

The negative puer archetype exhibits, of course, many of the problems of youth: impatience, instability, lack of containment, inflation, naïveté. The puer is uninitiated, and thus his presence in the world is still feeble. Its energy may be attractive and charismatic, but it often lacks substance and effectiveness. Like Telemachos, the puer is often impotent when facing life situations. He "cannot take hold, grasp the tools, comprehend the problems, seize the issues" (Hillman, *Puer Wounds* 218). In short, things get out of the puer's hands very easily, much like the situation in Odysseus' household goes out of control under Telemachos' guard. "Expel them, yes," says the frustrated prince, "if I only had the power; / the whole thing's out of hand, insufferable" (2.66-67). This powerlessness derives partially from the puer's incapacity to contain both external situations and his inner turmoil. In the puer structure, energy is usually leaking through several psychic holes, much like the food and drink that the suitors are taking from Telemachos' household without his being able to stop it. This failure to hold also manifests in the puer's impetuosity and haste. "What is fundamentally missing in the puer structure," says Hillman, "is the *psychic container* for holding in, keeping back, stopping short, the moment of reflection that keeps events within" (*Puer Wounds* 229). In Telemachos' case, we can see this when he faces the assembly and is incapable of holding back his emotional state: First, in excitement, he stands up on the chair: he is unable to hold his place. Then, when he becomes frustrated, he acts rashly: "And in anger

now he threw the staff to the ground, / his eyes grown bright with tears” (2.86-87). These are the handicaps of an unfathered son.

How would a negative puer constellation affect a story? What would an uninitiated narrative look like? Let us return to the water and imagine it like this: What would be of a river if it had no banks to flank it? How would it move without that container? What if it tried to run faster than it should? What if we took the water that runs in the Nile and tried to make it flow through the bed of a brook in the British countryside? What would happen then? A myth that is only puer cannot provide the meaning and direction that come from having a place in the world, because it will be charming but erratic, well-intentioned but weak, or energetic but uncontrollable. Puer energy alone is not focused and consistent enough to provide the ordering and patterning that are necessary to restore broken meaning. Rivers require the weight of water to flow; air and ether would just float away.

In the negative senex, on the other hand, consistence and order become so excessive that they turn into rigidity and fixation, resulting in the aforementioned situation in Ithaka, where the story becomes stuck and the environment is heavy, repetitive, and chronic (i.e., belonging to Kronos). The river is dry, coagulated, or petrified. The suitors (and everyone else in the realm) are just as powerless as Telemachos. All are trapped in what was once an archetypal pattern, but which is now only a stereotypical mold. To make things worse – and adding to this dryness – the negative senex has another harmful aspect: its resentment towards the puer, which reflects essentially its resistance to newness and change. This is the annihilating father. “In senex consciousness the child must be swallowed,” says Hillman (*Negative Senex*



290). And furthermore, “senex consciousness when split from the puer offers [a] chronic invitation to destruction” (Hillman, *Negative Senex* 278). This obliterating drive and bitterness against the young can be seen in the conspiracy to murder Telemachos, particularly in Antinoos’s reaction:

[...] Antinoos  
could speak out from the stormcloud of his heart,  
swollen with anger; and his eyes blazed:

“A bad business. Telemakhos had the gall  
to make that crossing, though we said he could not.  
So the young cub rounds up a first rate crew  
in spite of all our crowd, and puts to sea.  
What devilment will he be up to next time? –  
Zeus blast the life out of him before he’s grown!” (4. 707-15)

This type of discourse, needless to say, does not fit into a fathering narrative, either. It can be too heavy, too pessimistic, or even too murderous to provide meaning and direction. A storyline with this structure cannot move: flowing rivers are made of water, not of lead or stone.

Epic narrative cannot come exclusively from puer or senex, essentially because stories that come from only one side will go nowhere. Either they want to go everywhere, or they do not want to move at all. “When the [puer and senex] archetype is split,” says Hillman, “the dynamus works independently of the patterns of order. Then we have a too familiar pattern: action that does not know and knowledge that does not act” (*Senex and Puer* 56). One could hardly put it better. A puer narrative is too free, and the senex discourse is too fixed; one is movement without end, and the other end without movement. Together they might work better, and it is through fathering – through epic – that the split can be healed.

But where do we find fathering in *The Odyssey*? This is a very problematic question given the complexity both of the poem and of the issue. We can, however, bring forth a couple of examples of fathering functions, one in service to the puer's wounds, the other to the senex's. The first one is the introduction to history (as seen in the meetings that Telemachos had with Nestor and Melelaos), and the second one the learning of strategy (which permeates essentially all of Athena's action in the plot).

When Athena, in the form of Mentor, meets with Telemachos, she suggests his next move: "[H]ere's a course for you, if you agree: / get a sound craft afloat with twenty oars / and go abroad for news of your lost father" (1. 324-26). Here, in addition to performing the fundamental fathering function of separating the child from the familiar, the goddess is sending the prince to find out what has become of his father. Note here that the objective is never to literally find his father, but to seek *news* of his father. Telemachos' problem is not only that he has no physical father, but also that he has no memory of a father. At this point, even if he saw Odysseus, he would probably not even recognize him, because he has no psychic image of Father. He has no notion of history and no sense of the past, and without those his story cannot go forward. Only when we have a true connection to the past can we really move into the future.

Thus Athena sends Telemachos to Nestor, the oldest king of the Trojan War. "[I]n his wisdom / he will tell you history and no lies," says Zeus' daughter (3. 23-24). In some Latin versions of the poem, Hillman reminds us, Nestor is called "Senex" (*Puer Wounds* 237). The old Greek Lord tells Telemachos the story of the Trojan War, as well as the fate of Agamemnon, Aegisthos, and Orestes. Archetypally, what this meeting is suggesting is that history, as a positive aspect of senex consciousness, helps the puer

energy gain grounding and substance. It situates it in a continuum of time and thus facilitates its actual participation in the world. It is history that can make the puer consequential and effective. Only by establishing this link to time (Kronos) and past can the stagnant situations properly move forward. “Our task is to discover the psychic connection between past and future, otherwise the unconscious figures within us who are as well the archaic past will shape the historical future perhaps disastrously” (Hillman, *Senex and Puer* 31). History gives both substance and structure to the puer’s otherwise erratic and ethereal energy.

But where uncontained puer needs structure, hyper-structured senex requires a bit of play and release. This is where Athena’s strategy comes in. Among many other things, Athena serves as a father because she is, like Odysseus, a tactician. Although her strategic aspect is also multifaceted, there is one element that interests us particularly in relation to the senex: Athena’s plans rely very heavily on deceit. Her stratagems are intricate and versatile. They force us to be on our feet if we do not want to be surprised by an unexpected disguise or a tricky move. Just as history structures and solidifies the puer, Athena’s ruses soften the senex and force it to keep moving.

If we bring together these epic functions under the umbrella of fathering, we will see that all of them seem to be pointing in the same direction: order. Cowan is right: Epic poetry is in charge of generating cosmos. Athena is the great architect in the *Odyssey*, and, according to Hillman, she is “a containing receptacle which normalizes through interior organization” (*Athena* 68). Her strategies “bring the potential chaos into a successfully functioning order” (75). Ordering and patterning seem to be essential tasks of Homer’s epic. But what type of order is being brought? What sorts of patterns are

present here? Slattery states: “If one of the powers of poetry is to impose an order, an intricate design or pattern on experience, then Odysseus must first learn to give both order and aesthetic form to his past in order successfully to imagine himself toward the future” (26). From this statement, one term seems crucial: *aesthetic form*. We must remember that Athena is a weaver, not a construction worker: She is not building a cement edifice, but rather creating a delicate, but firm, fabric. This is important: The new order brought by epic is not scattered like the puer, but it is not rigid as the senex, either. It allows ancient (heavy) history to flow, and new (still delicate) patterns to consolidate.

This is how we get characters like Odysseus, marked by what Hillman would call a “senex-*puer* integrity” (*Puer Wounds* 237). Odysseus is both a puer and a senex figure, sometimes the much-needed father, sometimes in need of fathering himself. “On the one hand, he is a puer – always leaving for another place, nostalgic and longing, loved by women whom he refuses, opportunistic and tricky, forever in danger of drowning. On the other hand, he is father, husband, captain, with the senex qualities of counsel and survival” (Hillman, *Puer Wounds* 236). This capacity for archetypal dynamism is crucial in epic fathering; a good story has plots that are strong enough to hold collective patterns, but sufficiently flexible to allow them to move from one character to another and from one setting to the next. This puer-senex connection serves as a core for extremely complex stories that can bind past and future, old and new, history and prophecy, heaviness and lightness in such a way that they are capable of restoring meaning and movement for entire civilizations. In the words of Cowan:

The epic imagination is engaged in a double mode of vision, both elegiac [senex] and prophetic [puer]. Its endeavor is to tell a story in which a people honor and sin against their gods, one in which they transcend ordinary limits – and in the telling to create a world large enough to contain the full dimensions of the story.

This viewing of the old sacred pattern [senex] from an unfamiliar perspective [puer] reshapes the myth, bringing into being a new reality. 5

As epic fathering comes in and heals the puer-senex split, the river starts flowing and the stale, dry ground turns into moist fecund land, making this archetypal constellation extremely fertile. “The puer inspires the blossoming of things; the senex presides over the harvest” (*Senex and Puer* 37). Here we should remember old Laertes, who meets with Odysseus in his garden, where they had planted trees during the hero’s childhood.

It is this union, accomplished through fathering, that can restore movement and meaning in times of mythic draught in which the river beds run dry. “Epic shows us again and again the pattern of moving from the old myth to a new, carrying everything of value with it as it goes” (Cowan 25). Let us not forget who it was that Odysseus and Telemachos saved in the middle of the slaughter: Phemios and Medon, the poet and the herald. Father and son are preserving the life of those who will renew and retransmit the revitalized narrative. They are securing the flow of the mythic river that now – freed, but contained – moves with direction. Now that the epic poem has performed its task, movement is meaningful, and meaning begins to move.

It is true that a flowing river will endlessly move and transform, but it is also true that as long as there is water running, it will perpetually remain a river. It always changes, but it always is. Epic poetry, through fathering, heals the puer-senex split and reminds us that there are such things as fixed movement and moving fixations, and that it is precisely the combination of these paradoxical states that keeps the mighty mythic river in its flux.

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