

Rank, Otto. 1917. "Homer: Psychologische Beiträge zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Volksepos." Imago, 5, 3, 133-169. [English translation, Gregory Richter. 1999.]

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Homer:

Psychological Contributions to the Developmental History of the National Epic

Otto Rank

What shall live immortally in song
Must perish in life.

Schiller, "Die Götter Griechenlands"

The following essays on the national epic, which are gradually being published in sequence, concentrate on the Homeric poems, admired and criticized in equal measure. These essays are fragments of a greater project whose conception and preliminary research lie many years back, but whose publication would most likely have been delayed even longer were it not for the war.

However, this is not to imply that the topic, which concerns the great struggles of peoples throughout world history -- struggles so decisive for the destiny of civilization -- was furthered by the war or coerced by it in a particular direction. Indeed the purely psychological statement of the problem and certain perspectives toward a solution arise from the realm of psychoanalysis, which is beginning to manifest itself as a necessary methodological principle in various areas of psychology. In fact, even our era, more and more absorbed in realism, stands under the domination of inner forms to a greater extent than it believes or wishes to acknowledge. Indeed, perhaps due specifically to this unacknowledged inner compulsion, our era seeks a refuge in the passionate impulse for exteriorization. It is all the more true that the psychological realm remains the last and highest court of appeal in the idealistic considerations of science, even when the researcher attempts to "understand" the strict laws of nature and of human destiny. This, in turn, is nothing more than bringing them into correspondence with his orientation to the world -- an orientation determined by his psychological constitution.

In its confirmed results the psychoanalytical research method has thus revealed laws whose range, transcending technical and general interest, spans the history of mankind as he became human, and of his shaping of the world. What intelligence has invented, what reason has understood, what the mind has devised -- this has all flowed forth from the same few sources of human need, longing, and renunciation; it has all been formed in correspondence with the rigid norms of inexorable necessity and has been intended to satisfy the quintessence of human desire.

The mechanisms uncovered by Freud in the process of healing psychological disturbances reign in the immeasurable realm of human fantasy creation, from the *idée fixe* of the madman to the highly valued work of art, which likewise basically serves as a correction of unsatisfying reality. The extent to which the national epic and the legend-creation it is based on also obey these laws of individual inner life, the psychological tendencies it obeys, the social functions it fulfills, and the cultural stages and historical events it reflects, will be investigated in the following essays from the viewpoint of psychoanalysis.

Ten years ago Freud (1908) already emphasized the "epic" character of certain formal characteristics of fantasy creation which correspond to certain psychological tendencies. He thus provided the impulse for the study of the creation of the epic. But beyond the difficulties in the material itself and the complications that centuries of scholarly effort to understand it had produced, another problem presented itself which held back especially the psychologist from fruitfully deepening his interest in the problem of the national epic: the plot of the epic, beloved for its poetic beauty, lay as far from us conceptually as the place of action lay from us physically, so that a sensitive feeling for the text, necessary for an ultimate understanding, uncovered clues only in the few universally human elements, but failed to penetrate the details and the structural totality.

With its violent external tumult and inner revaluations, war, which Greek wisdom characterizes as the father of all things, has compensated for this deficit in one fell swoop: through the most intense personal experience, war has brought the heroic struggles and popular uprisings of the past, with their eternal themes, painfully close to the psychologist, oriented as he is toward individualistic detail. The cleft between the individual, who aims for personal pleasure, and society, which demands conformity and renunciation, had in any case been only imperfectly concealed by wife, family, clan and state. Now this cleft was suddenly bridged by war, which to a great extent wiped out individual characteristics while producing a dramatic increase in the feeling of solidarity and unity -- a feeling strengthened through the most basic need for survival. Thus was achieved an orientation to the problem making it possible to grasp the folk-psychological riddle present in the great epic creations by utilizing the individual-psychological means of observation, now permeated with the most intense feeling for society.

For it is not at all obvious that the social strivings and democratic ideas dominating our time, which in the war have found powerful impulses towards realization, are the product of such an intense collective feeling as was characteristic of the peoples of Classical times. Indeed, these strivings seem more like a reaction to the individualistic, separate strivings of the individual: to the extent that he feels himself a member of society, he perceives these individualistic strivings as oppressive. This occurs in the form of social conscience, unknown to the individuality of Classical times, which felt itself fully one with society. This is also one of the reasons no national epic has appeared in modern times, despite the great events which are the prerequisite of the epic. For in addition to the remembered experience of events important to the people and which have not yet moved from the twilight of legend into the historical light of consciousness, the production of a national epic requires an individuality which knows itself to be one with the past, present, and future of the people. Such an individuality unites in balanced harmony both sides of human nature, the individualistic and the social, whose relative proportions determine the entire orientation to the world. Yet it does so without needing to play them against each other as extremes in order to maintain the balance necessary for existence. Thus it is no coincidence that the decisive events of the Dorian and Germanic migrations or of the battles among the lineages of India, which occurred in dark primeval times and determined the destiny

of civilization for centuries, found expression in epic poems such as have not been produced in connection with the great events of recent times. Yet the catastrophe of culture now reflected in the full light of the realistic historical orientation of the analytical-individualizing conscious has made possible a psychological understanding of the development and origin of the epic.

Beyond the internal extension that drew me, as a modern individual enmeshed in personal problems, into a stream of societal feeling and consciousness, this approach was made possible by a degree of complementary external extension, which forever impressed on my restless senses the unforgettable image of that glorious region of the world which in the Homeric battle epic is the reward of the victor. For fleeting moments, in the shimmering azure hues of the coast of Asia Minor, the eye of the central European city dweller, sated as it was with the cheerful skies of Italy and the sublime Greek landscape, found a delightful place of rest while, within view of the "Queen of Cities," fighting raged over control of the crucial waterway connecting Europe with Classical Asia, just as in the primeval times described by the Homeric poet. Marveling in silence, I was unable to visit the ruins of Troy and the small trading city of Smyrna, which today pulsates with vibrant life -- just as it did when the greatest poet in history was born there. Yet perhaps the very proximity of this longed for but unattainable destination, like that of the Trojan stronghold, affected my fantasy more powerfully than whatever the stones might have said. On a crystal clear autumn evening, the view from the windblown forest cemetery on Ejub extended over the now truly gilded Golden Horn to the indescribable silhouette of Istanbul, to the straits and foothill-like Prince Islands beyond, and to the many-faceted threshold of the Asian world, so far-removed from us. This view permitted me so thoroughly to forget all the misfortunes of the difficult journey that the spirit of classical antiquity, soaring over the landscape, came to life in a way undreamt of. It suddenly became clear that one could love a city -- love it for its beauty -- like a woman from a fairy-tale. All the fighting and struggle over a city become comprehensible when the city unites within itself all things and offers with a noble gesture all that makes external and inner life worth living.

Intimately connected with my origins in Vienna, yet grown beyond them, I suddenly felt a kinship with the people of Smyrna. Happy-go-lucky and sentimental in equal measure, they love music and dance; the men love harmless amusements with their incomparable women, described as the most beautiful in the world. It became immediately clear that it is no coincidence that these two cities, intimately related in feeling and outlook, brought forth the great epic-heroic poems of the Greek and Germanic peoples. With shudders of admiration I perceived other strings playing along, playing the music that through the centuries connects the present with the epochs that live on in the poem. Just as in those times, today again there is fighting over possession of the bridge to Asia. Just as before, today again Austria must drive back invading barbarian hordes coming from the east. Just as before, today again nations react to the barbarians' senseless destructive rage with penitence and feelings of guilt, and seek unsuccessfully to justify these in diplomatic acts and secret documents. Just as before, a single great cry of pain wrenches forth from the breast of self-tormenting humanity. Just as before, the

wailing of mothers and the moans of the wounded penetrate the ever-lofty arch of the firmament. Just as before, our hearts are rent by the nameless misery of the refugee, the nearly hopeless despair of prisoners clutched from their native soil, and the expiring glance of the dying, which tenderly attempts once more to embrace the beauty of this unhappy world. As before, though, we are also moved by the uplifting passions of our phenomenal efforts. Pride and a feeling of power fill our minds, which, over all the wailing, exult in the triumph of the victor's unshakable determination. For us, though, these life-promoting energies are mixed with depressing feelings of pity -- which for the primeval hero became conscious only afterward, as suffering and regret; it is these feelings which led to the explanatory justification of inalterable events provided in the epic poem.

Yet for us, late-born descendants who have accomplished much but who are still burdened with all the worries of bygone epochs, it is imperative to find within our minds compensation for all the conflicting emotions whose manifestation so inexorably determines the fate of individuals and nations, and lastly of humanity. This fate was proclaimed by the epic poems of bygone millennia long before we existed and were able to hear them, and will be proclaimed long after the insistent roar of the present has ceased to resound in our tired ears.

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The Problem

"There is still much argument about the epic, but in these discussions the first and last word belongs to psychology."

Steinthal

These words, written half a century ago by Steinthal, one of the founders of ethnopsychology, deserve now more than ever to be taken seriously. Therefore, in a new attempt to grasp the essence of the national epic in the light of psychology, we are obliged to take his words as a starting point. Far from leading to a simplification or a solution, the discussion of the epic has sharpened, producing apparently incompatible and opposing opinions. Yet since Steinthal so boldly rendered psychology the right to speak, it has not again expressed itself. Only gradually did traditional philology, which long considered the epic its private domain, admit as cooperative partners other branches of knowledge which had subordinated themselves to it; only very late did philology deign to recognize their equal status. Specifically, it was the archeological excavations in Asia Minor, Greece, and the Greek Islands -- begun by Schliemann in the 1880's, continued by his successor Dörpfeld, and crowned with Evans' finds in Crete -- which brought forth a substantially new orientation to the history of the epic and considerably widened the corresponding research by bringing to light an old culture demonstrating the real bases of Greek epic tradition. Today, then, the "epic question" has become a complex of various isolated problems; in the effort to solve these problems, there is equal involvement from the fields of literary history, esthetics, linguistics, history, mythology and the study of legends, archeology, and cultural history. It should be no surprise that this continuing specialization in research and results has only sharpened the conflict of opinions at the present time. This has occurred even though the "science of the spade," initially regarded with contempt, and standing in contrast to "higher criticism" --

analytical, and suspect due to its subjective foundations -- finally won respect and recognition through the evidence it has provided: this evidence is positive and amenable to objective verification.

Any specialist approaching the problems of the national epic today is admonished by the unsatisfying progress and contradictory results of previous research not to take on too large a task; limitations on his ability to work and conceptualize also prevent him from doing so. Indeed, the rash attempts of earlier writers to solve the question in its entirety, smoothly and completely, have given way to a series of individual, careful, sharply delineated investigations which in turn, through the details, all too often lose sight of the totality within which they must position themselves. In the struggle of opinions, fought with intensity and bitterness, the contentious topic itself has been completely disregarded through personal attempts to refute one's opponent. Thus, through isolation and exaggeration, the contradictions have sharpened to the point of total incompatibility. By contrast, one must concentrate one's gaze on the matter and learn again to regard it naively, as the epic poet saw it. In this respect, a psychological approach to the topic has the advantage that it must turn directly to the material -- thus far nearly untouched -- although, as the last court of appeal of all human knowledge, this approach requires a maximally comprehensive knowledge of the various problems and of the solutions proposed thus far. On the other hand, it permits, indeed requires one to leave the established paths of research and to undertake independent research programs that may again lead to a new classification of the epic questions decisive for the understanding of the entire Classical Greek world. Still, one should expect no comprehensive solution eliminating all the difficulties and contradictions arising in specialized areas. Rather, one should expect only a psychological contribution that attempts to clear the way, through the undergrowth of tortuous criticism, toward free view and access into the understanding of epic poetry. As a necessary condition for the legitimacy of the independent, psychological approach, one must assume that it will nevertheless take into consideration the established results of various specialized investigations and that within the context of its framework the standard, basic questions will be respected and perhaps promoted. If it turns out that the already achieved but apparently contradictory results of scientific research over centuries can be reconciled or brought closer together, that is all that one can reasonably expect from a psychological approach to the topic. In other fields it has repeatedly been shown how progress has been delayed due to the peculiar manner in which humans conduct research, and that an unprejudiced orientation that keeps to the middle ground and incorporates without contradiction as many earlier findings as possible always comes closest to the truth. Yet by its nature, psychology is called to deliver just such a basis, previously lacking in research on the epic: it is the task of psychology to place in its focus -- the inner life of human beings -- the multiplicity and diversity of external forms and thence to make them comprehensible. Thus far, though, academic psychology has been able to do justice to this endeavor, its actual main task, only in a very inadequate way: in self-deceiving blindness it exhausted itself in the description of psychological processes and has been too lacking in approach and methodology to pronounce its own decisive word in other realms of

knowledge. Now, though, the endeavors of psychoanalysis, commencing soon after Schliemann's discoveries, have brought to light from the psychological underworld valuable, previously lost and buried relics that provide glimpses into the psychological development of mankind, and which, though incomplete, are just as important as the glimpses into the cultural prehistory of mankind provided by archeological finds. This comparison extends not only to the discovery of previously unknown material, but also to the procedures revealing this material and to the utilization of these fragments of a life which came to an end long ago. Psychoanalysis places the unconscious, hidden beneath the thin upper surface, in its proper role: the unconscious converts the individual, distinct fragments into a total picture, and complements experiences gained elsewhere when, on the basis of solid criteria, that is appropriate. Critics have often accused psychoanalysis of working with unproved hypotheses, but in so doing each applies a standard of demonstrative power appropriate to his own scientific field, but completely inappropriate to psychoanalysis. Archeology, too, must make use of heuristic principles, which, so long as they prove useful and enlightening, are taken as established laws. Yet as these are uncovered in the course of scientific investigation they can repeatedly be modified in the context of new discoveries. This concludes the discussion of the justification for applying psychological views to an area of knowledge so similar to "depth psychology" in its procedures and methods. Further, the aspects of analysis that can be applied to the problems of the national epic are by their very nature so general and undogmatic that the objections brought forth against the methodology fail to apply. The psychoanalytical way of thinking, highly tolerant toward greatly varying views and mutually conflicting interpretations, takes as its most basic tenet the vertical organization of all psychological phenomena, which corresponds to a layering of the material analogous to that observed in archeology. The application of some methodological approaches and established results of psychoanalysis to such an eminently complex product as the national epic is unlikely to lead to exaggerated conclusions since non-psychological research, in the results obtained thus far, has established a solid framework for discussion. Yet within this framework there still remain so many riddles that the application of our psychological knowledge requires no special justification. To the extent required by our investigation, the following discussions will orient the reader to the history of this research and to the unsatisfying situation in which it currently finds itself.

FOOTNOTE

1. The first five sections to be published are drafts produced in the winter of 1914-1915 during the war. So far these drafts comprise two general chapters and three chapters introducing the Homeric problem. To these will be added two major chapters completing the topic of the construction of the epic among the Greeks. The complete research plan also comprises an investigation of the Nibelungenlied, views of the epic poems of other peoples, and an examination of the artistic epic and of epic influences in drama -- all within the framework developed here. To summarize the results, this framework will be further presented in a final chapter characterizing the essence of the national

epic. Literary sources which have currently become inaccessible will be added later.