

Edited transcript of: »Sources of Creative Power«

Lecture [VIII] (S-II)

4/2/54

Part III [Homer]

Note: Part of this tape has apparently been lost as the transcription begins in the middle of a sentence.

... it is the same in the [Iliad](#) as it is on the [Parthenon frieze](#); namely, it is relief art just as the [Odyssey](#) is like the art of assembling free standing statues.¹ Homer created in both his works the basic artistic formula for each of these and then opposed them to one another just as he opposed the heroes of both stories to each other. The first hero, [Achilles](#), who could by his own action (which is in the beginning only the storm of anger in his own breast) bring about this one deed of killing [Hector](#), the hero of [Troy](#), proceeds in a single definite direction as action, and all of the other beings involved – the gods, the Greeks, the Trojans (like the figures on the Parthenon frieze) must follow the action of this one leading figure who takes with him all of the others. In the [Odyssey](#) all of the action that is going on is centered around [Odysseus](#). There is no action that is not related to him but he is not causing them. He is much more self-contained than Achilles is. He is, so to speak, upon himself, he brings all of the action upon himself, so the one composition, the [Iliad](#), is strictly linear, while the [Odyssey](#) is circular.

We are going to concern ourselves here more with the circular one, the [Odyssey](#), because the picture of the world that Homer wants to give in the [Iliad](#) is still outdone by the more accomplished picture of the world that is given in the [Odyssey](#); yet the purpose is the same in both, and this fact is shown by the two main metaphors that Homer uses. The first metaphor is the shield of Achilles in the [Iliad](#), this small circular shield upon which [Hephaestus](#), the god of art, has portrayed the whole world. It is almost as if you were to look into one of those little Dutch mirrors that you sometimes see on a piece of furniture when you come into a room. There is one such room at the [Metropolitan](#) and sometime you might make yourself

¹ See [Lecture I, Fall 1953](#).

the fun of trying it out, because when you come into this room you see not only yourself but everything concentrated in this little mirror. The first mirror of that kind ever created is the description of the shield of Achilles and it was Homer's endeavor to describe in a circular way the whole world. One could even say that the germ of the central motivating idea in the Odyssey is already contained in this description of the shield of Achilles. The focus that corresponds to this in the Odyssey is the description of the bed of Odysseus and this is the other main metaphor, the bed he made himself that is built into an olive tree and that cannot be destroyed or taken away. This bed is again such an artistic means to focus and give in a little Dutch mirror the main framework, the main purpose of the whole epos. The bed is built into a tree but the branches of the tree have been partly cut away. Only the main branches are left in order to support the bed. The trunk of the tree is there rooted deeply into the earth and around the tree is built a house so when finally Penelope sees what has been done she realizes that it must be Odysseus who has built all of this, because who else could have known about this bed and so a recognition takes place.

This is in a nutshell the whole of Homer's world as he created it in space. The space concept given here is not a scientific one, it is not a concept of physical space alone. Rather it is a concept of lived space and of existential space, because man in the world is the topic of the Odyssey even more than it is the topic of the Iliad. To give a description of man in the world means to be able to describe what the Greeks called the bios, the life figure not only of this man but of his life, hence man in the world has an existential space, a space within which he exists, and this space is three-fold in Homer given in three layers. First man is rooted in the underworld, in Hades, hence his roots go downward to the place where he will one day return. This is the meaning of the roots

of the olive tree. His life in the world that surrounds him is the earth as Homer describes it, the two-fold earth of land and sea. Then there is a third layer which rises above both the underworld and this earth, and that is Olympus, the Olympus he created for us all, being art for us, being art perhaps even for Odysseus, but being for the Greeks of his time a religion. This circular orbit in which Homer sets his man, Odysseus, who is man, who is existential space, who is the space of the symbolic tree, having his roots in the unknown, performing his deeds on this earth, and striving with all of his branches to get hold of Olympus and the gods.

So again, the techniques in both works are the same. Now comes the time concept. In the very beginning of the *Odyssey* there he is for us exactly in the middle of his time which is his life time. We know he has been away for twenty years and we also know he has been promised to reach a very old age so he is exactly in the middle of his life. He is, so to speak, on the top of his life. From here the story proceeds and after the last wave of his past has passed over him we find him sitting amidst the [Phaeacians](#), winning them as he has won everybody until finally his whole past comes in. We have learned in the meantime much of his future, because it has already come too. When the past comes in it is merely a sea story. It is accompanied by a land story, the story of his son [Telemachus](#) whom [Athena](#) educated and who does everything for him that Odysseus could have done, taking him across the world, and the circular action of the story is paralleled by the circular action of being driven around the world.

Both of these stories are illustrated by two of the most beautiful and simple lines ever written that re-occur again and again. The one for the sea story is when they go back to the ship and sit down either after or before the catastrophe, and then as they go on Homer says

»They whipped the gruesome salt of the sea with their oars.«²

² *Odyssey*, Book IV, 580; Book VIII, 104, 180, 471, 563; Book XII, 147.

That is the moving line of the whole epic. It comes again and again.

»They whipped the gruesome salt of the sea with
their oars.«

I do not know whether [Lattimore](#) translated it that way but this would be the exact translation. And the line that transports the land action is where the chariot comes drawn by the horses as the sun rises and sinks just as in the sea story, the sun rises and sinks regularly, and the whole of nature is brought into the story. The time here is cosmic time, which is eternal or infinite because it is circular, because it is always the same, because nothing new can ever happen within it gives, so to speak, the majestic contra-bass to the action of time that is being taken in a human sense, Odysseus' time, the time he lives which is his life time. So both concepts of time join and we know he gets home and here the story ends but we also know that the story does not end. When the story of the Odyssey closes the end is both there and still yet to come, because human time is continually being swept into cosmic time and the end is simply one more circular repetition of the life of Odysseus. He knows and we know that he will have to leave [Penelope](#) again. That he will only reach the oldest age and find peace with himself when he finally goes out once more to atone for the curse of [Poseidon](#), and this atonement will be the fulfillment of the curse of all seafaring peoples who have tried to discover the world; that they will have to go on till the end of time and to the end of the globe. And Homer knew that everyone who engages in that receives both a blessing and a curse, because the gods give both in one.

The curse is that they will have to go on to the end of the world, because they decided to go on their own and since they have made that decision the gods will see to it that they fulfill their own destiny.

So Odysseus has to go far, carrying an oar on his shoulders until he comes to a country where people will not know what that means, because they have never heard of the sea, and he will have to make them hear of the sea, that the cosmos is not only earth, but earth and sea, and that means he will have to sing to them. The seaman, the old sailor, will have to make them know, as the Greek metaphor goes, that they also serve Poseidon, that they also must give sacrifice to the god of the sea, and then the earth will become round as it became round when Columbus had sailed. This destiny of all the Western world that took upon itself the burden of seafaring is indicated and signified in this one Homeric story.

Shall we still say that Homer did not know everything? Homer might have known everything. Art knows everything, because the vision of imagination follows its own laws and if one is really able to experience the inner destiny of a man, a seafaring man, as Homer was able to experience not only himself but also the experience of others with the world, then the blind man sees through all ages, because as Laotse once said:

›The wise man does not have to go out of his room in order to know what is going on in the world. He can see it all in himself if he knows himself and if he has tried to know himself.‹³

The artist can see everything because the metaphor seems to carry him not only through the ages but also through all space and all time. Certainly the metaphor carried Homer very very far, carried him, that is, even into our own destiny, so the artistic space and time concept that Homer gives us is eternal, eternal as long as man lives. It is the discovery of space and time as man lives it in his different spheres, and these spheres are given in the most splendid description of a man as he lives his life not only through the world, but also through himself, and outward through us.

³ Tao Te Ching, Verse 47.

We can follow him into ourselves because he both encompasses and embraces us, because he embraces the very creative essence of man which every man has inside of him.

Man, because he is the hero of his own art is also the hero of his own epos, and we are men and as men are able to travel with Homer throughout all of his world regardless of how large our own world becomes, because even if it becomes so large that it reaches into interstellar space, the world of man will always be this world that Homer first gave to us. It can be taken out into infinity, but man (in so far as he is capable of a creative relation to the world) must always make it a lived one, and so Homer is the discoverer not only of our world but of our innermost longings and our innermost conditions. That is what makes him so eternally attractive again and again for everybody.

I would have wished for more time to have another session on Homer but I will not be able to come back to him and I regret that, because I would have liked to help you to see [Hades](#). Let me only say this much to you. If you approach Homer in a very very modern way then you will see that we are all living with Hades, because the idea of shadows which cannot speak or act any more, which cannot add anything more to their lives is very much with us today. We are all living with those shadows. Those are our dead ones and we all carry them within us and we can make them speak to us again in this memory which Hades is when we give them our blood just as Odysseus must spend his blood so that the shadows in Hades might be able to speak to him. We can make our shadows that live in our memories speak by giving them our blood, the blood of our interest and of our love for them, and as long as we live and carry them within us we can go back to Hades again as Odysseus went back and we can learn from it if

only we are able to love the shadows enough.

Art sets possible human relations in such a deep metaphor that the essential truth of those relations remains forever alive, forever able to blossom out again in now ages amidst new experiences, and those new experiences are our own which when added to the eternal experience of art leaves us unsure as to whether or not it is even we who have added them, because the essence of both was already present in the very beginning. And it is always present, always there, and this is the last word that I have to say about the creative magic of art which Homer was the first to show us fully.