

Symbolic Imagery and the Realm of Psyche

When psychology takes up the study of religious imagery it engages in the quest for meaning; in this the psychologist differs little from those whose interest is rooted in faith or scholarship. Indeed, psychology has as its etymological root *psyche*, that is, soul, whose nature has been the focus of religious traditions from time immemorial. That religion and psychology have often been at odds is no coincidence, for they lay claim to the same territory: the relationship between the human soul and its experience in the world. The development of awareness is sought by both. The act of transformation, spiritual, psychological and even physical, is at the centre of both religion and psychology. Thus the role of symbols as images leading towards transformation is as essential to analytical psychology as it is to the sacred traditions.

The psychological perspective discussed here is not one whose interest is primarily behavioural or cognitive. Rather, a psychology of depth is applied, one which recognizes that the significance of the symbolic image in the psychological history of the individual refers to the larger history of collective human expression and experience, and in fact derives much of its force from that larger context.¹ Symbolic imagery is the shared treasury of both psychology and religion, however they might differ in approach and perspective.

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1. The psychological perspective presented here has its origins in the work of C.G. Jung. See, for example, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, by C.G. Jung, translation by Richard and Clara Winston. New York: Vintage Books, 1965. The body of Jung's work is contained in the Bollingen Series of the Collected Works of C.G. Jung, published by Princeton University Press.

Further work in this area is contained in :

Re-Visioning Psychology, by James Hillman. New York : Harper and Row, 1975, and *The Dream and the Underworld*, also by James Hillman. New York : Harper and Row, 1979.

It may be said that the history of religious symbolism is long and that of modern psychology short. It may be said, as well, that the imagery of the sacred traditions is finally impervious to the analytical probings of modern science and cannot be explained by any method derived thereby. Such assertions are well considered. Psychology is young indeed, and its methodology still in its infancy. Its goals, however, need not include the final explication, reduction and dismissal of those images which permeate the sacred traditions. The depth psychologist seeks not to explain in any ultimate sense of that term, but to explore; his interest is not in metaphysical truth but in psychological truth. That is, he seeks not the ultimate verities which are religion's domain but the workings of the individual soul in its own mystery. Symbolic imagery provides access to the inner workings of *psyche* in all its complexity.

Psychologists themselves are often at pains to separate themselves from religious practice, history and symbology. Yet however much psychology protests against its fundamental differences from religion, there is often a blurring of boundaries and some need for an accommodation of religion in its varied manifestations.² It may be that there are some areas of psychological inquiry that will always partake of religion, not only in content but in sensibility. Freud dismissed religion as an illusion, a veil whose purpose was delusion and whose time had passed.³ That view itself has resonances in the ancient perception of Maya, a religious image. Freud went on to choose an ancient mythological image from the sacred tradition of Greece, Oedipus, as the fundamental image of his psychology. From the first, the boundary between the new science of psychology and the realm of religion was marked by ambivalence.

Jung, who recognized in the symbolic imagery of myth and religion the root of analytical psychology, spent his life defending himself against charges of mysticism. The scientific community, then as now, resists interpretations which refer to realms of *psyche* lying beyond measurable phenomena. Despite his efforts to present

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2. See Jung, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, and Jacob Needleman, "Psychiatry and the Sacred," in *On the Way to Self Knowledge*, edited by Jacob Needleman and Dennis Lewis. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976.
 3. Sigmund Freud, *The Future of an Illusion*, translation by W. D. Robson-Scott, revised by James Strachey, New York: Anchor Books, 1964.

his observations in an objective manner, the content of Jung's work was ever judged to be religious rather than psychological in nature. Jung always sought to clarify this issue.

The religious myth is one of man's greatest and most significant achievements, giving him the security and inner strength not to be crushed by the monstrousness of the universe. Considered from the standpoint of realism, the symbol is not of course an external truth, but it is psychologically true, for it was and is the bridge to all that is best in humanity.

Psychological truth by no means excludes metaphysical truth, though psychology, as a science, has to hold aloof from all metaphysical assertions. Its subject is the psyche and its contents.⁴

Jung proposed unconscious archetypes as "the numinous, structural elements of the psyche"⁵ which attract suitable and compatible contents from outside themselves and thereby give symbols both their impetus and their conviction. That is to say, within the unconscious are constellations of images, ideas, potentially powerful complexes, all of which may appropriate perceptions from outside and form intense associations with them. Such associations form the basis of our recognition of certain images as instantly valid. One recognizes them as significant and reacts immediately, instinctively, for they exist within one in some form. Again, there is no metaphysical assertion intended here, but a psychological one. An image is psychologically true and potent when it arouses an immediate reaction, positive or negative.

Symbols, according to Jung, are transforming images, converting energy within the unconscious. Certainly, as religion has always known, the power of symbolism is intended to transform the recipient. In psychological terms, the active symbol can deeply affect an individual and cause a transformation of understanding, of relationship, of life. Experience is full of such phenomena: a dream, a story, a particular image may serve as a psychological event, as well as a religious one if the religious context offers a viable connection. The

4. Jung, *Collected Works*, Vol. 5, *Symbols of Transformation*, Para. 343-344, p. 231. Translation by R. F. C. Hull. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1956.

5. Jung, *Symbols of Transformation*, para. 344, p. 232.

boundary between a psychological event and a religious one is a boundary of perception and understanding, dependent upon the individual and his context.⁶

An Image of Divine Suffering

Let us examine a text which presents the power of symbolic imagery following the sense of Jung's theory, as well as the ambivalence between religion and psychology. The text is a drama, *Equus*, written by Peter Shaffer.⁷ It is written from the perspective of a practising psychiatrist, Martin Dysart, who is confronted with an extraordinary case. A boy of seventeen, Alan Strang, has blinded six horses with a metal spike. The authorities would commit him to prison; Dysart takes him on as a patient as an alternative to imprisonment.

The doctor becomes fascinated by this boy, who is clearly suffering a great personal torment. Dysart himself is living on an edge, for he has come to doubt his profession. His first love is Ancient Greece, which he acknowledges he knows in very homogenized form and from a safe distance. He comes to sense in the Strang boy an immediacy, a close contact with something quite intense, which Dysart himself is lacking. He approaches his patient with mounting fascination and trepidation, suspecting that at the root of this apparently psychological mystery lies a mystery in the religious sense of the word. The horrific act for which Alan Strang had been tried and convicted was somehow a ritualistic act, an act of worship, love and hate, all of an intensity that is beyond anything Dysart could experience beyond his dreams. The psychologist, not a priest but a scientist, discovers that the horses were living sacred images to the boy, who was, in effect, their priest.

Alan Strang is not a co-operative patient. But he comes to trust his doctor and to long for release from his private waking nightmare. It takes the length of the play for him finally to reveal the secret of his actions. During this time, Dysart searches for clues as would a

6. See *Kundalini, The Evolutionary Energy in Man*, by Gopi Krishna, with psychological commentary by James Hillman. Berkeley: Shambala, 1971.
7. Peter Shaffer, *Equus*. New York: Avon Books, 1974. All page references are to this edition.

detective. From the boy's parents he learns that religion is a major problem in this family. Mrs. Strang, a religious woman, often read the Bible to Alan. Mr. Strang classified himself as an atheist and completely rejected any form of religiosity.

Alan led a fairly isolated existence. His first real contact with a horse was at the age of six; his attraction to horses grew out of all proportion to his actual experience. He subsequently evolved for himself a religion based upon Equus, the Latin word for horse. He took from the Christianity of his mother the elements of sacrifice and the suffering god, as well as the biblical references to horses. Using these, Alan developed a genealogy, a liturgy and a ritual, including self-flagellation and complete with a mouth-chain passed from a horse's mouth to his own. He performed his ritual in solitude, before a picture of a horse with very large eyes.

Alan worked during weekends at the stables where his crime was committed. There he found the opportunity for total devotion to his god, cleaning out the horses' living quarters and grooming them. Secretly, he would ride at night, enacting a total communion with his god. He also found quite a different opportunity at the stables. A young woman who also worked at the stables showed interest in him, and eventually offered Alan his first experience of human love. Tragically, she chose the stables as the site of her seduction of the boy, and Alan's deity would allow neither the human communion nor the desecration of his temple. Alan was doomed to horrible failure, and after the departure of the young woman he sought to free himself from Equus. His crime was performed against his god, a desperate attempt to stop those eyes from seeing all, judging and mocking him. The act itself was horrible enough, but the depth of its horror could only be understood from the perspective of the boy himself. Martin Dysart, healer of souls, must enter into the mystery in order to understand it.

The psychiatrist acknowledges that his patient is in contact with an aspect of *psyche* that is ancient, powerful, horrific and fantastic.

I can hear the creature's voice. It's calling me out of the black cave of the Psyche. I shove in my dim little torch, and there he stands—waiting for me. He raises his matted head. He opens his great square teeth, and says—(mocking) ‘*Why? . . . Why*

Me? . . . Why-ultimately-Me? . . . Do you really imagine you can account for Me?"⁸

Dysart knows he cannot and more: he knows that no one else can either. However strained the boy's religious upbringing, however isolated his existence, however dramatic the appearance of horses, psychology cannot account for the appearance of the god *Equus* in this boy. *Equus*, like all the gods, remains sacred mystery. There is, however, something the good doctor *can* do. He can neutralize the image. Dysart is loathe to perform this, his necessary function, the exorcism. "Can you think of anything worse one can do to anybody than take away their worship?"⁹ The argument is made that the boy is in terrible pain, an agony of the soul, and the psychiatrist can relieve him. That should be enough to satisfy the doctor. Dysart resists: "Because it's his. . . His pain. His own. He made it."¹⁰ His pain is closer to the essence of life than anything Dysart can put in its place. . . all he can offer is proper behaviour, proper desire, but as for the real thing, "Passion, you see, can be destroyed by a doctor. It cannot be created."¹¹

The stage directions for *Equus* make clear that the horses must be represented on the stage by actors using horse-like masks, but most emphatically *not* imitating horses as such. "Any literalism which could suggest the cosy familiarity of a domestic animal—or worse, a pantomime horse—should be avoided."¹² *Equus* is not a literal horse, he is a god, and just as he is not a literal horse he is not an anthropomorphic horse, not humanized in any way. *Equus* is something *totally other*; his strangeness is an essential factor. What the *psyche* presents is a mystery, and the psychiatrist, in order to explore it, must enter it. He cannot explain it, and what he calls a cure is not true healing but a psychic palliative. "My achievement, however, is more likely to make a ghost!" "When *Equus* leaves—if he leaves at all—it will be with your intestines in his teeth. And I don't stock replacements. . . ."¹³

8. *Equus*, p. 87.

9. *Equus*, p. 93.

10. *Equus*, p. 94.

11. *Equus*, p. 124.

12. *Equus*, p. 17.

13. *Equus*, pp. 123-124.

In the case of *Equus* we have a dramatization of the force of a living symbolic image and its confrontation with modern Western culture, an apparently irreconcilable situation. Equus the god cannot be accommodated. The psychiatrist as portrayed in the drama acknowledges his limited understanding of the phenomenon as well as his attraction to it. His role is to banish the god, but in doing so he is well aware that an image as primal as Equus is eternal, and that in the *psyche* the gods do not die. The most he can do for his patient is create amnesia. There is little he can do for himself.

I need. . . a way of seeing in the dark. What way is this? . . . *What dark is this?* . . . I cannot call it ordained of God: I can't get that far. I will however pay it so much homage. There is now, in my mouth, this sharp chain. And it never comes out.¹⁴

The living symbol, be it the divine Equus or some other manifestation, performs a transforming function. In this case, it thrust a lonely, frightened boy into a zealot's life, a divine intoxication. It accompanied him through his growth and exploded as he approached manhood. Equus has a fundamentally sexual aspect, but adolescent or Oedipal sexuality, while important to this story, does not define it. Rather, the sexuality of the image is part of a larger formulation, one that includes aspects of mystical devotion, animal worship, suffering and torture and so on. The transformation which occurs in this case, moreover, is not only Alan Strang's. Dysart, the psychiatrist, is also transformed by his experience of the image. The psychological event is of considerable strength.

In the Greek tradition, to which playwright Shaffer constantly refers in this work, the god of horses was Poseidon, who was also god of the sea, he who held the trident. Poseidon was characterized as violent, changeable, prolific, lord of earthquakes. Poseidon, the sea and horse god would not be a stranger to the force of divine madness. The image that overtook Alan Strang and his doctor is rich with suggestion, rich with both psychological and religious motifs, and the line between them is blurred indeed. Such an image cannot be explained away, but like all such images, may be explored and expanded to great advantage in the attempt to understand the human *psyche*.

14. *Equus*, p. 125.

An Image of the Divine Helper

Let us explore another symbolic image, this time one from a Hindu text. The image is a popular one in the Hindu tradition and, like Equus, is a divine figure in animal form. Hanumān, like Equus is essentially a non-anthropomorphic figure. That is, although he speaks man's language and engages in activities some of which bear resemblance to those of man, he is non-human in essence and could not be construed as a man in animal form. Rather, he is something totally other, awesome in his power and in his difference. Hanumān is a figure of divine import by virtue of his singular nature; he is a figure of psychological import for the same reason.

It is vital to remember that Hanumān is quite different from Equus, both in his particular attributes and in his cultural setting. Equus enters the experience of a very Western character, one whose religious and cultural setting is relatively sterile and devoid of powerful symbolic imagery. Hanumān is one of a vast realm of Hindu images, all extremely vital and part of the cultural context. The psychological contrasts between Eastern and Western cultures equal the differences of religious sensibility between them, in intensity as well as in essence. Nevertheless, it is possible to extend a psychological perspective upon symbolic images in a cross-cultural study, thereby enriching both the perspective and the imagery. Of course, here as in the previous section, theological assertions are not part of the analysis. There can be no attempt to explain religious devotion or practice as it pertains to Hanumān either historically or presently.

In this discussion, interest will be focussed only on a particular aspect of Hanumān. There is a vast mythology attached to this figure which cannot be included in so short a study. In keeping with the focus of the previous section, Hanumān is approached here as an image of transformation in one context. In the Valmiki *Rāmāyaṇa*, he acts as such a symbol in relation to Rāma, and it is this relationship that will be explored below.¹⁵

As an epic in every sense of the word, the Valmiki *Rāmāyaṇa* is rich with mythological motifs, imagery and characters. It is possible to characterize this work in many different ways. For the sake of this

15. The edition used is *The Rāmāyaṇa of Valmiki*, translation by Hari Prasad Shastri. London: Shantisadan, 1962. All references are to this edition.

study, we shall look to the very basic level on which it is the story of the transformation of Rāma from youth to adult; the journey of an eldest son to kingship. The trials and misfortunes which occur are part of the requirements the true king must satisfy prior to his ascent to the throne. From this perspective, the characters and phenomena which aid or hinder Rāma are essential aspects of the mystery he must enact in order to become what he must be, the future king. However wise and powerful he might be at the outset, he must experience a confrontation with the unknown and emerge still wiser and more powerful, that is, transformed, else he will not be fit to rule. This confrontation necessitates helpers whose own nature is unusual, remarkable and beyond Rāma's experience; he must make acquaintance with the unknown by way of mediators whose essence is similarly unknown. One such character is Hanumān, whom Rāma instantly recognizes as an ally.

Hanumān, the divine monkey, is well suited to be Rāma's trusted companion. As adviser and minister to Bali, his observations are astute and well-considered, for he regularly takes counsel with himself before offering his counsel to others. His monkey-nature is manifest, but as the son of Vāyu, his extraordinary strength and special powers set him apart both from men and from the monkey host.

Hanumān is not without his dark side, for he is prone to audacity and extremes. He takes considerable risks in revealing himself to the Rākshasas in Lankā and causing considerable destruction there when his mission was to be one of secret reconnaissance.¹⁶ He invites the wrath of Dadhīmukha, Sugrīva's uncle, by destroying Madhuvana.¹⁷ But such excesses, indicative of his monkey-nature, are rendered as amusing exploits, and never threaten the success of Rāma's mission. For his devotion to Rāma is complete. Hanumān's delicate treatment of Sītā in Lankā is notable for its restraint.¹⁸ And it is Hanumān who brings the crest of the mountain of herbs to heal Rāma and Lakshmaṇa during battle.¹⁹ His talent in warfare, too, is exceptional.

16. Sundara Kanda, Ch. 41-55.

17. Sundara Kanda, Ch. 61-64.

18. Sundara Kanda, Ch. 30-40, 55, 56.

19. Yuddha Kanda, Ch. 74-75 and again Ch. 102.

It is through Hanumān that Rāma first makes contact with his monkey allies.²⁰ And it is Hanumān who advises Sugriva to keep his promise to Rāma.²¹ In all this Hanumān acts as a facilitator, the one who eases the way, brings strangers together to mutual benefit, forges and holds bonds between parties. He helps the flow of events to continue, and he heals figurative and actual wounds which would disturb that flow. Hanumān mediates, as a divine messenger, among the disparate elements of the drama of Rāma's transformation. And it is Hanumān who announces to Ayodhyā the return of the future king, giving an account of all that has befallen him on his path to transformation.²²

Most importantly, it is to Hanumān that Rāma entrusts his ring,²³ for it is clear to him that among all the monkeys Hanumān will be the one to make contact with Sītā—making contact is Hanumān's speciality. His most essential role in the epic is as Rāma's messenger to Sītā; it is his task to cross the sea as Rāma's surrogate, survey the enemy and discover Rāma's woman, his female counterpart, the future Queen. Rāma's exile is from his homeland; Sītā's exile is from him. The one must be resolved before the other can be ended.

Hanumān is the instrument by which contact is made, both between Rāma and Sītā and Rāma and Rāvaṇa. By means of the divine messenger, the signal is sent that the future king is prepared to confront the unknown, the land across the sea, where his soul is held captive. In Chapter 115 of the Yuddha Kanda, it is Hanumān who summons Sītā to Rāma's presence, bringing an end to their long separation and signalling the beginning of yet another trail, for here, as in most epics and as in most psychological analysis, there can be no final resolution other than death. Psychologically, in the transformation of Rāma, Hanumān is active at all of the most decisive moments.

It is notable that each time Hanumān is sent to Sītā, as previously when Bali sent him to Rāma and as later when Rāma sends him to Bharata, Hanumān must recount what has happened. The messenger serves as historian/story-teller, bearing the sacred tales in good

20. Kishkindha Kanda, Ch. 3.

21. Kishkindha Kanda, Ch. 32.

22. Yuddha Kanda, Ch. 127-129.

23. Kishkindha Kanda, Ch. 44.

faith. He bears witness to Rāma's achievements, Sītā's despair and devotion, Rāvaṇa's defeat. . . . in short, all the essential steps in the transformation of the future king are attested by this singular figure. His active role in all that transpires, along with his special nature, qualify him as the true witness. To be sure, in the psychological mystery of transformation, there is need of such a witness and advocate, whose words may chart the workings of the soul. Mythological traditions speak of many such figures.²⁴

Hanumān is a combination of symbolic images, part *psychopomp* or guide of souls on their underworld journey, part mentor and counsellor in matters of transformation, part hero or conqueror of the underworld. There is no equation that will effectively define Hanumān as equal of any other mythological figure such as the hero Hercules, the *psychopomp* Hermes or any of the figures which suit the Western perception of the archetypal mentor. Hanumān functions uniquely in the Hindu context and in the wider context of mythological figures with psychological significance. But the psychological themes to which we have referred do function significantly in the relationship of Hanumān to Rāma, and, moreover, these themes are significant in the religious context as well. For religion and psychology often embark on their separate paths using the same thematic material; as we have seen, the imagery is essential to both. For the devotee, Hanumān is the semi-divine helper of the divine Rāma. He fulfils all of his functions as part of his relationship to the deity. In psychological terms, Hanumān fulfils these functions as an aspect or image of *psyche*, vital to the transformation of the soul of Rāma, the initiate.

Thus, from the perspective of depth psychology, the *Rāmāyaṇa* is rich with symbolic imagery, which emerges from the autonomous constellations in the unconscious as part of a continuing process of transformation whose end is undefinable. The importance of the *Rāmāyaṇa* is not, of course, confined to the elements of psychological drama which it describes. It is an epic whose cultural, historical and religious significance is unlimited. Still, its particular magic is rooted in its wealth of imagery, and in this respect its unceasing

24. See, for example, Karl Kerényi, *Hermes, Guide of Souls*, translation by Murray Stein. Zurich: Spring Publications, 1976, and James Hillman, *The Dream and the Underworld*, Ch. 5.

popularity has a certain resonance from a psychological point of view. Symbolic imagery, like Hanumān, can change its form at will. It can move mountains, signal war and engaged us in mortal combat. It is, as well, a repository of wisdom and good counsel. The human soul strives towards such images and with them may teach us something of our true nature. That nature remains ever mysterious to us, as were Rāma's and Hanumān's in the *Rāmāyana*.