

Hermes: Image of the Dual Psyche

Hermes is often depicted with wings on his helmet and on his feet. He was the messenger of the gods in classical times and is an increasingly important figure in our own world for he is the god of all going-between, the god therefore of that network of communication in which space means nothing so that you can be in Turkestan or anywhere and wiggle your way into a bank account in Notting Hill Gate as easily as if you were in the next street. In myth, time and space meant nothing to Hermes, and neither did rules and boundaries and we are beginning to find out that psyche itself has the same sort of fluidity and transcendence of boundaries. The understanding of that element in the world which is free, for good and ill, of time and space, is certainly one of the modern frontiers.

In 1925 Jung gave a seminar to a group of his first students, Esther Harding and Emma Jung herself and some twenty five others. His intention was to give a clear account of how his thought had emerged in those early days—probably as much for his own sake as for theirs. It was a taking-stock. There he says 'My first idea of the libido (by which he meant the energy of life itself) was that it splits into two streams from the very beginning, negative and positive, between which the life-energy is held as in an electric field. In a sense the opposites in the world are very obvious. There is life and death, creation and destruction, growing and falling back, apart from male and female and all the multitude of other opposites which play continuously as in a great water-garden. Mythologically we meet him-her (for of course he holds both sexes within him) in the caduceus, with its two snakes winding up the rod, facing each other, separating and also joining at every point. We meet it again in a more recent image, the DNA molecule, of which Jung had, of course, no knowledge. In terms of his time it was a brilliant intuitive image, rising up out of his own unconscious in the particular form of thinking which is natural to the unconscious, which is the image. The image is the thinking of the unconscious, and each image always combines the opposites.

The essential, structural presence in everything that exists of opposites, so that to be conscious of it is never a case of either-or but always of both-and, became the central theme of Jung's work. And if this offended the logical tradition on which the whole culture depended, and caused even a frisson of terror to pass through it, for it would change so much, he couldn't help that. Those of you familiar with the I Ching, with Lao Tsu, with Yoga and Tai Chi know that all of those depend on the continual balance of opposites—and this is much with the body as with the mind. There is that perfect union, too, of body and psyche. If you understand Tai Chi you understand Jung. But our myth is quite different. It is the myth of eternal war, Good and Evil pitched eternally against each other, God against Satan. That is the base-rock of our own culture, and that can never understand. The first rule of logic is likewise, that opposites exclude each other. That is its basic premise, and the rest of the great palace of logic rises above it. It has become like the air that we breathe, and it is unfortunately an anti-life principle, for in Nature opposites need each other the whole time, and nothing could be conceived and born without them, nothing could exist. But logic works very well with the inorganic, and has unleashed the enormous physical power which has given the Western culture domination over all others. It just doesn't work in the organic world, and as a culture we have not learnt that. In the organic world, completely different rules apply, above all that continuous union and falling apart of opposites, which only the language of image can contain. What replaced for Jung the negative dualism of the Western world was the image. Nature is all image. And he

sensed it in the very roots of its Being. Libido, he said, does not rise from the unconscious in a steady stream, so to speak, but it is archetypal: that is it comes in images.

The poet Coleridge had noticed the same thing about the image, though he used the word 'symbol'. Perhaps every thinking artist has to noticed it. There can be no deep thinking, he wrote in the *Biographia Literaria*, without deep feeling. This can only be expressed in symbol, and every symbol contains, he says, a contradiction. Anyone who has much to do with images knows that too. The image comes up out of nowhere, charged with an energy by which you are activated, by which you can even be possessed, demanding that we give it form, make it real. The image is in this way the *essence of creativity*, for it is always comes up in us, seeking this incarnation, this finding form.

And to do that it needs matter. Though the image itself is psychic in origin, it can't find form without matter. We have to think of psyche and matter, therefore, in yet another image, it is the lovers, it is the Sacred Marriage of the alchemists. For psyche loves matter exactly because of the limit that it confers; whereas matter loves psyche for the opposite quality, its complete fluidity. If we could think of them as lovers who need each other, and who as lovers must be equal or they can't be lovers, , it would place them both in the right relation. In matter everything is here not there, this not that, in this place *or* that: it can't be both. In matter a thing has edges, lines where it stops, and that gives it character and uniqueness. We cannot orientate ourselves in the material world *at all*, without logic. But the symbol of psyche in our culture is Shakespeare's Ariel, for whom the rules of here or there mean nothing. We learn all about him-her in the first few minutes of the play. 'I come to answer thy best pleasure, be't to swim, to fly, to dive into the fire, to ride/ On the curl'd clouds.' And he can do it all at the same time. Describing how he wrecked the king's ship he says, 'I boarded the king's ship: now on the beak/ Now in the waist, the deck, in every cabin/ I flamed amazement sometimes I'd divide/ And burn in many places, on the topmast/ The yards and bowsprit, would I flame distinctly/ Then meet and join. Jove's lightnings the precursors of the dreadful thunderclaps, more momentary,/ And sight-outrunning, were not...' And all the time the ship is not really wrecked: it is illusion. And Ariel is one of our favourite figures in all literature.

But Hermes in his fullness, in his own opposites, can only be properly expressed in the human, for he has himself no body . The first words in Jung's *Memories Dreams Reflections* are these: 'My life is a story of the self-manifestation of the unconscious. Everything in the unconscious seeks outward manifestation.' But to understand that second sentence, we must use that word 'seek' differently for it is different to our seeking consciously for something . It is deeper, as deep as the tree beneath us seeking to grow into itself. So he adds immediately, that he cannot use the language of science to describe this process of growth. It has to be expressed in the language of myth, which is the image.

If a man's life is a story of the self-manifestation of what before was hidden, it is no different to the plant, though a great deal more complicated, no different to the oak-tree locked in the tiny compass of the acorn, in that state of *potential* which is the unconscious—but waiting there, most actively waiting.

Coleridge's word for what we generally call the unconscious was *imagination*, .and Hermes is also god of the imagination. With Blake, he always spoke of *the* imagination not *my* imagination exactly as we speak of *the* unconscious and not mine. Whatever we call it, it is an unbounded storehouse of images. We trivialise it when we make it personal, as if we had made it ourselves, for those images

are objective, they are there in the unconscious, the source of everything that is also the source of all healing, for it is the archetypal experience which heals: it is a going back to the roots. And those images have an intelligence, again different to how we conceive of that word since it is the intelligence of the un-conscious, the intelligence of the dream. The unconscious thinks, and not only does it think, it is brilliant, far more brilliant than is the conscious mind. And we are only just beginning to be aware of that. As we learn more and more about Nature, which is no other than the un-conscious in its outward form, we have the chance, as no generation had before us, more and more to just stand in wonder and awe before it. It is the same with the learning about our own bodies, of which we have only just scratched the surface. The more do we know or glimpse, the more does it seem that awe is the only appropriate feeling—so far does it exceed the conscious intelligence. And all of Nature is also in our own unconscious, though of course most of it remains there, unconscious.

Throughout the mythology of the world Hermes, under many names, seems to represent the developing power of the human to take all this on. We had first, I think, to make our freedom from it, to separate ourselves off so that Nature and the unconscious could both be object to our subject. And in his most primitive form Hermes is simply trying to do that—a cunning trickster figure, immensely popular with people because he suggests the possibility of escaping from all those hard limitations that Nature puts upon us, mainly death. A good example of this figure is Brer Rabbit, who was a transplant into the slave colonies of the great African trickster-god, the hare. Death comes in the form of Brer Fox and Brer Wolf. They are quite stupid and Brer Rabbit continuously tricks them. When Brer Fox catches him one day, he cries out ‘burn me, boil me in oil, skin me alive, do anything but please, please don’t throw me into that bramble patch!’ So Brer Fox does exactly that and Brer Rabbit scampers off crying, ‘Born and bred in a bramble patch.’

He is very like the most primitive trickster figure in Greek myth who is called Sisyphus. When his time comes to die, he asks Hades to show him how a pair of handcuffs works, and when Hades obligingly shows him he snaps them shut, so Hades is held prisoner. And all over the world no one can die. Even if someone is chopped into a hundred pieces he still can’t die. It is a terrible situation. The whole world stops functioning. Eventually Zeus has to sort it out, and it is still Sisyphus’s time to die. This time he tells his wife not to bury him and when he arrives at the Underworld he asks permission to return, very briefly, he says, to see to this important duty, and he really will be right back. But of course he breaks his word. The infant Hermes is a greatly evolved form of the same figure.

Born in the cave where his mother had lain with Zeus, he is put into his cradle and on the first night climbs out and goes off on his own sort of business, which is to steal some cattle from his half-brother Apollo. Having separated from the herd fifty heifers, he drives them off backwards, so no one can tell in which direction they’ve gone, takes them to a cavern of his own and slaughters a couple, dividing the meat into twelve portions, one for each of the high gods. This is him in his role of making connections, for blood sacrifice always aims to do that, to link this world to the other, to cross that boundary.

Next he takes a bit of a heifer’s hide for his next project, which is to construct a musical instrument—a task of the same sort, to link up, to link up different levels of reality. He finds a tortoise in the road, picks him up (for like all the gods he is a psychopath, he has no feeling), says

cheerfully 'it's dangerous to go abroad, better to stay at home', scoops out the body from the shell, wraps cowhide around it, kills a sheep and stretches six strings of its gut across from side to side, sweeps his hand across the strings and makes the sweetest music. It is all, you see, life out of death but in a sense that is the meaning of this living and dying world. After all that he goes back to his cave, slips through the keyhole in the door like a wisp, and is back in his cot, and when Apollo comes raging into the cave, 'It cannot possibly be me', he says, 'for I am just a tiny, new-born baby.' Apollo knows he's lying and takes him to Zeus, who listens to his excuses and doesn't believe a word of them either, but smiles with amusement and insists he gives the cattle back. And Hermes does so, and cements his peace with Apollo with the gift of the lyre, which is henceforth Apollo's instrument. Apollo represents very much this world.

Later on we meet him in the *Odyssey*, showing Odysseus how to escape from the Cyclops' cave, giving him a special plant which will protect him from being turned into a pig by the lovely Circe; helping him eventually to escape from her enchantment and get back to Penelope and home. Helps him then to handle the suitors, who are gathered in his hall, devouring his substance and will kill him if they can. Lastly we see him leading the souls of the suitors, after the battle in the hall, off to the Underworld like a flock, says Homer, of twittering bats. Hermes is shown here, you see, leading you through the vicissitudes of this life, and when the time is right guiding you also into the other one, the world before the world, the world of pure, timeless psyche. For Hermes it is never a matter of life or death, matter or spirit, but always both.

Hermes is god of merchants who make wealth, and equally of thieves who take it away, loosening everything up. Various elaborate images of him, sometimes simple phallic stones, stood along all the roads of Greece, and especially where they met. He is therefore the perfect symbol for the study of the psyche in our time, which is what he has become. But I think it is only the complete human being who can do what Hermes is trying to do, which is no less than to evolve into the conscious principle of the world, which Hermes is ultimately symbolising. In that sense he is a Christ-figure, wholly God and wholly human. That is the archetype. Then Hermes is not the youth, as he is often depicted, but something complete and whole, and only representable in an image. .

The most developed form of the Hermes myth I find in a fairy tale collected by the Grimm Brothers, called the Golden Bird, and I want to finish with the first part of that. In European folk tales the unevolved Hermes figure is generally the fox, and his redemption is actually the subject of the story.

'A long, long while ago there was a king who had adjoining his palace a fine pleasure garden. In it stood a tree which bore golden apples, and as soon as the apples were ripe they were counted, but the next day one was missing.' What a world of meaning there is in those two sentences. The king has everything, including a fine pleasure-garden and a tree that has golden apples. But he never actually eats the apples. He counts them instead.

The lost apple vexed the king very much and he ordered that watch should be kept every night beneath the tree.

Is it not what we lose that sends us in search of it, sends us off into the labyrinth of the unconscious, sends us on the quest?

Having three sons he sends out the eldest one of the first night to watch.

There is no daughter, it seems, and no queen. The feminine is totally absent, except in the vegetative, the far unconscious form of the apples—which are not eaten.

At about midnight the youth falls asleep and next morning another apple is missing. The next night the second son has to watch but fares no better. The next morning yet another apple is missing. The turn comes for the third son, who is eager to try; but the king hesitates a long time, for this boy is not very bright, or is considered so. But at last the king consents. This youth lies under the tree and does not sleep. At twelve o'clock there is a rustling in the air and looking up he sees a bird flying down, whose feathers are of pure gold. The visitor has just picked off one of the apples when the boy let loosens a bolt at him, and one of the golden feathers drops off. The youth picks it up and the next morning takes it to the king, who at once assembles his Council who all declare that single feather to be worth more than the whole kingdom. 'Well then,' said the king, 'if this feather is so precious, I must and will have the whole bird, for one feather is of no use to me.'

This is the first appearance of the theme that runs through the whole story, which is the desire and pursuit of the whole.

The eldest son is now sent out on his travels, and he doubts not that he will find the Golden Bird. When he has walked about a mile he sees sitting on the edge of the forest a fox, at which he levels his gun, but the fox cries out, 'Don't shoot me, and I will give you some good advice. You are going on a quest for the Golden Bird. Tonight you will come to a village where two inns stand facing each other. One will be brightly lit and much merriment will be going on, but turn not in there but rather into the other, though it seem a poor place to you.'

The young man thinks 'How can a silly best give rational advice to me?' So he fires but misses, and the fox runs away with its tail in the air. The young man goes on and in the evening he comes to the village where the two inns face each other. 'I should be a fool', he thinks, 'if I went into this dirty inn while the capital one stands opposite', so he enters the dancing room and there he soon forgets the Golden Bird.

After a long time with no news of the eldest son, the second son sets out to see if he can do better. The fox meets him as it did his brother and gives him the same advice, which he doesn't heed. He too arrives at the two inns and out of the window of the riotous house his brother lean, who invites him in. He too enters and forgets about he Golden Bird.

After a long time the youngest wants to try his own luck, but his father will not consent. 'You're not very quick', he says, 'and are less likely even than your brothers to find the Golden Bird.' For all the Court has long decided the youngest brother is a simpleton. But the boy gives him no rest and at last he consents.

On the edge of the forest the fox is again sitting and again offers, in return for his life, the same advice. The boy says, 'Be not afraid, little fox, I will do you no harm.' You shall not repent of it,' says the fox. 'Get up behind on my tail!' So the boy seats himself and away they go, over hedges and ditches, uphill and downhill, so fast that the prince's hair whistles in the wind.

When they reach the village the youth dismounts, turns straight into the mean-looking house, and passes the night comfortably. The next morning he goes out into the fields, and the fox is already there. 'Go forward,' he says, 'until you come to a castle before which a troop of soldiers will lie

snoring. Pass through the middle of them into the castle and through all the rooms until you come to a room where the Golden Bird hangs in a wooden cage. Next to it will be a golden cage but do not put the bird in the golden cage or you will fare badly.'

When they arrive at the castle, which takes no time at all on fox's back, everything is as he said it would be. But when the prince sees the Golden Bird in the wooden cage there is something in him, which in a sense is the meaning of all this story, that will not allow him to leave it there. 'It would be a pity,' he thinks, 'with that wonderful golden cage just opposite.' So he does exactly what he has been told not to do, and the moment he touches the bird, it sets up such a screech that all the soldiers wake up, capture the youth and take him straight to the king who condemns him to death. There is, however, one way he can save himself. He must bring to the king the Golden Horse, and he will then go free himself and receive as his reward the Golden Bird.

This is the theme that runs through the whole story, and the stakes are continually raised, and when all has been achieved—culminating in the Golden Princess, who was what was missing in the beginning, the fox begs to have, as his reward, to be killed and his head and paws cut off. He too wants to evolve, and eventually the prince obliges, and of course the fox becomes a human. But how, throughout the story, does the prince discriminate between when to obey the fox and when not to? It all rests on that. The fox's preferred mode is always be get in, take what you want and then get out again, without waking anyone up. This occurs quite a lot in matters of love. You have to be careful of the fox in matters of love, for anything that is gained remains unconscious. What is wrong with remaining unconscious, he may ask? Why does anything need to be conscious? But this fox wants to evolve too. There seems to be something in the human which desires consciousness and is not content with less, something that needs the fox along the road but needs also to transcend it, to go through into a wider horizon. It is the desire and pursuit of the whole, and it cannot be described in scientific language. It is not rational.