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Escaping to the Angels: A Note on the Passing of the Manic Defence

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Abstract: This essay examines how some psychologically adroit individuals use creativity as a manic defence against the affects that they cannot bear to experience directly. Conceived within the perspectives of Jungian psychoanalysis, manic creativity is shown to effect a defence against the subjective distress of personal complexes by means of an identification with the archetypal cores of the complexes. This defensive use of creativity, however, may ultimately play a decisive role in healing. Indeed, when considered from a prospective or teleological point of view, manic creativity, for all its insensitivity to the suffering that has inspired it, can also be understood as gradually creating a container in which affects formerly defended against may be received and suffered, felt and grieved. It is in this way that manic creativity, though clearly a defence (and at times a very costly one), participates in the reparative initiative of the self.

There is an affect that comes *before* creativity and an affect that comes, if it comes at all, only *afterwards*. The first, which cannot be contained or completely experienced due to its traumatic character, splits the psyche and by doing so compels some people to make a creative container in which all that has been split apart can be gathered together again and healed. The second affect, which is sometimes experienced as the apocalyptic unveiling of the first in a burst of repressed affect and insight, corresponds to the actual inhabiting of the container which was formed as a creative defence, and the actual embodiment of the soul which has been made.

Said differently, if taken to the limit, the manic triumph one has achieved over an experience may finally give way to a depressive encounter with it. Although it may take years to find the words to

formulate the feelings that could not formerly be borne, it may take still more years before one will allow oneself to be moved by those words. In alchemical terms, the endeavour of finding the so-called "words to say it" corresponds to the *albedo* or 'whitening' stage of the process and being moved by the words, to the *rubedo*, that final stage in which the "soul-work" reddens into life.

But reddening into life is not easy, for the mind, having secured for itself an imaginal or linguistic mastery, reflexively eschews the gasps and sobs through which its words and images could be reconnected to the flesh. Loath to admit the extent to which it feels menaced by that rumble of interior thunder which announces the advent of a feeling-toned complex, the manically whitened mind will tend to engage in perseveration more and more grandiloquently. What is sowed in the furrow of denied anxiety, however, cannot be reaped through a similar denial. For it is one thing to "farm[] ...a verse\{and\} make a vineyard of the curse" (Auden), and quite another to press the grapes and drink the wine.

Avoiding this fact, prolific creativity--be it in transference relationships, work, or art--may become an addiction. Unable to bear what Jung has called "the terrible ambiguity of direct experience," or, more precisely, in a defensive avoidance of the necessary second encounter with it, we may live for a time in what could be characterized as an art-for-art's-sake attitude. Driven by what Freud called the repetition compulsion, the defensively generative person may only be able to live from project to project, relationship to relationship, poem to poem, in creative inflation. This is diagnostic. That a person finds it easier to ape God than to be human is the clearest indication of the rootedness of the manic defence in an archetypal identification. Yet, if the fool would persist in his folly he would become wise. Being a fatality such a condition can only be affirmed; healing comes, if at all, only as a sort of *enantiodromia* brought on by our perilous persistence in the defensive

folly of manic creativity. It will eventually pass.

What goes around comes around. Just as the legendary Parsifal, in the grail castle for the first time, missed the grail by failing to ask the fateful question, "Whom does the grail serve?", so many of us miss the opportunity for our own healing--not once, but many times--by failing to ask ourselves what our creative efforts mean to us.

A young man, in the grail castle of his own experience, vividly exemplifies how narrowly the grail can be missed. Although he seems to ask the decisive question no less than eight times in an eight line poem, the aesthetic relief the poem afforded him for the moment *stole the moment*, causing him to miss the eternity which lay like a treasure within the moment.

Can you paint the last stroke in the corner?

Can you live in your own painted room?

Can you never the distance to no-where?

Can your faith say but never assume?

Can you sup in the hallows of breathing?

Can you people the angelic snow?

Can you dream the world onto a lamb's back?

Can you love the undamable flow?

In taking so much pleasure in posing them, he never really put his questions to himself, asking what they meant to him personally. This failure to actually grapple with the contents of the unconscious which have been objectified through the creative process is, of course, indicative of inflation. To the extent that the young man was swept up in the incantational magic of his verse,

his awareness of a distinction between the larger Self, which had inspired him, and the little self, to which this inspiration had been addressed, was obliterated.

Jung sometimes characterized a neurosis as a creative phenomenon, an attempt at self-cure that leaves us *all but cured*. Unfortunately, this is only too true. Although creativity plays a vital and necessary role in our healing, and though we may even need to pursue it as an end in itself for a time, it must also be recognized (as deconstruction has shown) that creativity does not deliver us across the fissures of our psychic life to the paradise of any signified. And so, like Prospero at the end of *The Tempest* abjuring his "rough magic," many of us, too, who are psychological *magi*, must eventually abjure ours if we are not to remain trapped in the glitter and illusion of stylized feeling.

It is not just that the trauma from which the psychologically adroit sufferer fled to the angels of archetypal insight must be faced if that person is to live upon the earth as a human being. The opposite is also the case: the angels through whom one has fled to a traumatized identity must also be wrestled with. The manic defence itself must be faced if we are to recognize the response of our own essential nature to the impingements we have suffered. For in the deepest sense, our capacity to be traumatized is a secret capacity of the angel who expresses our ambivalence about feeling or refusing to feel a particular event on *a priori* grounds.

'The pearl of great price,' an archetypal motif many have latched onto to make sense of a longstanding struggle with emotion, is one such angel which refuses, and thereby, compensates the starkness of our lives by sending us on a quest of discovery. Since the motif is rooted in the psyche's inability to represent negation, however, the promise represented by this priceless pearl is actually obtained, if at all, *iconoclastically*, if not quite aniconically, in the deconstruction of the pearl back to the very grit against which it was made--i.e., in the emptiness and despair that we

formerly could not bear.

Eliot was right: The end of all our exploring will be to arrive at the place we have started and to know it for the first time, *not* merely as a well wrought poetical construction, but also as the scene of our own crime.

The healing of the split between psyche and soma, the subtle embodiment of each in the other, occurs, not in the twinkling of the eye it takes for a manic defence to save us through the repudiation of basic needs, but rather, in that paroxysm of grief in which we actually allow ourselves to be moved by what has been moving us in the form of an archetypal identification or manic defence. And though it may have taken many years to create, with the help of the gods who inspire us, the temple for the soul which Keats describes in his poem, "Ode to Psyche," once it is built, we must also, as Keats tells us in the last line of his poem, learn to leave "a casement ope at night,\To let the warm Love in."

Reference

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