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The Active Door – Transformation Symbolism in Nietzsche and Suhrawardi

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Abstract

In this paper, I look at a dramatic scene from Nietzsche's Zarathustra, "The Vision and the Riddle," from Jung's perspective and then from the perspective of Henry Corbin. Both proceed from divergent ontological premisses, and both are equally convincing. As my friend and colleague Andrew Rawlinson once observed, "opposite truths apply to the human condition."

In Irvin Yalom's novel *When Nietzsche Wept* (Yalom: 1992), Lou Salome asks Josef Breuer to treat Nietzsche's suicidal despair. He reluctantly agrees, and the two men form an extraordinary therapeutic alliance. Jung was only able to analyse Nietzsche through his texts but he thought that Friedrich would have been a difficult patient:

The problem here is that Nietzsche is not an ideally analysed person - and not even an ordinarily analysed person is free from that peculiar crisscross of personal tendencies. If Nietzsche were analysed-as if a man like Nietzsche could be-he would show two sides: here the suffering neurotic Nietzsche, and there the psychology of the spirit, his peculiar mythological drama. But as it is, the divine drama and man's ordinary suffering are completely mixed and they distort each other, so naturally we are confused when we look at the tangle and try to decipher the contradictions. In order to have a clear picture you must hold thesis and antithesis ever before your eyes, the two things that constantly work into each other or influence each other and then try to separate them. But it is really difficult. (Jung 1989: 856)

I suspect that Jung's Zarathustra Seminars are one long misreading of Nietzsche's text. It is however what the late Harold Bloom called a strong misreading:

A strong poem, which alone can become canonical for more than a single generation, can be defined as a text that must generate strong misreadings, both as other poems and literary criticism. Texts that have a single, reductive, simplistic meaning are themselves necessarily weak misreadings of anterior texts. When a strong misreading has demonstrated its fecundity by producing other strong misreadings across several generations, then we can and must accept its canonical status. (Bloom 1982: 285)

In what follows, I will be looking at a passage from *Thus Spake Zarathustra (The Vision and the Riddle, 2)* from the standpoint of the thesis and of the antithesis. In the second half of this chapter, I will turn to Henry Corbin's equally strong misreading of the Iranian Sufi Master Al Suhrawardi. Like the highly idiosyncratic jazz pianist Thelonious Monk, Jung and Corbin play wrong right.

The Vision and the Riddle

Nietzsche had many voices. He could be prophetic but also light and playful. Here is how he speaks of the death of God in *On Apostates (Zarathustra 3:8)*:

*For with the old Gods, things came to an end long ago - and verily they had a good and joyful God's end!
Theirs was no mere twilight death - that is a lie! Rather, one day they laughed themselves to death!
This happened when the most godless words issued from a God himself - the words; 'There is one God! Thou shalt have no other gods before me!'
An old wrath-beard of a God, most jealous, forgot himself thus.
And thereupon all the Gods laughed and rocked in their chairs and shouted: 'Is this not Godliness, that there are Gods but no God' (Nietzsche 2005: 158)*

Later in the text, Nietzsche calls for a new nobility to oppose mob rule, and he repeats the last line to suggest that this elite will be truly godlike. Jung's comment on this in the *Zarathustra Seminars* is based on the Thomas Common translation, where the line in question is: "That is just divinity, that there are gods but no God". Jung takes the word "divinity" as a synonym for Meister Eckhart's "Godhead" and translates Nietzsche into a new key:

We know that Nietzsche has declared God to be dead, and here it appears as if God were not so dead; that is, as if there were no personal or monotheistic God, but there was divinity. In the language of Meister Eckhart, it would be Godhead, not God. The divine element is still there, but not in the form of a monotheistic God... (Jung 1989: 1526-7)

Only Jung could bring together the radical 19th century atheist Nietzsche and the greatest medieval Christian mystic. However, this is a misreading too far. It has been pointed out to me that Nietzsche's actual word was 'Gottlichkeit' (Divinity) and not Eckhart's 'Gotheit (Godhead).'

Jung returned to Eckhart in *Aion*, where he explicated the distinction between Godhead or Divinity and God like this:

Meister Eckhart's theology knows a "Godhead" of which no qualities, except unity and being, can be predicated; it "is becoming", it is not yet Lord of itself, and it represents an absolute coincidence of opposites... Union of opposites is equivalent to unconsciousness, so far as human logic goes, for consciousness presupposes a

differentiation into subject and object and a relationship between them. Where there is no “other”, or it does not yet exist, all possibility of consciousness ceases. Only the Father, the God welling out of the Godhead, “notices himself”, “becomes beknown to himself”, and confronts himself as a Person. (CW9ii:301)

The death of God does not mean the extinction of God, but his withdrawal back into the Godhead. So, there is no God as such, only gods; or rather, the divine element has left the dogmatic idea of God and become incarnate in human beings. Jung then asks, “Is it the deification of man or the birth of God in man?” He seemed to oscillate between the two, but in *A Psychological Approach to the Dogma of the Trinity*, he has opted for the birth of God in man. God, he declared in the Trinity essay, wants to become incarnate in fallen man:

In the Paraclete ... God is much closer to the real man and his darkness than he is in the Son. The light God bestrides the bridge - Man - from the day side; God's shadow from the night side. What will be the outcome of this fearful dilemma, which threatens to shatter the frail human vessel with unknown storms and intoxications? It may well be the revelation of the Holy Ghost out of man himself. Just as man was once revealed out of God, so, when the circle closes, God may be revealed out of man. (CW11.:267)

If man were to become “deified,” he could not be the bridge. He has to remain fallen so that God can be revealed out of his creature in the Paraclete. Nietzsche had forgotten that “We are no more than the stable in which the Lord is born.”

Nothing illustrates the pitfall of deification more vividly than Jung’s treatment of *The Vision and the Riddle in Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The scene is set at a gateway where one lane stretches back for an eternity and another one stretches ahead. The word “MOMENT” is inscribed on this gateway. Zarathustra has climbed up to it with a dwarf on his back. The burden of the spirit of gravity is intolerable, but eventually Zarathustra shakes it off. Then he says to the dwarf:

Must not whatever among all things can walk have walked this lane already? Must not whatever among all things can happen have happened and been done and passed already? And if everything has already been, what do you think, dwarf, of this moment? Must not the gateway have already been there?

Suddenly, this dialogue about eternal recurrence is interrupted by a howling dog. The scene changes abruptly, and Zarathustra sees a young shepherd writhing and choking with a heavy black snake hanging out of his mouth. The spirit of gravity has shifted from the dwarf to the serpent, which has crawled into the man’s throat. Zarathustra tugs at the snake but to no avail; then he shouts, “Bite its head off!”:

(The shepherd) bit with a good bite! He spat far away the head of the snake - and sprang up. No longer a shepherd, no longer a human being, a transformed being, illumined, who laughed. Never yet on earth had any human being laughed as he laughed! (Nietzsche 2005: 136-8)

When Jung first read this narrative, it made a tremendous impression on him, but he could not explain why. It became his

“particular task to deal with the problem of the chthonic snake.” In the Visions seminar, he takes a very dim view of the matter: “One can quietly say that it is a most hysterical laughter, it is unsound laughter. In reality, one would be terribly disgusted” (Jung 1998: 283). Jung also maintained that the condition of the shepherd “is not to be explained by the preceding facts.” But let’s look closely at the text and zoom in on the moment of crisis:

*My hand tugged at the snake and tugged in vain! It could not tug the snake out of the shepherd’s throat***Then it cried out of me:** “Bite off! Bite off! Bite its head off!”- thus it cried out of me, my horror my disgust, my compassion, all my good and bad cried out of me into a single cry. (Nietzsche 2005: 137)

Did this cry come from the renegade that would drag the ego into an inflationary psychosis, or was it a redemptive summons from the core self?

In the Zarathustra seminars, Jung gave his most extensive commentary on this text. He observed that the normal situation, where the serpent swallows the hero, has been reversed. Nietzsche’s gothic imagery has no precedent in the world’s mythologies. According to Jung, the black snake embodies everything that Nietzsche refused to acknowledge in himself. Consequently, his entire individuation process is stuck at an impasse. The two sides represented by the innocent shepherd and the black snake should come together, and he “really should swallow the serpent in order that the regular thing should happen.” Zarathustra gave the man the wrong advice, and the outcome was catastrophic: “If you take a leap into heaven and become the sun,” says Jung, “your other side will be right down there in hell” (Jung 1989: 1292-6).

The Philosophy of Light

For Jung, that deification was psychologically impossible—how could mere mortals extricate themselves from original sin? This is a Christian view of the human condition that is not shared by Sufi masters like Suhrawardi. In Iranian Sufism, man has no fixed position in the order of things; he is, as Corbin puts it succinctly, “only a Not-yet: either an Angel or demon in potential” (Corbin 1983: 104).

Shihab al-Din Yahya Suhrawardi (1155-1191) was executed in Aleppo at the age of 36 under Saladin’s orders. He was the founder of the Illuminationist school of Islamic philosophy, and he is known as the Shaykh al-Ishraq. According to Henry Corbin, *israq* is a verbal noun meaning the splendour of the sun when it rises. For Suhrawardi, existence is light. Everything in existence manifests light at varying degrees of intensity:

“The essence of the First Absolute Light, God, gives constant illumination, whereby it is manifested and brings all things into existence, giving life to them by its rays. Everything in the world is derived from the Light of His essence, and all the beauty and gifts of His bounty, and to attain fully to this illumination is salvation.” (Hikmat al-ishraq, cited in Nasr 1964: 69)

The philosophy of light was first revealed by Hermes, or Idris as he is known in the Islamic world. It had two points of

origin: Persia and Egypt. From Egypt, it was transmitted to Greece, and from there it entered Islam. Suhrawardi reunified both streams.

In *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, Corbin has selected and translated a dramatic deification narrative from Suhrawardi's *Book of Elucidations*:

"On a certain night when there was sunlight, Hermes was at prayers in the temple of Light. When the column of dawn blazed forth, he saw an Earth about to be engulfed, with cities upon which the divine anger had descended and which fell into the abyss.

Then Hermes shouted, "You who are my father, rescue me from the enclosure that is near perdition!" And he heard a voice shouting an answer, "Take hold of the cable of our irradiation and climb up to the battlements of the Throne."

Then he climbed up, and there were an Earth and Heavens." (Corbin 1977: 120)

Suhrawardi's narrative recapitulates an ancient archetypal pattern, the passage through the Active Door, the Symplegades or clashing rocks. This is an ancient initiatory pattern. According to Ananda Coomaraswamy, "The distribution of the motif is an indication of its prehistoric antiquity and refers to the complex pattern of the Urmythos of the Quest to a period at least prior to the population of America" (Coomaraswamy, 1977, 521). It is found in Native American myths throughout the continent and is best known in Europe through *The Odyssey*.

On one side, beetling cliffs shoot up, and against them pound the roaring breakers of blue-eyed Amphitrite – the Clashing Rocks they're called by blissful gods.

No ship of men has ever approached and slipped past—always some disaster—big timbers and sailors' corpses whirled away by the waves and lethal blasts of fire.

One ship alone, one deep-sea craft, sailed clear, The Argo, sung by the world, when heading home from Aretes' shores. And she would have crashed against those rocks and sunk at once if Hera, for love of Jason, had not sped her through.

(Book 12, Fagels, 1997: 201)

In some Hindu myths, the Symplegades are sharp dancing reeds that snap shut in an instant, or they take the form of doors which, says Coomaraswamy, stand for pairs of opposites. In the Rig Veda, these are the opposites of day and night or light and dark. The hero must decisively pass through when it is neither day nor night, just as Hermes must grasp the cable when the sun is shining at night and climb up to the Throne. The path out of the quotidian world "is the single track

and strait way that penetrates the cardinal point on which the contraries turn” (Coomaraswamy, 1977: 529).

The shepherd in the *Vision and the Riddle* has to pass through the Active Door by the unusual expedient of biting off the head of the snake. He does so with all his might at the moment in which time and eternity intersect. He is immediately transformed: “Whoever would transfer from this world to the Otherworld, or return,” said Coomaraswamy, “must do so through the undimensional and timeless “interval” that divides related but contrary forces, between which if one is to pass at all, it must be instantly” (Coomaraswamy, 1977: 542).

Suhrawardi’s Hermes and Nietzsche’s shepherd do not carry their shadows with them when they ascend. They discard them, and the “cities of the oppressors” sink into the abyss. (Corbin 1978, 47) Philosophically, Suhrawardi and Nietzsche seem to be poles apart. Suhrawardi was a Muslim Neoplatonist, and Nietzsche’s philosophy is a devastating critique of the Platonist tradition. Or rather, it looks that way from Henry Corbin’s perspective. Recent scholarship has shown that Suhrawardi was not simply a mystical Platonist but “a hard-headed philosophical critic and creative thinker who set the agenda for later Islamic philosophy” (Walbridge 2005: 201). He could have given Nietzsche a good run for his money.

For his part, Nietzsche philosophized was no stranger to theophanic visions. In a short poem titled *Sils Maria*, he recollected his encounter with Zarathustra:

*There sat I waiting – waiting yet for naught,
Transcending good and evil, sometimes caught
in light, sometimes in shadow, all game,
all sea, all midday, all time without all aim.
At once then, my friend! One turned to two
and Zarathustra strode into my view.
(Nietzsche 2001: 258)*

Jung interpreted “one turned to two” correctly as a theophanic experience of the Self in his long essay *On Rebirth*:

When a summit of life is reached, when the bud unfolds and from the lesser the greater emerges, then as Nietzsche says, ‘One becomes two’ and the greater figure, which one always was but which remained invisible, appears to the lesser personality with the force of revelation.

Nietzsche’s last man, who has his little pleasures for the day and his little pleasures for the night, will drag this revelation down to the level of his mediocrity:

But the man who is inwardly great will know that the long expected friend of the soul, the immortal one, has now finally come to “lead captivity captive”; that is, to seize hold of him by whom this immortal has always been confined and held prisoner, and make his life flow into the greater life – a moment of deadliest peril. (CW9i:217)

Jung then refers to the tragedy of the tightrope walker in the Prologue of Zarathustra that anticipated Nietzsche's catastrophic fate. But this was not entirely his fault. Jung conjectured that had Nietzsche lived at any time between the 15th and the 18th centuries, he would have been an alchemistic philosopher. "The Christian myth did not hold life for him," said Jung in the Zarathustra Seminars. Consequently, "he came to the conclusion that the Church didn't give him the spiritual life he expected or needed, so he would quite naturally seek something that would produce life" (Jung 1989: 949-50). But what if Nietzsche could have found what he was seeking in Islam? He was more than half in love with Muslim culture, which he confessed "speaks more clearly to our senses and tastes than Rome or Greece" (Nietzsche 2005a, Aphorism 60). If Nietzsche could have made his way to the Islamic world, he certainly might well have found life there, not to mention a new earth to stand on and a new heaven above him:

*O sky above me! O pure deep sky! You abyss of light! Gazing into you,
I tremble with divine desires.
To cast myself into your height - that is my depth! To hide myself in your purity - that is my innocence!
The god is veiled by his beauty: thus you hide your stars. You do not
speak: thus you proclaim your wisdom.
You have risen for me today, mute over the raging sea; your love and modesty speak a revelation to my raging
soul.
(Nietzsche 1969: 184)*

In the Zarathustra Seminars, Jung maintained that this reverie was evidence of Nietzsche's inability "to give a definite or a decisive value to anything outside of himself". Consequently, he had to take it in into himself, or in this case, introject the sky! (Jung 1989: 1319-20). Jung's diagnosis of Nietzsche is based on his multivalent texts, and the patient has no right to reply. If he had, Nietzsche might well have said:

It's a bit rich for you to accuse me of self-deification when this is what you have written in your Liber Novus:

*You serve the spirit of this time, and believe you can escape the spirit of the depths. But the depths do not hesitate
any longer and will force you into the mysteries of Christ. It belongs to this mystery that man is not redeemed
through the hero, but becomes a Christ himself. (Jung 2009: 202)*

Is there any essential difference between your Christ and my Superman? Would you have written your Liber Novus without my Zarathustra? But you show scant regard for my material, and you find what you're looking for on almost every page: a man divorced from his instincts taking refuge in inflation. Have you forgotten what I wrote in *Ecce Homo*: Listen to me! I am the one who I am! Above all, do not mistake me for someone else! (Nietzsche 2005a 71). Moreover, I note that you make no mention of the fact that I lost my father when I was five - a strange oversight for a psychoanalyst!

The Alternative Evolutionary Hypothesis

In *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, Chapter 3, Jung recalls that his first reading of Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* was a deeply disturbing revelation:

Zarathustra was Nietzsche's Faust, his No.2 (personality), and my No.2 corresponded to Zarathustra - though this was like comparing a molehill with Mont Blanc. And Zarathustra - there could be no doubt about that - was morbid. Was my No.2 also morbid? This possibility filled me with a terror which for a long time I refused to admit, but the idea cropped up again and again at inopportune moments, throwing me into a cold sweat, so that I was forced to reflect on myself. (MDR: 123)

No wonder that Jung was extremely ambivalent about Nietzsche all his life. And if he had not had the good fortune to marry the second richest woman in Switzerland, he too might have ended up like Friedrich. But sometimes Jung gets away from his Nietzsche complex in the *Zarathustra Seminars*. When he relaxes his relentless hermeneutic of suspicion, he acknowledges Nietzsche as "one of the greatest psychologists who ever lived". Jung also commends Nietzsche for coming within a hair's breadth of discovering the archetype of the self:

We have many situations where it comes in, so one really marvels that he could never grasp it; for instance, in this jewel, and the star, and later on in the chapter about the adder, it comes so close one would almost expect him to realise it. Yet he does not; it was not of his time. Of course we fall down somewhere else; we make this discrimination now, but we omit something else. And we shall never become perfect - happily not. (Jung 1989: 745-6)

Jung acknowledged that Nietzsche's inability to see the pitfalls of going into the collective unconscious and avert catastrophe was not entirely his fault. He was born too late to be an alchemist and too soon to be a psychoanalyst. Or was Nietzsche far more psychologically streetwise than Jung gives him credit for?

In his neglected masterpiece, *Mythology of the Soul*, H. G. Baynes examines the material of two borderline psychotic patients in great detail. Both patients encountered a dangerous shadow figure that Baynes called the renegade:

He is the reckless renegade; the unscrupulous desperado; the man who does what he likes and takes what he can, uninhibited by ethical or moral qualms; the tendency of the personality, in effect, which would repudiate the burden of the human soul, preferring any kind of magical or tricky means to the simple acceptance of human responsibilities. In other words, he personifies the downward and backwards pull, the alternative evolutionary hypothesis. (Baynes 1940: 91)

This figure appears in the Prologue while Zarathustra delivers his sermon in the marketplace. He declares that "The human is a rope, fastened between beast and Overhuman - a rope over an abyss." But when he meets with complete incomprehension, Zarathustra changes the subject and speaks of the last man, a despicable figure who renounces the

discipline of suffering for the sake of “his little pleasures for the day and his little pleasures for the night.” Of course, this too meets with incomprehension, but then a tightrope walker begins his walk high above the market, and everyone is distracted. Before he is halfway across, a buffoon emerges from a small door in the tower, mocks the tightrope walker, and then leaps over him. The walker loses his balance and crashes down to the ground. Evidently, Nietzsche had anticipated the alternative evolutionary hypothesis long before Baynes and Jung.

Zarathustra comforts the tightrope walker and promises to give him a decent burial. He tells the dying man that he will not go to Hell and that: “Your soul will be dead before your body, so fear nothing more” (Nietzsche 2005: 17-18). This, Jung remarked, is exactly what happened to Nietzsche after his collapse in 1889, and he remained in a vegetative state until his death in 1900. However, Rudolf Steiner, who actually spent time with the ailing Nietzsche, saw things differently. He reports seeing Nietzsche’s soul “hovering over his head, infinitely beautiful.” It had “surrendered to the spiritual worlds” it had longed for but was unable to find until illness set it free” (Lachmann 2007: 84).

Steiner’s observations seem fanciful when the harrowing details of Nietzsche’s final years are brought into the picture (Prideaux 2018: chapters 20-22), but his account should not be dismissed out of hand. In the discussion on the rope dancer in the *Zarathustra Seminars*, Jung remarks that there can be perfectly reasonable voices in severely psychotic patients, “a sort of nirvana condition behind madness.” He cites some examples and then suggests that, “It is also possible that behind Nietzsche’s condition there was a superior self which had no chance to come through. Consciousness was diseased but the self was sane.” Jung goes on to cite the findings of Dr. Carl Ludwig Schleich, the discoverer of anaesthesia, who maintained that the psyche is not connected to the brain but to the sympathetic nervous system. Even if the brain is disturbed, the personality is not necessarily affected (Jung 1989:137-8). Had Steiner discerned Nietzsche’s nirvana condition?

Nietzsche had surrendered to spiritual worlds before he collapsed into madness. He does so in *Before Sunrise* when he longs to cast himself into the light abyss of the sky. In a later chapter, *At Midday*, Zarathustra falls asleep beneath a gnarled tree with a grapevine entwined around it:

Zarathustra spoke thus to his heart: Still! Still! Did not the world become perfect? But what is happening to me? Just as a delicate breeze, unseen, dances upon an inlaid sea, lightly, feather lightly, so sleep dances on me. My eyes he does not press closed; my soul he leaves awake. Light is he, feather light. What happened to me: hearken! Did time fly away? Am I not falling? Did I not fall - hearken - into the well of eternity? The well of eternity is the sky above him, and on waking, Zarathustra asks: O Heaven above me ... are you listening to my wondrous soul? When will you drink this drop of dew that has fallen on all earthly things - when will you drink this wondrous soul – When, O well of eternity, will you drink my soul back into you? (Nietzsche 2005, 241-2)

If Steiner is to be believed, Nietzsche actualized his deepest longing through his madness. The unfathomable relationship between mysticism and psychosis eludes the limits of language. How could it be otherwise?

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