A Coyote Barks at Prometheus: Archetypal Images of the Therapeutic Stance

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A small Navaho sand-painting, done on a thick piece of hardboard, hangs prominently in my office. Anyone looking vaguely in that direction will be drawn to it, and for me it serves as a kind of benign, silent supervisor. It depicts an event in the Navaho creation story. Coyote steals the fire from the sleeping fire god, Hashjesh-jin, and takes it to the hogan (the Navaho hut) of the first man and woman (Etsay-hasteen and Etsay-Assun). Next to the left hand of Hashjesh-jin is his medicine bag; across his arms and shoulders are the white zig-zag lines of the Milky Way. The black crosses are the stars of the night sky. The trail of embers can be seen, embers left when Coyote passed next to the eagle and home of the sun (lower right) and into the quadrant of the moon (upper right), where, in this picture at least, he returns after delivering his fire. The creation chant which celebrates these adventures of Coyote, who is also known as He-Who-Wanders-About (Mah-i), is as follows: “I am the frivolous Coyote/ I wander about/ I have seen Hashjesh-jin’s fire/ I wander about/ I stole his fire from him/ I wander about/ I have it! I have it!”

I want to reflect on this Navaho story because it offers a significant counter-point to the Prometheus image through which we tend to understand the birth and development of consciousness and thereby the work of depth psychotherapy. The counter-point illustrates a tension which is to be found in Jung’s writing, and in psychotherapy too.

It must be conceded that there are similarities between Coyote and Prometheus. The Titan Prometheus, brother of Atlas, passed on the knowledge of architecture, astronomy, mathematics, navigation, medicine and metallurgy to mankind. He also tricked Zeus into choosing the poorer sections of a sacrificial bull, leaving the best for humans. Zeus, furious, and angered at humans’ increasing knowledge and power, refused to send them the fire with which to cook their meal. Then Prometheus, aided by Athene, entered the back door to Zeus’ home on Mt. Olympus, where he lighted his torch or the sun chariot, broke off a burning coal which he hid in a fennel-stalk, and escaped, giving the fire to mankind (Graves 1955/60).

Both Coyote and Prometheus have direct access to the realm of the gods; both steal fire from the gods and take it to human beings; both figures are endowed with superior insight (Prometheus means “Forethought”); both are Tricksters, who use guile against their more powerful adversaries. Given these similarities, both stories illustrate archetypal themes concerning the origins of consciousness: that fire, which gives us the power of light over the darkness and the ability to cook our food, is a fundamental image of consciousness; that there is a deeply conservative tendency in the depths of the psyche that resists change and the birth of consciousness; that this birth of consciousness, that is the birth of the human order out of purely natural life, is therefore imagined as an attack upon the gods and a theft of their power; that consciousness is mediated by the figure of the Trickster; and most importantly for our purposes, that consciousness is received as a gift from an Other that is not of our own making.

However, in the post-renaissance western tradition, which is heir to the Greek, we have forgotten the receptivity to the other which lies at the heart of consciousness. We have identified with Prometheus, personalized him as a human hero, and thus come to see ourselves — our Prometheus egos — as the source of enlightenment, knowledge and power. This is the genius and inflation of humanism; as the individual becomes valued he also become godlike. Thus Jung wrote:

Why did the gods of antiquity lose their prestige and their effect on the human soul? Because the Olympians had served their time and a new mystery began: God became man. (Jung 1938/40, p. 81)
If the essence of the Promethean crime is becoming an individual (Jung, 1976, p. 347), it is understandable that Jung should have celebrated Prometheus’ heroic image in some of his accounts of consciousness. Then he writes, for example, that consciousness is “the magical weapon which gave man victory over the earth, and which we hope will give him a still greater victory over himself” (Jung, 1934a, p. 140). Imagined this way, individuation indeed becomes a Titanic struggle. On the other hand, even as he sang the praises of Promethean consciousness, Jung was more sensitive to the limitations of a consciousness formed in heroic terms.

An inflated consciousness is always egocentric and conscious of nothing but its own existence. It is incapable of learning from the past, incapable of understanding contemporary events, and incapable of drawing right conclusions about the future. It is hypnotised by itself and therefore cannot be argued with. Paradoxically enough, inflation is a regression of consciousness into the unconscious. (Jung 1944/52, pp. 480-1)

As Edinger (1972) showed, the opposite of Promethean inflation is ‘alienation,’ which is experienced primarily as abandonment or persecutory anxiety — Prometheus chained to the cliffs of Caucasus, his liver eaten all day by a vulture. What this seems to suggest is that torment is itself part of the Promethean experience. On one hand, as Jung indicates, there is the Promethean pain of becoming conscious (Jung, 1928, p. 157), of recognizing that wholeness includes accepting “the bondage of earthly existence” (Jung, 1945/1954, p. 263). On the other hand, for an ego identified with Prometheus the inflation contains persecutory torment as its own shadow. Inflation and torment follow each other, held together by their internal tension.

The birth and development of consciousness needs to be imagined in another way. We need to follow the shift that occurred for Jung, which he illustrated when he built his tower at Bollingen and wrote the inscription over its gate: Philemonis Sacrum, Fausti poenitentia (Philemon's sanctuary, Faust's atonement). This inscription was Jung’s recognition that he, who had lived and worked through the Faustian images of control, power, and agency, needed to atone, and that Bollingen, like the rest of his life, was dedicated to the values of Philemon (and his wife Baucis), the humble tramps who gave hospitality to the destitute gods as they wandered homeless in our technocratic age (Geigerich, 1984; cf. Jaffee, 1979, p. 189). These images of Faust and Philemon are metaphors of consciousness; they are images which shape the quality of consciousness as it calls the world into being and, as such, they determine the contours, textures and values of that world. In particular, for Faustian consciousness the world is there to be set upon and seized for technological exploitation (cf. Heidegger, 1954/1977); for Philemonic consciousness it is there to be witnessed for all its beauty, multiplicity, and awesome majesty. Such images of consciousness also structure the relationship to the self. We could say they are images of our capacity for self-reflection, images which prescribe the limits of our self-understanding. This Jung’s shift from Faustian appropriation to Philemonic hospitality shows us that the development of consciousness cannot ultimately be described in heroic terms. As the myth indicates, Promethean inflation is ultimately tormenting, but Philemonic hospitality transforms the world into a temple (Geigerich, 1984).

Jung understood such hospitality as central to psychotherapy. As he repeatedly claimed, the work of psychotherapy cannot be characterized according to a set of procedures but rather according to a certain fundamental stance in relation to the psyche. This therapeutic stance is primarily an attitude of compassionate receptivity to whatever is trying to show itself, especially through that enigmatic place of self-showing we call the symptom. But this means that the development of consciousness, which is one way of describing the aim of psychotherapy, is founded upon such a capacity for receptivity. We do not remove the symptom; the symptom heals us, if we can receive its meaning (Jung, 1934b).

Yet receptivity is difficult to establish, particularly when we are anxious. Then we are like animals caught in a snare. Our natural response is to pull away, to try to reassert our freedom, even though the only way we can ultimately be free is to yield to the pull of the snare, to move in the direction of our own entrapment. Now I think that this tension between our desire for autonomy and transcendence and the call of the symptom lies at the heart of our so-called resistance. And in order to overcome that resistance, to allow ourselves to listen to the voice and the story in the symptom, we sometimes could do with more than an understanding of our anxious fantasies and hidden feelings. It may be helpful to have an image of that compassionate hospitality at the center of psychological healing. Which returns us to the story of the Coyote. As patients we are like the first man and woman in their hogan, without the fire that will spread an area of light in their darkness or cook their food. That is, we are without the power of self-reflection or the capacity to transform the basic ingredients of our lives into moments of culture and human festivity. For transformation to occur we have to wait and be available to receive the fire which Coyote brings. In other words, we need to offer hospitality.
to that figure which is both of the animal order and of the night. As a creature of the animal order Coyote is contained within instinctual life; as a creature of the night he is contained beyond the light of human consciousness. Coyote is an animal of the night, and his domain is the quadrant of the moon. Thus to receive Coyote is to receive the figures of our dreams.

Yet what is this fiery light that occurs with the appearance of Coyote? What is our anxiety? Coyote, like all animal figures, reveals the Spirit in animal form and thus serves as mediator to the supernatural world (Cavendish, 1970, p. 1162). This means that to receive Coyote is also to bear witness to the sacred. On the other hand, as Jung showed us, that can be an awesome and overwhelming experience and may have none of the ethical upliftment or spiritual delight we were taught to expect at Sunday School — and still are in the Evangelical churches. For the Navaho, Coyote is a disruptive competitor of the Creator in the creation of the world and, like the light-bearing Lucifer, is associated with evil (Cavendish, 1970, pp. 730, 2883). Perhaps this is because harmonious order and containment are central to Navaho aesthetics and spirituality (Schenk, 1988), and Coyote, the Trickster, is the force of disorder and wanton change (cf. Link, 1956; Reichard, 1963; Sandner, 1979). In his endless wanderings he is impulsive, lascivious, exploitative, duplicitous, furtive and ruthless. His is the realm of death, and like the dark presence of that realm he is demanding, powerful and persistent. He cannot be appreciated through the categories of good and evil, and he defies reason. We could say he is profoundly unconscious. And yet, by awakening the hero’s inner eye and enchanting his imagination, he brings the fire without which we would continue to live in darkness. Thus to offer hospitality to Coyote is an act of courage and faith in the face of what may initially appear as malevolent or lethal.

I have one further reflection on my sand-painting, for which I am indebted to the Jungian analyst Ron Schenk, who lived among the Navaho for many years. For us Westerners it is matter-of-course to look at the sand-painting and say it “represents” or “symbolizes” an event in the story of Coyote. Or if we see a coyote in a dream we may say it “symbolizes” Coyote the Trickster-demiurge and all that that means. If we have a Jungian sensibility and see a coyote while awake, we may say it was an occurrence of synchronicity, in which the reality of the coyote and the psychic meaning of Coyote were momentarily fused. For the Navaho all these formulations would be highly problematic, and I am glad to say that they are for me too. But many of us tend to imagine that such thinking reflects a move into psychology, and we forget that it is not necessary for psychological thinking at all. On the contrary, it is a move that forgets the psychological depth that inheres within experience, and such forgefulness means that psychology tends to obscure its own inheritance in favor of its metaphysics. Such thinking assumes, in fact, the metaphysics of Galileo, who saw the world as a mathematical grid, and Descartes, who secured Galileo’s vision into the pillars of modern epistemology (cf. Husserl, 1936/1970). Our western separation of appearance and meaning, of signifier and signified, separates our experience from its significance and perpetuates the neurotic core of our Cartesian doubt which insists that we must not trust our experience in our understanding of the world or ourselves. For the Navaho the animal coyote is not a “symbol” of Coyote and the sandpainting is not a “representation” of the Creation myth; a coyote is Coyote and my sand-painting is not a “thing” as the empiricist would have it. Rather it is the adverb of relations between the sand-painter, the image, the cosmos and the viewer, so that each time the painting is attentively witnessed is a moment that participates in that act of creation. To see it is to allow a certain world to come into being.

In this context my sand-painting also serves as a reminder that things and images are their own meaning and that the question “What does it mean?” is the same as the question “What is it?” This reminder is also Jung’s. When he says “Image and meaning are identical” (Jung 1947/1954, p. 204) he is recovering the psychological at the heart of experience. That is, on one hand, the destruction of western metaphysics, but it is also just good, basic psychotherapy.

References


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