

# IMAGES AND THE PSYCHE

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THE HUMAN PSYCHE lives and expresses itself at many levels, from the vision of the contemplative and the abstractions of the philosopher to the level at which the psyche interacts with the body. It is now generally recognized that our conscious thinking and deciding is only a tiny fraction of the total activity of the psyche. Indeed our conscious mental activities are just the tip of an iceberg which swims in the vast sea of the unconscious, the unknown within and around us. At every level the psyche articulates itself largely through images. There is an inborn tendency, to which Jung has given the name archetype, to recognize and respond to specific images. The new-born infant, for example, instinctively perceives through hands, nose and eyes his mother's breast as a source of food. It is highly probable that something similar occurs in the sub-human animal kingdom, and that the spawning of salmon, the nest-making instinct of the thrush, the migratory urge of the swallow and the extraordinarily complex behaviour of ants, wasps and other insects are triggered by the stimulus of specific images.

The image or mental picture of objects in the world around us by no means exhausts the significance of images for the human mind. The image is even more important when it is made the symbol which points to or suggests more than one meaning, perhaps many meanings. The invention and development of language are largely the story of the development of symbol and metaphor to describe new facts and experiences and to convey new meanings. The developed language of today is of many kinds. There is the language of poetry and imaginative prose, full of symbol and metaphor, and there is the exact language of science with its sparse use of metaphor. The difference between these two modes of writing does not lie in the degree of concern for truth, for each is concerned to express truth in its own way. Reality is bafflingly mysterious. Science seeks to eliminate mystery by concentrating on what is measurable and ignoring the rest. Imaginative writing seeks to express something of the mysteriousness, the wonder of the real. As Austin Farrer has put it: 'The purpose of scientific statement is the elimination of ambiguity and the purpose of symbol is the inclusion of it. We write in symbol when we want our words to present rather than analyze or prove

their subject matter'.<sup>1</sup> And again 'exact prose abstracts from reality, symbol presents it. And for that reason symbols have something of the many-sidedness of wild nature'.<sup>2</sup>

In a short article I must limit myself to what seems especially relevant to the spiritual life. I shall first say something briefly about the images of memory and then turn to the function of images in exploring and coming to terms with the unconscious. One of the ways in which psychic life expands is through the development of memory, which enables the individual to profit by his experience. The new-born infant, thrust into the strange bright world out of the warm and comforting darkness of the womb, can at first make nothing of the blur of light that impinges upon the retina of the eye. He has no memories with which to interpret it. To begin with, he explores the world more by touch and taste and smell than by vision. Only gradually does he learn to identify objects through sight. Seeing is in part a mental act, in which the mind sorts out the variations in the light waves that fall upon the retina into images which roughly correspond with objects in the external world. As the infant slowly learns to identify persons and things around him, to form mental images of them and eventually to name them, he begins to grasp a little more of the nature of the real world. Comprehension expands with the development of memory. Just as the perception of persons and things is partly a mental construction, not merely the product of sense perception, so too memory is not just a recording of past happenings but is something constructed by the mind. The psyche weaves the recordings of the past into a pattern or story. In this work it is highly selective, it simplifies and conflates. It comes as a surprise to a person, when he is able to check some vividly remembered incident of the distant past with a contemporary account of it, to find that his memory is inaccurate. He has mixed together two or more events and has inserted into his memory-picture people who were not in fact present and omitted others who were.

The patterning and story-making of the psyche, as it builds past happenings into present memory, is brought about in the main unconsciously. Something similar is done consciously by the historian. History is more than the chronicle of past events, the juxtaposition of successive happenings; it is the discerning and describing of patterns, the discovery of connections between apparently unconnected events. The historian selects, out of the myriad facts known about his period, those facts which illustrate the patterns, the movements of thought, the economic trends and the

political objectives that he believes to be significant. The same kind of selecting and discriminating which the historian does deliberately goes on unconsciously to form our memories. The memory prefers a connected pattern or story to a higgledy-piggledy collection of facts.

Although the process of memory formation is largely unconscious, it can be assisted and modified by deliberately remembering the past and reflecting upon it. This exercise of recalling and pondering past memories can be of great value for our human and spiritual growth. Many of the moral and spiritual frustrations of the present are rooted in past experiences; experiences, for example, of rejection, despair, terror or rage. The past is not something finished and done with; it lives on in the memory and in the form of tendencies, attitudes and habits which were developed to cope with traumatic experiences in the past and persist into the present. These powerful emotions, and the actions or paralysis of action that they lead to, carve out channels along which the stream of psychic energy continues to flow long after the original storm and stress is over. The past, of course, cannot be altered but the effects of the past can; and the key to the repair of these damaging effects lies in the memory, the set of images created by the psyche as it seeks to make sense of experience. These memory images, as we have seen, are highly selective. They by no means exactly correspond with what happened; in fact they may wildly misrepresent it. The images we form of persons close to us will be coloured by the love and affection, or indeed the fear or revulsion, that they awaken in us. These memory pictures of the past can be changed and the emotions attached to them released. This is not to falsify the past, for our memories are anyhow far from true pictures of what happened. Rather it is to correct the memories by setting them in a larger and truer context.

Some of our memories are happy, some the reverse. If we are able to see our good memories in the context of God's love and thank God for these past blessings, the remembered happiness can bring a fresh element of warmth and gratitude into our present relationship with God. But it is of even greater importance to recall the bad and painful memories which keep alive unhealed emotional wounds. If we are able to bring these painful memories into the context of the presence and love of God, disclosed and made real in Christ, to bring them into this context and to hold them there, then the memory-picture will change. It will become possible to see our trouble not as something unique but as part of the world's sorrow

embraced by Christ on the cross and transfigured by him. This exercise of bringing old memories into the larger context of the presence of God is partly a work of imagination, in the sense of mental picturing, partly an expression of faith in God. Further, though they concern the past, the memories are, together with the complex emotions attached to them, an active force in the present. Faith and imagination working together are able to open up emotional wounds to the healing waters of divine grace.

Valuable though this exercise is for those able to practise it, there are many who cannot. Part of the reason for this is that the crucial memories that most need healing are often buried in the unconscious and so are inaccessible to deliberate recall. More importantly, there is a kind of split in the psyche between people's conscious aims and activities and the aims of the unconscious, an opposition between our deliberate purposes and our deep needs and instinctive drives. St Paul vividly described this opposition when he wrote: 'I do not do the good I want, but the evil that I do not want is what I do' (Rom 7,12). This opposition is an effect of our fallen condition and the consequent triple estrangement, from God, from our own depths and from our fellows, that flows from it. This estrangement from our own deep needs is accentuated by the secularist climate in which we live. Secularism, the practical assumption that this world and its values and goals are all that matters, influences us like an atmosphere which we cannot help breathing and causes us to repress our spiritual aspirations. This is a major cause of the aimlessness of many today, the boredom which Teilhard de Chardin called public enemy number one in today's world.

The psychologist who best understood what is wrong is Carl Jung, and in what follows I shall depend largely on him. Fifty years ago Jung was declaring that all the patients in middle life who came to him had fallen ill because they lacked what the living religions of all ages have given to their adherents. It was no good telling such people to go to church for they were alienated from religion and the words and symbols of religion meant nothing to them. Jung developed a method of helping people to make contact with their depths. The key to his method was the dream and the images and symbols which presented themselves during sleep. Jung was a pragmatist and found that by teaching people to pay attention to their dreams he enabled them to reduce their estrangement from their unconscious which was the cause of their neurosis. He wrote modestly about dreams:

I have no theory about dreams, I do not know how dreams arise. I am altogether in doubt as to whether my way of handling dreams deserves the name of 'method'. I share all my readers' prejudices about dream interpretation as the quintessence of uncertainty and arbitrariness. But, on the other hand, if we meditate on a dream sufficiently long and thoroughly — if we take it about with us and turn it over and over — something always come of it. It gives a practical hint which shows the patient in what direction the unconscious is leading him.<sup>3</sup>

In sleep the dreamer's psyche expresses, in the highly symbolic language of the unconscious, some aspect of himself of which he is not consciously aware. Jung used to encourage his patients to recall, write down, think about and sometimes to paint their dreams. The effect of this is to expand consciousness by admitting into it the emotions and ideas with which the dream symbols are charged. Sometimes a dream contains a warning, sometimes it indicates starved or neglected elements of the dreamer's personality, sometimes it caricatures an immature or one-sided aspect of his waking attitude. Jung also taught his patients to enter into waking fantasies in which, in a relaxed and receptive mental attitude, they would attend to whatever images passed across the screen of their imagination. In this exercise a person may have an imaginary dialogue with a figure on the screen, questioning it and waiting for his imagination to throw up the answer. Jung termed this procedure active imagination. The individual who practises it does not expect from it necessarily any profound wisdom but rather a point of view which he would be wise to weigh seriously. Active imagination enables a person to confront, to be influenced by and to come to terms with hitherto unconscious elements of his personality.

If we try to explore the unknown within by reflecting on the images and symbols that confront us in dreams and active imagination, the first image that will meet us is likely to be some form of what Jung has called the shadow. The shadow represents forces within us opposed to our conscious aim and attitude. In the course of growing from child to adult we form, partly unconsciously, partly deliberately, a personality ideal of the kind of man or woman we want to be. This ideal gives us the strength to reject the impulses and feelings which clash with it. These rejected elements of ourselves tend to coalesce and to act like a sub-personality opposed to our conscious aim and outlook. I earlier referred to Paul's struggle with his shadow. The shadow is likely to appear in a dream as a disagreeable

or dangerous character, a thug out for your life, or a tramp, or a disreputable acquaintance who tags on to you and you cannot shake off. I once dreamt of my shadow as a child-murderer, repulsive and horrifying. Not till long afterwards did I realize that he pointed to a violent and aggressive streak in myself which I had firmly repressed. The shadow represents a part of oneself which is not essentially bad but which, through being repressed, has taken on the character of evil. By confronting the shadow not as an enemy, but as a potential ally, we are enabled in time to integrate what is positive in it with our conscious attitude and, by so doing, to become stronger, humbler and more truly ourselves. The seven deadly sins — pride, anger, envy, avarice, lust, gluttony, sloth — list the kinds of qualities that are found in the shadow. Each of them can be understood as the perversion of natural human instincts and tendencies. But the seven deadly sins are abstractions whereas the shadow image is highly real and concrete. For that reason it enables us far more effectively to recognize in ourselves, to confront, and to come to terms with these dangerous forces within.

Jung distinguished between the personal shadow, the rejected elements of one's own personality, and the racial or collective shadow, the elements of humanity which the human race has rejected as anti-human. The collective shadow stands like a demonic adversary behind our personal shadow. It is too powerful to be integrated with our personality, and to attempt to assimilate it would expose us to the danger of being possessed and taken over by it. All we can do is to realize it as a dangerous inner force to be reckoned with and stood up to, and not to be forgotten or ignored.

The probing of the unconscious, through reflection on the images it presents, helps to reduce the alienation between our conscious aims and the deep needs of our nature. No amount of effort can overcome this estrangement from our depths. It is overcome by the right symbol which is offered by the unconscious to the person who seeks it genuinely and persistently. This uniting symbol might be described as a powerful image, focusing the imagination, releasing the emotions, moving to action. The symbol is a kind of bridge across which the energy and insight locked up in the unconscious can flow and be made available to the conscious mind. Jung likened the symbol to the giant turbines which transform the waters of Niagara into electricity and so provide power, heat and light to the neighbourhood. The uniting symbol cannot be thought up by conscious reflection. It comes as a gift from within. It has both to express

the deep needs of the psyche and be capable of relating realistically to the world of everyday. Religion is powerful through its symbols. For Christians the central symbol is, of course, Jesus Christ, crucified and alive, the symbol of the infinite Godhead identifying itself with the human condition as a man among men. I referred earlier to Paul's inner conflict, the division in his own being between his moral and spiritual ideals and opposing forces within, which he hated and despised but could not overcome. He felt himself tied to a body of death (Rom 7,24). Deliverance came not by redoubled effort but by the grace of the Lord Jesus Christ. The figure of the crucified Messiah, despised and rejected, not only satisfied his highest ideals but also spoke compellingly to the despised and rejected elements of his own being.

In the prologue to John's gospel the divine Word is declared to be the light of all men (John 1,4.9). Any genuine intimations of the divine that people have had in the long history of the human race have come from the light of the Word. It would seem that that light manifests itself in certain basic images. These images working in the minds of those sensitive to the spiritual, wise men and visionaries, enabled them to construct mental pictures of an invisible world around them, which gave meaning to the joys and sorrows, the disasters and triumphs which mankind has experienced everywhere and at all times. As Austin Farrer has written:

The human imagination has always been controlled by certain basic images, in which man's own nature, his relation to his fellows and his dependence on the divine power find expression. The individual did not make them for himself. He absorbs them from the society in which he is born. . . .<sup>4</sup>

These images are to be found in many forms and combinations in the religions of mankind. It is our special concern to trace their presence at work in the incarnation of the divine Word and the preparation for that event. To quote Farrer again:

There had arisen in Judaism the image of heroic and unmerited suffering for God's glory and the good of the brethren, especially in the figure of Joseph: and this image was tending to fuse with that of the blood-offering in atonement for sin. There was also the image of Messiah in whose enthronement the Kingdom of God would be manifested on earth. There were also the images of the divine power and presence — God is in Heaven but his name is in the temple, his

Wisdom or Word or Spirit is in the mind of the prophet, or, in some degree, wherever there is a mind alive with the divine law. There was an image of divine sonship belonging primarily to the chosen people. In Christ's very existence all these images fused. Joseph, the saint of sacrificial loving-kindness, the ritual Lamb of the atonement, David the Viceroy of God, Adam the new-created Image of God: all these were reborn in one divine Saviour out of the sepulchre of Christ. All this he was by right and in fulness, all this the Christians were to be by grace and participation.<sup>5</sup>

Many other primordial images have met and mingled in the hearts and imaginations of Christians, as down the ages they have meditated on the figure of the divine-human Redeemer. There are the feminine symbols of Mary, Christ's mother, and of the Church, the mother of believers; there is the image of the divine child, born in Bethlehem and in the hearts of believers, the symbol of hope; there are the images of the spiritual quest, of the treasure and the way. These and other symbols, woven into the fabric of public worship and private devotion, have reverberated deep within the being of Christians, renewing and revivifying them.

Why do these symbols, which have meant so much to our christian ancestors, seem to have lost their power to speak to an increasing number of people today? Two qualities must be present if a symbol is to speak with power. First, it must retain the element of unfathomable mystery. To understand a symbol completely would be to destroy it as a symbol, it would be to turn it into a sign, a shorthand expression of something that could equally well be stated in words. The true symbol has to point to an only partially comprehensible reality. The second quality, indispensable if the symbol is to speak with universal power, is that it must make a realistic impact upon the contemporary world, both the world of ideas, the intellectual world, and, perhaps even more important, upon the world of everyday living and action, the world of the inner city for example, and the unemployment queue.

It seems that the old images need to be reborn today in the kind of way, perhaps, that the Old Testament images were reborn through Christ in the first century. Such a rebirth can be brought about only by the Holy Spirit, inspiring and enabling the work that needs to be done. For work is needed on many fronts, the work of christian thinkers and philosophers, of theologians and liturgists, of contemplatives, of poets, artists and musicians, and of those expert in the behavioural sciences. But how are the gospel symbols to be made



powerful in the world of everyday? Partly by the lives of individual Christians in home and market place, in shop and factory. The heroism of Maximilian Kolbe in a nazi concentration camp and the sustained and joyful self-giving of Mother Teresa in the Calcutta slums have made Christ come to life in the imaginations of great numbers. But perhaps the witness of groups of people, living in unity and love and serving the needy around them, may make Christ visible even more clearly than the witness of outstanding individuals. People are symbols to each other, and people by their very being and existence can speak powerfully of the presence of Christ within them.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Farrer, Austin: *Rebirth of images* (Westminster, 1948), p 19.

<sup>2</sup> Farrer, Austin: *op. cit.*, p 20.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted by Ann Faraday in *Dream power* (London, 1972), pp 128-29.

<sup>4</sup> Farrer, Austin: *op. cit.*, p 13.

<sup>5</sup> Farrer, Austin: *op. cit.*, p 15.