

THE SYMBOL SETS US FREE

(Ricoeur and Lacan on the Potential for Self-transformation Through Symbolic Language)

Both Paul Ricoeur and Jacques Lacan are concerned with the polysemic nature of symbols as transcendent of context and of signified, and as thereby having the ability to encompass and express existential truths regarding the negative forces experienced inside and outside each of us. In The Symbolism of Evil¹, Ricoeur's hermeneutical approach insists on the demythologization of symbolic narrative, and outlines a typology of the 'primary symbols of fault' as well as of 'the myths of evil'. This paper will focus on Ricoeur's analysis of the relationship between the symbols and myths of evil, the progress of conscience through these symbols, and the way in which the symbolic narratives, specifically the Adamic myth, are potentially transformative of human consciousness in that they give meaningful expression to the ontological and ethical concerns of the human condition. This paper will also define the categories of Lacan's model of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, and demonstrate that by locating the symbolic in a Freudian-style model of the psyche and reinterpreting the theory of the Death Drive, Lacan provides an insight into how and why it may be that symbolic language is so powerfully transformative of the self.

The primary symbols of *defilement*, *sin* and *guilt*, as analyzed by Ricoeur, are connected with the development of the self in that they are each representative of moments in a reflective process of self understanding in the face of evil, suffering and the experience of fault. Ricoeur sees this process as the transformation of consciousness through conscience and as a progression of self-awareness and self-expression reflected in the movement from the more physical and objective symbol of defilement to the more conceptual and subjective symbol of guilt. The relationship between the primary symbols is also a circular one in that the symbol of guilt is enriched by those preceding it and in turn informs these, retrospectively. The primary symbol of *defilement* is the most archaic in that the imbuing of an object or location with the property of either impurity or sanctity is merely a matter of convention and, as such, is an externally imposed ethical ontology. As well, the retribution for transgression of prohibitions of taboo is conceived of as a physical contagion which implies that an evil act is followed by

¹ © Ricoeur, Paul 1967. Emerson Buchanan, Transl. Beacon Press: Boston, 1969 (by arrangement of Harper & Row Publishers, Inc. New York, NY).

a just punishment in suffering. In the second primary symbol of *sin*, we observe the transition of a deferral of punishment to the Last Judgment, although there remains the social retribution in the stigma of alienation and exile. In the third of the primary symbols, that of *guilt*, there is a further development of conscience in the internalization of the consciousness of sin, which alienates the guilty individual from himself as he stands before the scrutiny of God.

The language of the Confession of Sins makes use of all three levels of fault symbolism, culminating in the guilty conscience of the 'servile will'; a concept which represents the paradox of being responsible for one's own captivity. In fact this language superimposes the three levels of consciousness of fault onto each other, so that the experience of a state of sinfulness includes the stain of impurity, the fear of retribution (through social alienation or exile) for transgression, as well as the internalized guilt arising from the failure to meet the infinite demand of self-scrutiny through the eyes of God. Such symbolism is primarily Christian in content, however according to Ricoeur any hermeneutical enquiry is necessarily oriented by its contingency on the philosopher's context, yet he goes on to claim that the Adamic myth of The Fall creates a concrete universal in the figure of Adam as a symbol of humankind. Personally I do not see how this particular myth could speak to every individual; however, with the intention of revealing something truly universal in the value of an exegesis of myth, I will attempt to explain how Ricoeur believes it does so.

Ricoeur finds the second-order symbols of mythical narrative, in which the primary symbols are operating in a temporal context, to be the most sophisticated form of symbolism. Because we live in a demythologized time in which science has revealed the inadequacies of an etiological function of myth, Ricoeur suggests that we have the unique opportunity for the "demythologization of myth" which offers "an understanding of myth as myth, and the conquest, for the first time in the history of culture, of the mythical dimension" (Ibid.162). In fact it is only when myth has been divorced from etiology that we can fully appreciate the true value and functions of this form of expression. Myths speak to and reflect the diachronic potentiality of the self and of humanity in general, due to what Ricoeur calls the "plastic" nature of the narrative form which places the symbols in mythic time and space and unfolds an ideal dramatic history from beginning to end. Furthermore, the myths of evil function to address the

experienced dichotomy between mankind's "ontological status as a being created good and destined for happiness and his existential or historical status, experienced under the sign of alienation" (Ibid.163). While it is certainly the case that there is evil and suffering in this world, not everyone will accept Ricoeur's validation of a state of supralapsarian innocence and infralapsarian peccability.

Despite Ricoeur's quoting from St. Paul that "In Adam we have all sinned", it is possible to accept the third function of myth, previously mentioned, as the concrete universalization of existence in the archetype of humankind (however it is represented). Ricoeur has outlined four basic types of myths of evil: Firstly, the Creation myths, which deal with the order imposed on the chaos of primordial evil by God's creation of the world. Secondly, the Tragic myths of a God who tempts, blinds, and leads man astray in a fate of inevitable fault in which the only salvation attainable is an internalized aesthetic of self-pity in the tragedy of existence. Thirdly, the myths of The Fall of Man, which locate the origin of evil in human fault subsequent to our creation by God as initially innocent and good. The Adamic myth of The Fall is an example of this type of myth which is eschatological in nature and is, for Ricoeur, a particularly meaningful symbolization of human ontological and existential experience. Ricoeur points out that "only the Adamic myth is strictly anthropological" and that this implies certain characteristics, one of which is that the protagonist is the ancestor of the human race and another of which is that this ancestor is guilty of deviation, of 'undoing himself', by going astray from the goodness in which he was created. Thus this myth makes a strong distinction between the primordial origin of good in God's act of creation, and the radical origin of evil in The 'Fall' of mankind. Another characteristic of this myth is the complexity achieved by Adam's introduction to evil through the secondary characters of Eve and the Serpent. Because Adam is not alone in his temptation and deviation, this myth contains elements of the other types of myths of evil, specifically the Tragic type.

The fourth type of myth of evil, namely that of the Exiled Soul, view the soul as separate from, yet enslaved in, the profanity of the physical body, the transcendence of which facilitates the salvation of that soul. This myth, in my opinion, is equally as universal as the Adamic myth, since it locates evil and suffering in mundane existence as opposed to in the heart of man. It is interesting to note that many Eastern philosophies take this sort of view in their mythologies of evil and suffering. This type of

mythology, with its ideology of a potential enlightenment through transcendence of bondage, leads me now to the examination of Jacques Lacan's morphology of the psyche. For Lacan, as we find in Richard Boothby's Death and Desire², the symbolic order is likewise a realm of potential self-realization. Less concerned, however, with the hermeneutical approach to understanding the symbolism of the myths of evil, Lacan reinterprets and expands on Freud's psychological model of the Id, Ego, and Superego with his formulation of the Real, the Imaginary, and the Symbolic, in which the Symbolic register is transformative of the self through its relation to the Imaginary and the Real.

The human infant, Lacan points out, is born in a state of prematurity in which it experiences complete chaos of the senses and is without any awareness of the borders between itself and otherness. As the infant becomes aware of the movements of its caregivers it begins to recognize the potential for its own mastery of motor coordination and to realize the parallels between the parts of its own body and those of others. Thus the first self-identification is actually experienced through an identification with the other. In a phase of development which Lacan terms the "Mirror Stage", the child has begun to be fascinated by its own reflection in the mirror and to form a correlative image in its mind of its own bodily wholeness. The subsequent identification of the self with this visual gestalt is idealistic in that it is fixated on an image of physical completeness that the child as yet does not experience in terms of its own mastery of motor coordination. This image (or 'imago') thus becomes an ideal towards which the child strives and by which it proceeds to interpret reality. By 'interpreting reality' I mean that the child begins to discriminate between what is itself and what is not itself, and this formation of an identity involves the assimilation of some stimuli and the negation, or repression of others. It is this binding together of elements that are identified with the self which, for Lacan, is the genesis of the Imaginary register of the psyche.

The Imaginary is basically a parallel concept to the Freudian 'Ego', and engenders the same narcissistic need for self-comfort aimed at by a homeostasis within its own boundaries. With the formation of the Imaginary, its opposite or negative is implicit in the act of excluding certain aspects of

² Boothby, Richard. Routledge, Chapman and Hall, Inc., New York, N.Y. and London, England, 1991.

the whole of reality. This excluded and undefined 'otherness' forms the Lacanian register of the Real, which is similar to the Freudian conception of the unconscious 'Id'. Like the Freudian Ego, the Imaginary is threatened by a 'return of the repressed' in the form of pressure from the unconscious to acknowledge the material that has been kept outside the boundary of the Imaginary. This repressed material is, in Lacanian terms, the excluded contents of the Real. It needs to be clarified, however, that the unconscious, while it has access to some elements of the Real, does not itself constitute the whole of what has been excluded by the Imaginary.

The third register of Lacan's model is that of the Symbolic, and it is through this realm that the Real may be indirectly accessed by the conscious mind. With its operation on both conscious and unconscious levels and its capacity to sublimate the energies of the unconscious drives, Lacan's Symbolic realm is consistent with the Freudian 'Superego'. The contents of the Symbolic are the internal and external Law of the Father³; cultural resources such as art, religion, ritual and myth; and metaphor in general as it is a pluralization in terms of levels of meaning. In Lacan's estimation it is the polysemic nature of the Symbolic language which is essential to its power as a tool for moving beyond the limitations of the Imaginary. In his book on Lacan, Richard Boothby demonstrates that by interpreting Freud's biology-based theory of the 'death drive' along the lines of psychic energetics, Lacan is able to incorporate the theory into his psychological model and to relate it to the transformation of the self through the Symbolic. The unconscious desire to break the bonds of the Imaginary stasis is at once both threatening to the egotistical Imaginary and necessary for the growth of the self. According to Lacan's theory this fact explains the paradox of the psychological 'drive towards death'. Lacan's brilliant insight is that the 'death' implied in the death drive is not actually a biological death, as Freud postulated, but is in fact the death of the Imaginary, which is equally as threatening to the psyche as physical death since the Imaginary is identified with the physical cohesion and identity of the self.

³ This term, from Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, refers to the concept of cultural regulations and parental restrictions, which effect a negation of desire and introduce the developing individual to the symbolic (linguistic) realm of social order. [A.K.A.: "le nom (non) du pere", i.e. the name (no) of the father].

The unconscious desire for the death of the Imaginary is experienced as a sense of a lack in wholeness, of a potential negative complement to the positive assertion in the narcissism of the Ego. According to Lacanian theory, this desire for the 'unnamable otherness' comes nearest to being satisfied in the language of the Symbolic, due to the fact of the overdetermination of linguistic signifiers. As individuals enter into the Symbolic through language and culture, they develop the capacity to see points of view other than their own and potentially to glimpse unconscious aspects of the Real in the form of an awareness of possibilities beyond themselves. There can be no direct access to the Real, but by our engagement with the realm of the Symbolic, especially in times of personal crisis and suffering, it is possible to reassess the limiting boundaries of the Imaginary and thus to respond creatively to the problem of evil. Although their approaches differ, I have demonstrated that both Ricoeur and Lacan are exploring and expounding the power of symbols to initiate a type of reflective process that potentiates a creative response to evil and suffering; a response that bridges the gap between overrationalization and meaninglessness.