

The archetype of Woman as Redemptress: psychodynamic, literary and patriarchal aspects

"There is [in man] an image not only of the mother but of the daughter, the sister, the beloved, the heavenly goddess, and the chthonic Baubo¹. Every mother and every beloved is forced to become the carrier and embodiment of this omnipresent and ageless image, which corresponds to the deepest reality in a man. It belongs to him, this perilous image of Woman; she stands for the loyalty which in the interests of life he must sometimes forego; she is the much needed compensation for the risks, struggles, sacrifices that all end in disappointment; she is the solace for all the bitterness of life. And, at the same time, she is the great illusionist, the seductress, who draws him into life with her Maya – and not only into life's reasonable and useful aspects, but into its frightful paradoxes and ambivalences where good and evil, success and ruin, hope and despair, counterbalance one another. Because she is his greatest danger she demands from a man his greatest, and if he has it in him she will receive it."

Carl Jung, "The Syzygy: Anima and Animus," *Collected Works* 9ii, par. 24

*Swer guotes wibes minne hât,
der schamt sich aller missetât.*

Walther von der Vogelweide (c. 1170 – c. 1230)

"Dans la tragique lueur qui naît parfois au cœur le plus angoissé, il entrevoit l'impossible salut. Il comprend qu'au long de toute sa vie, un infini était à portée de main et qu'il ne l'a pas apprécié à sa juste dimension, pour se tourner vers d'autres horizons vite empourprés. Cet infini, c'eût été de partager plus intensément l'amour de Friderike, l'amour exclusif et multiple d'une seule femme, c'eût été de célébrer le miracle toujours renaissant du couple, ce monde fragile comme un secret. Dans la conscience obsédante de son échec, une autre vérité l'envahit, qui se traduit ainsi : t'aimer, c'est aimer l'humanité, bâtir le monde autour de toi c'est réinventer la liberté, caresser ton épaule, c'est embrasser l'univers, boire dans ta bouche c'est satisfaire ma soif d'absolu, mourir dans tes bras, c'est vivre!"

J.J. Lafaye, *L'Avenir de la Nostalgie: une vie de Stefan Zweig*, Paris 1994, p. 200

Jung's reflections on *Anima* help us to understand mechanisms of projection in male/female relations, but leave a lot, it seems to me, unexplained. How and in what historical period did this mechanism come into being (for it seems not to be universal)? How has it been shaped by culture and may it therefore morph into new forms as culture shifts? How does it stand in relation to religion? And is the woman, from the perspective of the man, condemned merely to be a mirror of his self and gateway into self-inquiry or is there not a transpersonal, or at least interpersonal, dynamic which is disruptive of the self?

The archetype of Woman as Redemptress has a history which it behoves us to disentangle. In religion it has been a fairly minor theme. Certain rather fringe elements in Marian devotional theology within Catholicism (going back to the Troubadours) have had a more exalted view of her intercessory importance alongside Christ, endowing her free decision to bear the Savior with redemptive force given its (supposed) indispensability within the framework of salvation history. Yet older archetypes give scant support to such a vision. Ancient pantheons have either been predominantly male or supposedly more ancient feminine goddesses have been subjugated, almost universally, to their male counterparts. But even in reconstructable forms of goddess worship, the feminine may be productive, co-creative and infuse the living order, but it is never redemptive. Indeed the very need for redemption seems to arise only under the influence of a growing alienation from archaic ways of life. Jung, therefore, cannot be talking about an innate characteristic of the structure of the psyche (indeed one may question many of the Jungian archetypes as to their imagined ahistorical character); instead he must be telling us something else. Something, it seems to me, he grasped intuitively but did not fully understand.

I grew up under the sway of Wonder Woman. William Marston, the character's creator, intended her, it seems, as an aspirational figure. But if he believed he was calling her into being purely through his imagination, in fact it seems she, like Athena, sprang fully formed from his unconscious, and from the collective unconscious of the culture of his place and time. Until then, all superheroes had been men. This in itself bears witness to the relatively recent origin of the archetype and how non-obvious it in fact is. No one believed in the commercial success of Wonder Woman and based on Marston's reasoning one can also see why. Nevertheless, she was a tremendous success; and she captivated me still some forty years after her creation.

An even more captivating figure was Julia, the heroine of George Orwell's *1984*, which I probably read when I was about 15. Winston Smith's sexual relationship with Julia empowers him to fight the dystopian system of which he is a part. The sex scenes in *1984* are highly erotic (or I found them so) due to the camaraderie that the pair share and the ever present danger they are under, where either could be forced to betray the other, or could indeed be a plant, a double agent. Smith seeks moral redemption with Julia. She represents very clearly his anima in Jung's sense.

Jung posited four stages in the development of the anima. As [Frith Luton writes](#):

"In the first stage, Eve, the anima is indistinguishable from the personal mother. The man cannot function well without a close tie to a woman. In the second stage, personified in the historical figure of Helen of Troy, the anima is a collective and ideal sexual image ... The third stage, Mary, manifests in religious feelings and a capacity for lasting relationships. In the fourth stage, as Sophia (called Wisdom in the Bible), a man's anima functions as a guide to the inner life, mediating to consciousness the contents of the unconscious. She cooperates in the search for meaning and is the creative muse in an artist's life.

Ideally, a man's anima proceeds naturally through these stages as he grows older. In fact, as an archetypal life force, the anima manifests in whatever shape or form is necessary to compensate the dominant conscious attitude.

*So long as the anima is unconscious, everything she stands for is projected. Most commonly, because of the initially close tie between the anima and the protective mother-*imago*, this projection falls on the partner, with predictable results...*

No matter where a man is in terms of psychological development, he is always prone to see aspects of his anima, his soul, in an actual woman."

But what psychodynamic and cultural aspects shape and condition this development? Whilst the mother-fixation is relatively easy to understand, how does it happen that the successive figures develop and how is this process influenced by the subject's actual experiences at each stage?

This is not an attempt to interpret Jung and I don't know what his answers to these questions would have been. In my experience, however, and I think in all logic, we cannot escape the conclusion that, far from being a universal, this development is in many ways a cultural artefact. In my opinion we are not condemned to the conclusion that man cannot relate to woman by other means than through anima-projection, or can do so only under ideal conditions and towards the end of his life. If we cease to think through a patriarchal lens, other possibilities emerge; possibilities which are both more truly erotic and more truly emancipatory.

The adolescent boy, in the state of nature, faces two interrelated challenges: socialization and mating. Under patriarchy, if socialization goes well, the boy gains a certain power over women by virtue of his status and ability to mediate access to resources. If socialization is botched, on the other hand, and (since it is also competitive) it often is, these two drives coalesce and the boy becomes a taker in the sexual marketplace, at least during a critical moment. This, it seems to me, is when the woman takes on transcendental aspects and becomes invested with a function as gateway to personal redemption. Then Helen emerges because Helen is an abstraction; she is no real woman and furthermore she is entirely passive: her redemptive function emerges purely from her existence, not from anything she does. This ego-based objectification is only possible in an ideological world where women are denuded of agency; her subjugation is the condition of possibility of her transcendent goddess-like alter ego. As ever, woman is bifurcated in the patriarchal mind.

A moment's reflection should be enough to concur that most men do not apotheosize women, at least not in quite this way. The mafia boss's mother is untouchable, his wife and daughters his unreserved property, and all other women count for nothing. There is no redemptress in this scenario: there is just pure masculine might. But for the socially disadvantaged male, there is a solution which in the world of his imagination banishes loneliness for ever. If this quest is consecrated, he may advance to the third and fourth levels of the taxonomy. Unrequited, another branch leads into the transcendentalism of courtly love in the troubadour tradition and other mysticisms.

There are perfect literary parallels to the development Jung describes, or at least its early stages. I think in particular of the tortuosities of Renzo in Manzoni's *Promessi Sposi*, and of Jérôme in Gide's *La Porte Etroite*. But what do women think of this objectification? Is it embraced as part of a shared cultural universe, tolerated reluctantly, or fled from?

If we look to Lucia and Alissa respectively, the latter seems the privileged course of action. Why, in the presence of overwhelming and devoted male love, the supposed prize of the mating endeavour, do they still flee? What needs are still unmet and sublimated into mysticism and devotional piety?

I think that women, if they are honest, find the anima-projection creepy, or at least suspect and unmasculine, as well as dehumanising. This is the case regardless of its level of "sophistication". Simply put, women do not aspire to be bit players in men's internal psychodrama. It does not, in the main, elicit an erotic response. Indeed conventional patterns of male domination are far more eroticised in the female imagination than this doting apotheosis. It may be flattering, and it may be culturally sanctioned and thus not bereft of positive connotations. Yet if women play along, they often do so cynically and even consciously so.

Indeed there is no parallel myth and no worldly redemption which women typically seek. Redeemer figures may be invariably male, but they are mostly desexualised. Notable exceptions aside (one thinks of the extraordinary writings of Teresa of Avila), devotion to Jesus is in the mode of father-figure or in some entirely asexual mode. Actual real-world men are only viewed in a salvific capacity when they incarnate the most ascetic of characters¹. Perhaps there is a sexual sublimation going on here, but it is present, in any case, from the outset. Sexual desire is not redemptive for women; rather the contrary. This, I believe is because natural sexual behavior simply cannot be restored to women within the constraints of patriarchy, and very few men have ever offered anything else (it cannot be restored to men either, but it appears to them differently, and they are usually oblivious to the subtleties).

What men are looking for in women is the physicality of sex and its transcendence. That is, its biochemical signature and the states of consciousness to which it gives access. Or in other words, "another trip". Paradoxically, however, the objectification entailed by the anima-projection robs the women of her potency in the sexual context, that is of her power to induce transformation in the man, because it disables the abandonment needed to gain access to new perspectives. With the woman reduced to a mere screen, the process is in fact self-induced by the man and, as such, has little power to disrupt his ego. The woman is bemused as to the unwanted importance with which she has been endowed and feels herself bereft of her real powers of sexual alchemy. She seeks emancipation through the male rather than redemption; but she encounters just a new form of slavery.

I should clarify at this point the distinction. Redemption, *Erlösung*, of course, is a concept from Christian theology (historically, women were usually deemed to be inimical to it rather than the reverse). It is also a financial term meaning to collect a debt². Because of original sin we all owe a debt to God; Christ paid this debt and set us free. Therefore if I look for redemption I believe myself to be fallen from a state of grace to which I seek to return, but I explicitly look to another to pay my debt. In doing so I recognize (a) that the state I am in is my own responsibility (the debt is legitimate and I am the debtor) and (b) that I am unable to repay the debt and only another can do it for me.

¹ Male figures may be viewed as salvific if they offer a worldly path out of unfavorable conditions of life but this is coextensive with the eroticization of domination I discussed in a previous article.

² The term Paul uses is ἀπολύτρωσις and the financial sense (Hebrew גאולה) is attested in the earliest layers of the Torah.

When I talk about emancipation there is similarly awareness of a fall from grace, but the attitude towards this state is different. I recognize myself to be in a state of enslavement into which I was born through no fault of my own (there is no "original sin"). Others may play a role in releasing me from this state, but only indirectly as it always requires agency on my part. The mechanisms of emancipation are therefore incidental rather than intrinsic to the definition. In the case of emancipation from patriarchy, mechanisms of sexuality and relationships assume a key *strategic* importance their repression is the key strategy which patriarchy employs and their restoration a key goal of the return to the archaic state of nature. Effective rebellion requires collective action and (as Reich understood so well) restoration of natural libido, in particular of its erotic expression (because this is the most foundational form of libidinal energy).

I am inclined to propose that the search for redemption only characterizes, in terms of Reich's taxonomy, the masochistic character type. The other character types think there is something wrong with the world but not with them (sadistic) or they question neither the world nor themselves (rigid, psychopathic) or they question both the world and themselves (oral). The masochist accepts the world but questions himself³. He has done something wrong and is powerless to put it right. Thus he is dependent on others for a restored place in the world. The same idea of four basic attitudinal types is found in [transactional analysis](#) which I mentioned in a [previous article](#).

Now my current attitude is "I'm OK, you're OK, but the (mental) world we live in (i.e. our culture) is *not* OK". Thus all of us seek emancipation from culture and a return to the state of nature. That's of course not really possible but it expresses a deep longing. And each of us can serve the other, initially by recognizing we are all (whether we realize it or not) in the same predicament.

In my early relationships with women I always imposed this kind of redemptive flavor. Needless to say, it communicates "I'm not OK" and was not very successful. But I realized that I also always wanted to liberate them. This isn't a standard component of the masochistic attitude (or of TA)⁴. Usually the pure masochist sees the woman as perfect and thinks there is nothing to change. Only he needs to change. Indeed, an imperfect redemptress is for him a contradiction in terms; it must always be he that is wrong and fails to perceive her perfection (but the attachment, of course, may be to the archetype, which any individual woman frustratingly fails to live up to).

I was never quite like this as it was obvious to me we all need to change. But I think I was for a long time much too invested in the outcome and also this is tied up in the masochistic drives as liberating others is a way of paying ones debts. It didn't matter if they wanted to be "saved" or had another understanding of it to me or actually what they wanted at all (maybe they wished I'd just shut up and fuck them, mow the lawn or clear off home). Basically I didn't trust other people to find their path and believed too much in my own agency in their process. Unlearning this has taken time (though I'm now profoundly in awe of the wisdom of other people's personal processes and very disinclined to intervene personally, limiting myself to writing articles like this aimed at no one in particular).

³ I am paying attention here only to the masculine perspective and therefore choose male pronouns. The analysis is not commutative.

⁴ The Reichian taxonomy presents pure types but recognizes that there are hybrid types as well and it is not a simple matter of assignment to one or other of them

Despite the persistent power the redemptress archetype has had over me, my experience, if I truly examine it, points to a different conclusion: erotic ecstasy is in a real sense a mere accompaniment of transformation. By this I do not mean to say that, for example, tantric practices are unhelpful on the path of self-discovery. But even these practices can only be entered into and benefitted from if there is prior preparation and a space of surrender beyond the sway of projection; otherwise they are close to useless or on occasion even worse.

This is because the function of erotic ecstasy for the man is in fact identical with what it is for the woman; not redemptive, but emancipatory. The man is merely slower to recognise his enslavement. He imagines that if the woman is subjugated, he himself must be free; but this (of course) is not so. The subjugation is not of one sex to the other but of both to the patriarchal order, in which residues of freedom are indeed differently distributed but the status of both partners is equally dire. *1984* we think of merely as a parable of totalitarian collectivism; in reality, however, it is, and always was, a parable of all of modern life.

The archetype of Woman as Redemptress stands in for a lack of comradeship and shared meaning encountered in puberty and conflates this with the lack of sexual outlet available to the adolescent male due to a large extent to his socially marginal position. It is a conversion phenomenon. The pre-pubescent child knows, however, a different story; one in which, typically, playmates are plentiful and hence unencumbered with hopes and lost dreams, unencumbered, in fact, with permanence. There is no inherent biological reason why with adolescence this should change, at least fundamentally. There is only a clash which takes place between the phenomenon of sexual scarcity generated (or massively augmented) to underpin patriarchal culture and the natural desires of the individual.

Where there is no projection, there is no attachment. "*Life is a lila, it is a play*", said [Osho](#), "*and the moment you are ready to play, you are enlightened.*" Or in the words of [Yeats](#):

*Down by the salley gardens
my love and I did meet;
She passed the salley gardens
with little snow-white feet.
She bid me take love easy,
as the leaves grow on the tree;
But I, being young and foolish,
with her would not agree.*

*In a field by the river
my love and I did stand,
And on my leaning shoulder
she laid her snow-white hand.
She bid me take life easy,
as the grass grows on the weirs;
But I was young and foolish,
and now am full of tears.*