

PATRICK WHITE – A NOTE ON THE PHOENIX

In the poems of Patrick White, the most persistent symbol is that of birds¹ and, of these, the Phoenix occupies a central position.

In the poems "Rain in Summer", "They Held Out their Hands to Me" and "Resurrection",² for example, the Phoenix is associated with motifs of rebirth, regeneration, androgynous and mystical union. The Phoenix of the poems is a great but non-orthodox god of resurrection.

The legendary Phoenix is a special form of the androgynous symbol and is one of the ancient, holy, mythical symbols of mankind that has long been denaturalised but is ever again raised and filled with a living tradition.

According to Ovid, the Phoenix derives from Assyria and was especially honoured by initiates in Egypt. The Phoenix, which was thought of as similar to the eagle or hawk, was the subject of the myth that every 500 years it would come out of the desert where it spent its days in loneliness and go to Heliopolis, the sun-city in Egypt, in order to build its nest. Then it would burn itself in its nest, but would stand up again from its own ashes in the beauty of new youth. Thus it is the symbol of death by fire and rebirth into beauty and youth.

As Patrick White puts it, in "Rain in Summer" –

O, then I am given birth again
By the heavy, pregnant, breeding one;
And the glossy-feathered sky
Stands from the ashes where cold she has lain
And her claws are barbed with the gold of the sun.

The Phoenix is likewise the symbol of an eternal self-sufficiency, of a being-by-oneself; it is an image of self-immortality. As a baroque phoenix-poet³ has said, the Phoenix eternally returns through itself into itself, is its own progeny, its own father and its own child. It is the father that springs from the seed of its child, the child that springs into life from the ashes of the father. The father and the child are born of one thing. This is autogeneration; the Phoenix is androgynous. Hence the bi-sexual character of the bird in White's poems; for example, the Phoenix

... Stands from the ashes where cold she has lain,
And her claws ...

"Rain in Summer"

and ... there against the sky the Great God stands:
Blue are his wings, and living gold the grain
That in the morning scatters from his hands.

"Resurrection"

(My emphasis)

And, to continue with the baroque poet's description, as convenient illustration, the Phoenix is his own truest love, his own true spouse; he is no strong man and no mild maid, but, beyond these, fulfills both needs in himself. The Phoenix, for his own fertility, needs to couple with no other but himself. His seed remains in him. As Hoffmeister⁴, the commentator of the "Deutscher Phoenix", states, the Phoenix is the symbol of the highest earthly mystery and a goal of the Faustian striving for the ideal human. Androgynous mysteries are not of course restricted to the Phoenix symbol; their traces are to be found widely in the older cultures and in the hidden stream of initiatory traditions which have never quite died. Indian, Chinese, and Egyptian traditions know the androgynous symbol well; the book of Genesis depicts the original Adam in Eden as androgynous; and in the ancient mysteries, in the gnostic tradition, in Plato, in the early Christian and Germanic religions, the androgyne is to be found. In mediaeval hermeticism, in spiritual alchemy, the androgyne stands at the centre-point of doctrine as the "hermaphrodite" or "rebis".

If one seeks to define just what is meant by the androgyne in all these traditions, then it appears to be essentially the unity of complementary or polar opposites, of active-passive or male-female, as the condition of Self-consciousness; that is, to "Know Thyself" in the unity of the Self. The Self and the form of consciousness implied here are of course different from the "self" and consciousness of everyday life, and will be familiar in concept at least to those readers versed in literature of mystical tradition, not to mention the writings of C.G. Jung. From this viewpoint, physical, 'profane' union is but a figure of the higher Self-union.⁵ Or, as Patrick White writes in a poem —

If you would see that I love
Something beyond yourself . . .
Then how burning-swift our love under the web of the trees;
Then our kisses, no mere kisses, carnal lingering,
But meet to draw us upward into the stars.
"If You Would See"

I would also suggest that this poem, though not explicitly a Phoenix poem, must be seen as such to be fully grasped, that the "web of the trees" is allusive of the "glossy feathered sky" ("Rain in Summer") and that the upward motion and the "burning" are allusive of the typical bird-flight motif and Phoenix-symbolism in White's other poems.

The Phoenix, as the self-sufficient mother-figure with claws, and as the self-regenerative God emerging from its own destruction, is a key symbol to the whole of Patrick White's work. If the Phoenix itself does not appear in direct form in his later work, its properties nevertheless resonate again and again with those of significant figures in this work.

Here, one is reminded in passing of D.H. Lawrence, in whose work the Phoenix also holds an important place, and of White's statement that Lawrence was an influence on him when White started writing⁶. Indeed, Lawrentian aspects are to be found in White's novels from as early as Happy Valley (1939), which shows response to various authors of the 30's, through to The Vivisector (1970), with its sequence of women who enter into the life of the artist Hurtle Duffield in the course of Duffield's seeking the answer to the Lawrentian question of the extent to which Art is dependent on sex. Other androgynous features, homosexual and lesbian aspects, common to the work of both authors, will not escape the observant reader.

Somewhat further afield, one is also reminded of the passage in Hermann Hesse's Demian, beginning "I was on my way to my parents' home and over the main entrance the heraldic bird gleamed gold on an azure ground . . ."7. Jungian psychology and androgynous conflict play a large part in Demian and in Hesse's work generally, as do ideas drawn from mystical tradition8. The psychologically informed reader will no doubt see further connections here.

Of the Phoenix in its "burning" aspect, of the "burning" and "Burnt Ones" in White's work, little mention need be made here; the associated concern is always with the possibility of initiation into another order of awareness, of union and rebirth. The androgynous motif is present in a variety of forms. Disgruntled readers have complained that there is hardly a happy, normal love-relationship in White's novels, that no one gets well 'laid' and lives for ever after in the complementary egoism of happy marriage. Himmelfarb and Reha in Riders in the Chariot form an exception, but their union is tragically broken off. Elsewhere, Voss and Laura have, at best, a telepathic connection; the real action is encapsulated in the separate parties, the essential function of each being as catalyst to the other's spiritual strivings. The ageing and the childlike, brother and brother, fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, brother and sister, are attracted to each other with greater or lesser awareness, with varying degrees of physicality, and are also repelled. There is conflict and misunderstanding, a seeking on one plane for something that can only be found on another, and then not found because the way is uncertain, the parties blind and only human, though their urge to transcendent union remains. The irony of this situation is done full justice by Patrick White; which too is a mark of the author's humanity and wisdom, as it is also a mark of the inadequacy of any psychologising interpretation of his work in terms say of a Jungian "individuation-process": for the irony is of such an order that it relativises all psychology as the all-too-human attempt of an overweening and insecure intellect to reduce a great 'mystery' to a lesser one. That White's work appears to stand partly under the influence of the psychologist C.G. Jung is more to be explained by the reference of both authors to common sources in mystical literature, than to White's predilection for Jungian psychology. White's characters are all brought to their knees, but there is no suggestion that a course of analysis or, for that matter, any of the other resources of a scientific optimism, would blunt for them the claws of the Phoenix. There is an attitude here similar to that in Christopher Brennan's "Wanderer", where those who have stayed 'safe' at home are the benighted traducers of an inward call which it is spiritual death to deny.

That the androgynous Phoenix is also a hunting bird of prey with claws is clear from tradition and from White's poems. One aspect of this in the novels is the sequence of monstrous, destructive mother-figures, from Catherine Standish in The Living and the Dead, to Mrs Hunter in The Eye of the Storm. Mrs Hunter preys on the lives of those that serve her, until in the eye of a great cyclone that beats up in the sky, she becomes for a moment an object of prey herself. Voss has for name that of the hunting fox (Reinicke Voss = Reynard the Fox; White's Johann Ulrich Voss also suggests Johann Heinrich Voss, the "Hainbund" poet, 1751 - 1862, as does the Laura of White's novel Voss suggest the Luise of the German poet's work). Theodora Goodman receives a gun from her father; and so on. Gerhard Schulz9 has remarked on the dominance of hunting figures in some of White's best novels.

The self-sufficiency of the Phoenix is paralleled by the attempts of White's characters to ground their personal development in themselves alone, from the central character of the 'writer' in The Living and the Dead, in 1941, through to the self-centered Mrs Hunter in The Eye of the Storm, in 1973. In the night of Mrs Hunter's death, her children, brother and sister, couple incestuously in her marriage-bed.

From a mystical point of view, which White appears to adopt, sexual love as expressed in physical coupling is merely the most universal form in which mankind unconsciously attempts to achieve the androgynous mystical union. As with Mrs Hunter's children, it is an attempt which consistently fails with White's characters.

White's irony precludes any attempt to fit his work to a system, but this does not preclude us from detecting central and recurring features in it. In the novels, Theodora Goodman, with her mannish traits and father-bond, appears to be the prototype of a variety of figures who stand under the myth of the androgyne. It is tempting to stop at the interpretation of her story as that of the development of the simple or hebephrenic form of schizophrenia. But this psychological interpretation, though useful in revealing aspects of order in White's work, becomes more and more questionable as one attempts to extend it over the whole of the work. Indeed, the work as a whole suggests the reverse approach; that is, instead of attempting to explain the myth with the aid of psychology or any other form of scientific understanding, it is the myth of the androgyne or, more broadly, the metaphysics of eros, that is to be invoked in explanation of all other realities. The basic principle of this myth or metaphysics is "through duality to unity"; this bare formulation giving no hint of the vast range of expression that this principle has found in culture, including the little-known mystical traditions that White has obviously drawn upon.¹⁰ This reversed approach presents problems to literary interpretation, and in the last resort must be unacceptable unless the 'science of myth' is to become the 'myth of science'. It is clear that the myth of the androgyne, symbolised in Patrick White's poems by the figure of the Phoenix, is a central figure in his work; the irony of the novels repeatedly redirects our gaze to the irreducible nature of the myth.

References:

1. Noel Macainsh: The Poems of Patrick White, LINQ, No 3, 1975.
2. Patrick White: The Ploughman and Other Poems, Beacon Press, Sydney, 1935.
3. Johann Hoffmeister: Kaspar von Barths Leben, Werke und sein Deutscher Phoenix, Heidelberg, 1931.
4. *ibid.*
5. Julius Evola: Metafisica del Sesso, Atanor, Rome.
In German transl. as Metaphysik des Sexus, Klett, Stuttgart, 1962.
This work contains an extensive review of initiatory 'mysteries' and occult doctrines of sexuality with regard to the quest for mystical union in various traditions.
6. Ingmar Björkstén: Patrick White, Die Stimme Australiens, Düsseldorf, 1973, p.10. cf. Noel Macainsh, LINQ, No 1/2, 1975.
7. Hermann Hesse: Demian, Panther Books, London, pp. 89-90.

8. cf. A.W. Brink: Hermann Hesse and the Oedipal Quest, Literature and Psychology, Vol. XXIV, No. 2, 1974, pp. 66-79.
9. Gerhard Schulz: Urmythos in Australien, Zum Werk des Nobelpreisträgers Patrick White, Die Neue Rundschau, Vol. 85, 1974.
10. cf. Patricia Morley: The Mystery of Unity, 1972; Rudolfo Delmonte: Various Types of Ambiguity in Patrick White's Riders in The Chariot, LINQ, No. 3/4, 1974. In addition to the literature cited in Delmonte; Bernard Tarschy's Über das Jüdische, 1972, gives further insight into the legend of the Zaddikim.