

The Disenchantment of the Dragon

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A penetrating essay that links the symbolic structures of the Arthurian legend cycle, mythic elements underlying *Beelzebub's Tales* and wisdom that transforms rather than slays the Dragon.

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Myths are not distorted records of historical events. They are not periphrastic descriptions of natural phenomena or 'explanations' of them; so far from that, events are demonstrations of the myths.¹

For a long time in the Western World, the predominant form of the eternal fairy-tale has been the one wherein the Hero, in order to rescue the Princess and win the Kingdom, must slay the Dragon. This pattern is engraved upon the very substance of our psyche. It is re-enacted nightly on the screen in the costumes of the old west, the modern city or the fantasized future in outer space. In recent years, reflecting the revolution of the 1960's, the roles are often reversed: he who formerly played the Dragon (the 'bad guy') may take the role of the Hero. But the pattern remains the same. The Dragon, which in ancient China was the splendid embodiment of the energies of Nature, and held in its claws the Pearl of Great Price, became in Christian folklore, the Old Dragon, the Devil, the Enemy; and in our innumerable wars, the enemy, whoever he happened to be, became, for the moment, the Devil. Ascetic monk and puritan assumed the same militant posture toward their own lower natures, and Victorian character-building consisted of subduing the natural appetites and impulses by force – which is how 'will power' was, and still is, understood. The portrait of the Hero which is woven into the tapestry of our collective unconscious is never far from the red threads of the blood of the dying Dragon. Mastery to us means murder.

But the Dragon in ourselves is not slain. Energy can neither be created nor destroyed, but only transformed. Having lost the secret of its transformation, we do the Dragon's will whether we know it or not. When we suppose we have slain or conquered it, we have only pushed it out of our own sight, repressed it into the

unconscious. Thus a part of our energy becomes inaccessible, and we are left sweet and ineffectual, or dry and rigid; or the Dragon in its underground prison takes on poisonous forms, making us physically ill, or enslaving us in irrational, repetitive patterns of action; or it erupts periodically in violent revolutions; or its image is projected upon our supposed external enemies. We have the choice of neurosis or psychosis.

From time to time there is a movement back to Nature and the idea of the Noble Savage—a romantic revolution, the return of the repressed. The Fathers, who saw themselves as self-controlled conquerors of Nature, are seen by the Sons as self-deceived polluters, destroyers and oppressors. The aim becomes, not self-control, but self-abandonment: to overthrow the tyrant super-ego, get rid of our inhibitions and let energy master us. This was the ecstasy of the 1960s.

Reason may sometimes govern our thoughts, but our emotions, which animate our actions, listen, not to logic, but to myth. The tale of the noble Dragon-Slayer has provided both our spur to idealistic action and our justification for murdering or subjecting by force those whom we have identified as evil, or that which we have identified as evil in ourselves. Turned upside down, it has provided the justification for our violent revolutions. What if we have misread the myth?

Searching the scriptures of the world, we find, to begin with, that the Hero himself first comes on the scene from the direction of the Dragon. The Dragon's first role in relation to the Hero may indeed be that of Mother—or Grandmother. The Hero is born in the wilderness, nurtured by wolves—or in a stable, below the ox and the ass—: he is born beyond the pale. A little reflection reveals that this is necessarily so. Heroism cannot begin in passive conformity to the established order. The Hero is born to regenerate that order, whether we speak of the social order or the order of habits and unquestioned assumptions in ourselves. If we slay the Dragon in subservience to any external authority—even to the best of gurus, or to the best of teachings accepted as unquestioned dogma—we have slain our own independent spirit and intelligence, the living germ of a possible individuality. Thus G. I. Gurdjieff makes Beelzebub himself—one of the original rebels—the hero of the First Series of the great myth he bequeathed to modern man for the making of a new world: *All and Everything*. The words Gurdjieff ascribes to his own paternal grandmother—"In life, never do as others do"—arouse the rebel, the infant hero, in each of us. In this Series, *Beelzebub's Tales to His Grandson*, Gurdjieff dismantles the super-ego of the whole Western World, and of much of the East, in order to clear the way for the emergence of conscience, the data for which—"the particles of the sorrow of our Father Creator"—have remained intact in our subconsciousness.

Later in his life, Beelzebub voluntarily undertakes a task in the service of HIS ENDLESSNESS in order to become a particle of a part of the Great Whole and to be allowed to return to the Centre from the outer darkness (which is our solar system). If the Hero does not undertake his earthly task of regeneration, he remains a *puer aeternus*,

an eternal infant, a Peter Pan, dwelling forever in a never-never land of imaginary heroics, drugs and dreams; or he remains an eternal adolescent rebel, stockpiling bombs in the outer darkness of the underground. These have been the fates of many of the rebel-heroes of the 1960s.

The grown-up Hero voluntarily undertakes his task, not in subservience to any of the saints or external authorities, but in the service of God—the inmost centre of himself, as well as of the cosmos. But what is his task? Now, we would suppose, comes the moment for slaying the Dragon.² We picture the Dragon as guarding the Well of the Water of Life and holding captive the Princess. But tracing the myth back to earlier forms, we discover that at this stage in the process portrayed—when the Hero is born, but has not yet undertaken his task—the Well of the Water of Life, the Princess and the Dragon are all one and the same.

In an ancient form of the myth found in the *Rig Veda*, the Dragon, or snake, Apala, the Earth Goddess, approaches the divine Hero Indra, demanding that he embrace her in her loathly form. Kissing the Dragon, he drinks the Soma from her lips—he takes on her knowledge and her power. "It is beyond question that she was a reptile when Indra drank the Water of Life from her lips; the purification takes place afterwards.³ He draws her through the hub of each of the three wheels of his solar chariot. From the third, she emerges sun-skinned. The Dragon has become the Princess; and she who, in the form of the Dragon, ruled the Earth (the Devil is the Lord of This World), has brought that sovereignty to him.

The purification, then, which may be thought of as Dragon-slaying, is one of the later acts in a long drama: and though it requires great efforts on the part of the Hero, and great sufferings on the part of the Dragon-Princess, it is more accurately thought of as the separation of the Princess from her Dragon-skin, or disguise, or, as in the case of the Princess Briar Rose, from her sleep. "Separate the fine from the coarse slowly, and with gentle heat," admonished the alchemists.

It is not so simple, then. We have, first of all, to withdraw our projections. We have seen the enemy, and he is us. Then there is a path to be followed, with dangers and pitfalls at every step. If the Dragon is slain in unquestioning obedience to any external authority, the Hero cannot be born. If, once born, the Hero slays the Dragon prematurely, he deprives himself of the Water of Life and the Princess (and hence of the Kingdom) and deprives the Princess of her salvation. If, on the other hand, he allows the Dragon to overwhelm him, both Hero and Princess are lost, and there is no one left but the Dragon—unopposed, uncontrolled, untransformed psychic energy: pure violence.

We do not need to be demythologized, but to see to it that the child who sits listening in the action-evoking substrata of our psyche hears the whole story, accurately told; for he understands the language, not of logic or reason, but of myth. The most exhaustive and meticulously accurate version of the total myth ever formulated is contained in the Three Series of Gurdjieff's great work, *All and Everything*; but there is a

brief medieval story which may help us discern the bare outline of an essential part of the process. It is a tale of sun and earth, of king and kingdom, of man and woman.⁴ On the scale of immediate concern to each of us, it is a myth of self-mastery, attained, not by murder or militant conquest, but by marriage.

The Dragon approaches...

The Wedding of Sir Gawain and Dame Ragnell

One day King Arthur rode out hunting, he and all his men, armed only with bows and arrows and clad in hunter's green.

Suddenly a deer leapt out of the underbrush. The King rode off alone in hot pursuit. On and on the animal led him, deeper and deeper into the tangled wood.

In the very heart of the forest he brought his quarry down, dismounted, and knelt to skin the deer. But there a great shadow fell over him. Turning, he saw looming above him a huge knight, armed from head to toe.

"Well met, King Arthur," said the knight, and he raised his great battleaxe over the undefended neck of the King.

But Arthur chided him, reminding him what great dishonour would fall upon a knight who, clad in full armour, should strike down an unarmed man.

Slowly, the strange knight lowered his battleaxe.

"Very well," he said, "I will spare your life today, but on one condition: that upon your honour you promise to return, unarmed as now, a year from today, with the answer to this question: What is it that a woman most desires in all the world?"

"And if you fail to find the answer, you shall die."

Troubled in heart, the King rode back to his companions. Noticing the change in his sovereign's countenance, Sir Gawain drew him aside and questioned him. King Arthur opened his heart to him, for Gawain was his sister's son and the best of his knights.

When he understood the King's predicament, Gawain devised a plan.

"You, my lord, ride one way, and I shall ride the other, and we shall ask everyone we meet: What is it that a woman most desires in all the world?"

"In this way we shall surely find the answer."

So, having prepared themselves, the King and the Knight rode off in opposite directions. Each of them asked everyone he met: What is it that a woman most desires in all the world? And they wrote down all the answers in two great books.

Some said a woman loves to be well dressed. Some said she loves to be treated with courtesy and respect. Some said that she loves to be hugged and kissed by a lusty man.

Thus did the two men gather a great number of opinions.

When they met on the eve of the appointed day, Sir Gawain felt confident that somewhere in their books must be the answer. But a strange disquiet in the King's heart told him he must seek a little more.

So he rode straight ahead into the forest, and there he came face to face with the ugliest hag he had ever seen.

The horse she rode upon was gaily decked out with bells and tassels and cloth of gold, but she herself was foul beyond all telling. Her snout hung down below her chin, and her paps below her knees, and from her ragged and bristly mouth two tusks stuck out, one pointing up and the other one down. This Monster addressed the King flirtatiously, and asked the reason for his downcast mien.

When she had heard his tale, she said, "Arthur, you are a dead man, unless I myself give you the answer. For the strange knight was my brother, Sir Gromer Somer Joure, and long has he held a grudge against you, since that time you took away a part of his lands and bestowed them on Sir Gawain.

"And the answer I will give you on one condition and one condition only: the best and handsomest knight in England, your nephew, Sir Gawain himself, must marry me."

Once more the King returned to court in sore despair, for he could not ask such a service of his best beloved knight. But Sir Gawain could not bear to see his master thus cast down, and so at length persuaded him to tell his story.

When he heard what the difficulty was, he laughed aloud. "My lord, to save your life I would marry a thousand monsters!"

And so the King returned to the Lady with Sir Gawain's promise, and learned the answer.

"A woman desires, above all manner of thing, to have the sovereignty of all, both high and low."

Then King Arthur kept his word and returned unarmed to the appointed spot. At first he tried all the answers from the books, but the rude knight only laughed and whetted his battleaxe. He had grown impatient and was lifting the axe when at last the King said, "Could it be that what a woman most desires is the sovereignty?"

"The Devil told you that!" Sir Gromer roared, and he moved off grumbling and cursing, as a thundercloud moves away from the sun.

It remained for Sir Gawain to face the wedding. Dame Ragnell (for such was the Monster's name) would not hear of a private service, as the Queen desired, but insisted upon a full high mass and a public feast. Sir Gawain went out to meet her at the castle gate, and he showed no sign of dismay, but bowed to her and took her hand, just as if she had been his longed-

for love. When the ladies of the court saw the bride, they turned away and wept, and the lesser knights of King Arthur's court flushed red in sympathy for Gawain's sore humiliation.

For Dame Ragnell behaved disgustingly. She devoured innumerable chickens whole. She tore at the joints of mutton with her tusks. She swilled whole barrels of wine and then let her hairy mouth gape wide with seismic belching.

But Gawain treated her all the while with utmost gentleness. Not even by the tremor of a muscle did he betray that he was less than pleased with his bride.

Not until the final moment did he waver. Bravely he climbed into bed with the Monster, but he could not bring himself to turn his face toward her fearful snout. From behind his back she commended him, and told him he was indeed the best knight in England, just as she had heard he was, to have treated her so graciously. Then she begged him for Arthur's sake at least to kiss her, lest he keep his promise only in an outward way.

Sir Gawain drew upon his great store of courage and kindness, summoning up the utmost drop. "By God, I shall do more!" he said, and turned to the Lady.

And there before him lay the loveliest creature in all the world. "What are you?" he asked in his great astonishment.

"Behold, I am your own dear wife," she said, "so kiss me, and be of good cheer." And they took great delight in one another.

But the Lady said, "Alas, Sir Knight, my beauty will not hold. And you must choose: whether you will have me fair at night and foul by day, for all to see, or whether you will have me fair by day and foul by night."

Sir Gawain's heart was grieved, for either choice seemed hard to him. "Fain would I choose the best," he said, "but know not what to say. Dear Lady, let it be as you desire it. My body and goods, my heart and all, is yours. That I avow before God."

Then at last she told him how her stepmother had cast a spell upon her, condemning her to remain in that loathsome form until the best knight of England should marry her and yield to her the sovereignty of all his body and goods. Thus, by his bravery and courtesy, Sir Gawain had at long last released her completely from her spell.

And so, the night through, they made joy out of mind, and far into the day, until the King began to wonder what had happened, and whether the Monster had devoured his Knight. Gathering all his courtiers around him, he went and knocked on the chamber door. "Sir Gawain," he called, "arise! Why do you sleep so long?"

Taking his Lady by the hand, the Knight arose and let the King come in. Ragnell stood in her nightgown by the fire, and her long hair shone like gold in its light.

"Behold my reward," said Gawain to the King. "This is my wife, the Lady Ragnell, who once saved your life."⁵

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The picture of the kneeling King with the huge figure of the uncouth knight looming over him reminds us of "the psychoanalytic view of the relation of the conscious ego to an overpowering unconscious."⁶ What loomed over King Arthur was the threatened immense revenge of a neglected part of the psyche.

What does our subconsciousness want? asked Sir Gromer Somer Joure; and more importantly, What does it most desire in all the world? The demand is, as it ever was, "Know thyself," but now presented as an ultimatum.

It was Sigmund Freud who brought the existence of the unconscious, as he called it, to the attention of the modern world, revealing how we are animated by motives of which we are unaware. Our tale bears out this part of Freud's discovery, for the King and Sir Gawain unknowingly carry out the wishes of the Loathly Bride.

On the lovely, firelit face of the Lady as she is revealed to us at the end of the tale, I see a secret smile. Is it not very odd that a rude knight like Sir Gromer Somer Joure should ask that question? Either his sister has put him up to it, providing him both with the question and with the one acceptable answer (which is the last anyone in the medieval realm would think of – it shocks us even today); or else Sir Gromer Somer Joure (fantastic name!) is Dame Ragnell herself, disguised in armour. The Lady who saves the King's life is the Dragon who threatens it. Like an unliberated Victorian wife, she moves the men about from behind the scenes to get what she wants.

Her approach is amazingly sinuous, coil upon coil. She has to marry Sir Gawain. If she approaches him directly in her dragon form, he will not marry her, but slay her. How, then? What is his ruling passion? Loyalty to the King. She can get at him through that, and he will never notice who has been the moving force behind the whole plot. She goes about weaving her intricate web. The King's life must be threatened, and in such a way that she alone will have the power to save it, and hence the power to impose her conditions and achieve her aim.

But what is her aim? What does she most desire in all the world? She already has the sovereignty, over the low, and over the high as well – the King and the Knight – so long as they do not see her. The Lady is very subtle. We must by no means believe everything she says, but watch what she does, and deduce her supreme desire from what she in fact achieves.

It is here, in the implied answer to the question of what our subconsciousness most desires in all the world, that the ancient wisdom embodied in this tale points to a limitation in Freud's understanding of the psyche. In the course of his life's work he put forth many answers to the question, no doubt all correct, like those collected by the King and the Knight in their two great books, but none of them the supreme answer implied in our tale and made explicit in Dante's *Divine Comedy*. In Freud's account of the stages in the development of the libido (the energy of desire) we can discern faint outlines of the seven terraces of Dante's Mountain of Purgatory. But above even the

highest terrace, at the centre and summit, Dante places the Earthly Paradise, where he comes once more face to face with Beatrice. The spiral coils of the Mount are like the Dragon-form within which she is hidden, the circling progress of the souls like the turning wheels of Indra's chariot. Once the ordeal has been successfully endured, the Lady of Desire, "the old flame within my veins,"² is revealed in her true form.

The seven terraces of the Mountain of Purgatory correspond to the Seven Deadly Sins of medieval Christianity. To sin means not yet to have uncovered in yourself what it is you most desire in all the world.

Dame Ragnell desires to marry Sir Gawain, in order to be released from her enchantment, to be restored to her native loveliness, above all to be admitted into the inner circle of warmth and light and grace that is King Arthur's court—no more to wander in aimless exile in the dark wood. It is the longing of the soul.

Freud came face to face with the Monster, but he never saw the King. Indeed, what could lead him to suppose that a true King might exist, when the understanding of religion in his time could not be reconciled with that positive science which he himself worshipped as the sole reliable means of arriving at the truth? But unless the Hero has seen and sworn fealty to the King, he can never achieve the transformation of the Loathly Lady; for it is in the inner court of the true King that she is secretly longing to dwell. Thus Freud held fast, until his death, against powerful opposition, to the conviction that the Dragon is the reality, the Princess only one of its disguises—the victim of an illusion. Our tale says that, on the contrary, the Dragon is a disguise—the loathly, enchanted form of something lovely.

This is not to underestimate the lethal power of the Dragon. During the sixties, one heard a great deal about liberation, about the abolition of repression. Untransmuted appetite already had the sovereignty. Why lie about it? Why not tear off the mask, abandon the cover-up? Many cast themselves euphorically into the maw of the Dragon. But the Loathly Lady was not transformed. Many who supposed her service to be liberation from the lies of social conformity discovered too late that what she most desired was their death, just as surely as did civilization with its wars. The rebel-hero of the sixties drank the Soma from the Dragon's lips, and drowned in it. Self-abandonment to the flood of psychic energy and chaotic imagery was mistaken for that voluntary subordination of ego which is represented in the Hero's oath of fealty to the King.

During this same decade people in the West arose in unprecedented numbers and went in search of the true King (who is not to be confused with that old tyrant, the super-ego—Sir Gawain clearly serves King Arthur out of love, and is nobly free of any sense of guilt or cowering fear of punishment). There followed the great influx of spiritual disciplines from the East—some of them authentic. The response of the East to our hunger for immediate experience, as opposed to that external observation of ritual and literal understanding of scripture which Freud found irreconcilable with reason and experimental evidence, at least reminded us of the direction in which the true King must be sought, and brought us methods for seeking. Our own scriptures pointed the

direction—"the kingdom of heaven is within you"—but the method had been lost: to sit in meditation and abstain from all motion, outer and inner, turning the whole of one's attention toward the inner silence, away from all the mutable manifestations of earth—that Loathly Lady, Maya-Sakti, Illusion—and wait for God. Our understanding of what constitutes prayer has changed, and proceeding in this way perhaps at moments we sense the distant presence of the true King, in whose service is perfect freedom.

But the prayer given us was, "Thy kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven." What happens when I arise from meditation and go about my business? Does this true King rule my every manifestation? If I am honest, I have to acknowledge that, as soon as I move, or anything moves in me, I am still the slave of the Dragon. Where is the Knight who will achieve her transformation? In embracing Eastern disciplines, we have also embraced the Eastern idea of the necessity for annihilation of the ego. In turning toward the East, we have turned away from the West; in turning toward the King, we have turned against the Hero.

In the foreground, in the dappled sunlight of the greenwood, ride the King and his small company of knights. Are they mere puppets, moved about by unseen forces? Not by any means. Their strength and nobility lie in their active and eager response to the challenges issuing out of the darkness, the Womb of Time, from which issue all the unexpected problems of our everyday life on the solid ground of this earth. King Arthur cannot rest until he is conscious of the whole of the truth, both high and low. Sir Gawain has put his strength in the service of the light. He endures the humiliating test of welcoming the Loathly Lady into the court of consciousness, where she is longing to dwell. It is only through him, through his strength and candour, that she will be able to achieve her hidden desire. If, instead, he goes to dwell in her shadowy realm, he has failed both the King and her. Without a strong ego, grounded in the experience of our own capacity to deal with ordinary life and in a just and clear-eyed estimate of our own strengths and weaknesses, unclouded by either delusory self-loathing or fantastic conceit, we go to dwell in the inexpressibly sad realm of schizophrenia—that alternate reality which is not the kingdom of heaven.

It is as if all the pieces of the puzzle were present, but in picking up one, we feel obliged to throw away another. To find a map is by no means the same as to make the journey, but if we fit all the fragments together, we do discern the faint outline of an ancient path to self-perfection. All the characters must be present—King, Knight and Loathly Bride—before the alchemical transformation can take place.

G. I. Gurdjieff is one who unites East and West. He insists upon the necessity of a strong ego, with a firm hold on the reality principle: "People who are unable to organize their own personal lives, who are too weak to struggle with and conquer life, dream of the ways."⁸ He teaches a two-ended attention: one end directed inward, attentive toward the King, the other attentive to every move of mind, emotion and body—the loathly, mutable, multiple Lady: myself. To undertake this dual effort of attention in actual practice is to discover its difficulty. I immediately forget what it was I was going

to try. I become directly aware of the great hypnotic power of the Dragon, who desires the sovereignty of all, both high and low. Or does she? Her message is: "Wake up! Watch out! Pay attention to me, or lose your head and with it your capacity for watching." Every time I forget, I allow the King to be slain in me. The King himself is never slain, but the Dragon has the power to eliminate him from the realm of myself. This is the paradox that puzzled the Fathers of the Church. The King of the Universe is not necessarily king over any given human psyche. The King has the sovereignty over only a small circle of light amid the vast, shadowy forests of my unconsciousness. The power of the Knight is only a small quantum wrested from the unmeasured holdings of Sir Gromer Somer Joure. If Sir Gawain fails the test, the Dragon will seize the sovereignty over all. One of her names, as Freud perceived, is Death.

In watching, I discover that my picture of myself was wholly illusory. I supposed I wished to serve the King; and with that small part of myself that wishes to take the initial steps toward self-mastery in the service of something higher—that small company of unarmed knights riding through the dappled sunlight—I undoubtedly do. But my every posture, gesture, tone of voice, every idle mental association reveals a person I do not know at all, with motives I never would have attributed to myself. We who would serve the King have to be at least as honest and unflinching in our self-observation as was Sigmund Freud. I do not like what I see, and try to change it. Again and again I resolve to overcome my self-destructive habits, to keep my temper with my family, to cease to burden other people with my gloom, irritation, self-pity, to adhere to some physical or spiritual regimen I set myself—even to love my neighbour. Again and again I fail, resolving and backsliding, doomed, like Sisyphus, to eternal repetition of the same. One part wishes to change, another part refuses. The part that refuses, I call the Devil, the enemy, the resistance; but it is myself. Sooner or later, it makes a revolution.

To cast off pretense and self-deception, to be what I am, in my untransformed state—acknowledge it openly before the whole court of consciousness—one expects disgrace and exile. Instead, there is an influx of energy and joy, a draught from the unpolluted spring of truth. All the energy that went to maintain the lie becomes available. Before I can change myself, I must be myself, however low. This is the dark matter of the alchemists. Nothing can be made out of lies.

But the Hero is still in danger. If the Lady remains in the form of a Dragon, she may devour him in bed. She puts him to the test: Will you have me fair by day, for all to see, or fair by night? Will the Hero use the Devil's magical power for exaggerated satisfactions of his body or his ego? The Dragon-Lady tests the Hero at every step, and in such a way that he does not know it is a test until it is over, when, if he has passed the test, she is transformed into the angels that minister unto him.

Body and ego are the first two wheels of Indra's chariot, the two motors that move me through my everyday life. Each has legitimate needs—the just necessity, the hub of the wheel. It is in my sins, my excesses, that I look for the Loathly Bride, my

hypnotized soul. Body and ego oppose each other, seizing the sovereignty in turn, resolving and backsliding, never coming face to face. But in the hub of the third wheel of the solar chariot, Will and Desire are one, united in the court of the Love that moves the sun and the other stars.

This is to speak of the highest, inmost aim, envisioned by only a few poets throughout history, and realized in practice (so far as we know) by an even smaller number of Masters. What is portrayed in the story as the work of a night may be the work of many lifetimes. But it is none too soon to begin. Sir Gromer Somer Joure has delivered his ultimatum. Each of us is charged to answer the question. No answer in a book, no opinion of another person, however sound, can do for me the work of coming face to face with the despised and rejected in myself.

I address her: What do you wish? But only the ego has been to school; the Lady has not learned the language.² She can only hold up images, symbols: representations in earthly forms of something which exists on a level beyond the externally visible. Confused, uninstructed, she mistakes one or another representation for the reality. I must go on searching, both for the King and for the treasure hid in the field of myself, "the which when a man hath found, he hideth, and for joy thereof goeth and selleth all he hath, and buyeth that field."¹⁰ For *joy*. This hardly sounds like grim Victorian character-building. It sounds like Sir Gawain in the hidden chamber in the middle of the night, discerning for the first time the true face of his Bride.

What is the lovely desire that can give me the power to blossom and bear fruit on this earth in service to the true King? Neither to continue in unconscious, involuntary, mechanically repetitive slavery to the Dragon, nor to sit in meditation in a cave until I turn green, like Milarepa, from eating thistle soup, and my limbs wither away?

Hidden in the snake pit of desires, like unto a treasure hid in a field, there is one desire that sometimes faintly stirs in its sleep, in response to a certain strain of music, a line of poetry, a fragrance, the presence of certain people, or a sustained attentiveness to myself as I am, maintained against aversion and distraction. I am pierced by a flash of longing sharp as a sword. It is the Princess stirring in her drugged sleep, hearing from afar her father's trumpeters.

For her to awaken is to awaken to exile, to find herself in an alien, loathsome form, to feel her imprisonment. She will struggle to hide, run away, go to sleep, or will flee down the stairs as the clock strikes twelve, leaving only an empty slipper. The Hero must treat her gently, courteously, though her face be blackened with ashes or rotted half away. He must stay with her until her longing to return to her true form and her true home awakens and grows stronger than the force of her desperate lunges toward oblivion.

Then the Hero can say, "Lead and I follow. My body and goods, my heart and all, is yours. That I avow before God."

Strong-arming and self-punishment can never lead to self-mastery, but only to a sullen Dragon plotting escape or taking subtle forms of revenge, making a manifest fool of her self-supposed master, withholding from him the gift of the Water of Life. Neither can capitulation to the Dragon, for then she will seize the sovereignty for certain, raging through the land, destroying King and kingdom both, in a joy of destruction which conceals her insupportable disappointment. Only a supreme desire can subordinate all other desires to itself.

The Knight is the mediator of transformation, who must separate the fine from the coarse, slowly, and with gentle heat. His will, his command over attention, is the burning glass that focuses the warmth and light of the King upon the fertile soil of the Loathly Bride. She herself may be in the dark as to what she most desires. She may have given up all hope of satisfaction, so that, when you ask her, she answers, like the Sibyl, "I want to die" – revealing this desire of hers in all my suicidal excesses, the intractable 'sins' that so baffle all my efforts at reform. Hers is the power to draw the kingdom of all the functions after her, even to destruction; but his is the 'right good will.' He agrees to marry her, for Arthur's sake, sight unseen. This may be the reason we were born. If we knew in advance what our task would be, we have forgotten. It rides into view in the hideous form of our manifest selves, which we find, to our consternation, do not conform in any way to what we thought we were.

We do the King a disservice if we turn our back on the Lady, attending to the King alone at all times. He is already Lord of the Universe. Our task is to win for him the atom of territory, the quantum of power, that is ourselves.

We must stay with the Lady attentively and courteously (but warily), holding always the same question: What does she desire above all things? Each of us is charged to find the treasure hid in the field of his or her unprecedented self.

Notes

1. Ananda Coomaraswamy, "On the Loathly Bride," *Ananda Coomaraswamy: Selected Papers—Traditional Art and Symbolism*, edited by Roger Lipsey (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1977), I, pp. 353–370. I am indebted throughout to Coomaraswamy's essay.
2. It is interesting that Beelzebub's task is not to slay anything, but to persuade people to stop slaughtering animals in sacrifice to their imaginary gods.
3. Coomaraswamy, p. 374.
4. Cf. Martha Heyneman, "Sir Gawain and Women's Liberation," *A Journal of Our Time*, No. 1, 1977, pp. 15–20.
5. Retold from Heinrich Zimmer, *The King and the Corpse* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1948), pp. 88–95.
6. Sigmund Freud, "The Resistances to Psychoanalysis," in *Character and Culture* (New York: Collier Books, 1963), p. 261.
7. Dante, *Purgatorio*, Canto XXX, 1. 48.
8. P. D. Ouspensky, *In Search of the Miraculous*, (New York: Harcourt Brace, 1949), p. 12.
9. "The id ... has no means of showing the ego either love or hate. It cannot say what it wants; it has achieved no unified will. Eros and the death instinct struggle within it..." Sigmund Freud, *The Ego and the Id* (New York: Norton, 1960), p. 49.
10. Matthew 13:44.