

The Wanderer

[The following article is part of the welcome address to the 47th block-course of the Research and Training Centre for Depth Psychology in Spring 2018]

While I was brooding over the question of how to attune us to our work, how to open the access to the world of the psyche and our introverted search and quest, I received a photo of an early painting of Peter Birkhäuser. I hardly knew this work and when it landed on my table I understood it as a synchronicity, having received an image giving light to our work here in the seminar.

The painting is called **The Wanderer**, created in 1956:



The longer I study this oeuvre the more it opens itself to me. I have found myself and us in it—as we are here in the seminar, we analysts and analysands, lecturers and students, we who are on the quest for the secrets of the soul; descending into the inner-psyche reality, the *terra incognita*, as C.G. Jung called it. I will let us be guided by this painting, taking it as an archetypal pattern for the work we do in Jungian analysis, as we dare to face the unconscious, as we try to deal with it and to understand it. Of course, this is an endeavour men

are eternally engaged in, in countless ways. But analysis is the form we are focussing on.

This piece of work, as with all the paintings by Peter Birkhäuser, was not done with the intention to teach anything. It is a fruit of the deep *Auseinandersetzung* with the unconscious Birkhäuser had to endure. [For more information about the artist's life see the website.]

At the time of this work -1956 - he was in analysis with Marie-Louise von Franz who helped him to confront and assimilate the powers which were visiting him and which were causing him to suffer. She encouraged him to use active imagination; to lift the lid over the depressions and the neurotic complexes; to become a hero instead of being the victim. And such an approach to the inner world is visualized in the painting.

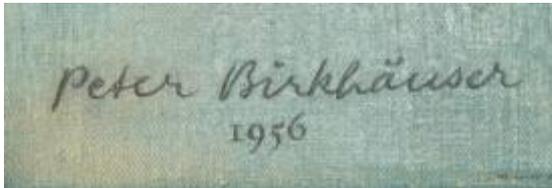
I will not continue to talk about the artist, the individual PB, but rather to take the painting, as I have said, for an archetypal image of the descent into the unconscious. Not only the analysand is a wanderer, but the analyst too. An analyst must have personally experienced this descent into the unconscious himself. In working with the patient, he or she accompanies the individual on his completely unique path into the unknown. In a true analysis one has no good advice, no solutions to offer. One has to bend down and wander with the suffering individual into the unknown. The only difference is that the analyst has been strengthened by his own experiences. The descent must be done in the right attitude.



In the painting, we see the wanderer walking with firm steps, wearing good shoes, with a rucksack with his belongings, and with a map in order to find orientation, with a torch in order to bring light into dark spots and with a knife. The knife will be the instrument of discrimination, analysing what he will experience. The wanderer is wearing a protective jacket with a hood. This hooded outfit indicates an introverted bearing. Lastly, he has a wanderer's stick with him. He travels with a spiritual orientation, with rules and laws, and this lends him a certain power or strength. Jungian psychology could be the wanderer's stick, in a deeper sense a kind of theory, knowledge, and experience.

It is a completely different approach than letting oneself be drawn into the unconscious by a drug or by affect. And of course, it is the opposite of pushing down the disturbing inner world by antidepressants, but it is a conscious encounter.

The firmness of the attitude of the wanderer is underlined by the signature of the artist.



It is a detail, but I think it is important. Firmly signing his name indicates that here is an individual facing the collective unconscious, a distinct ego living in an exact time and place. He exists in the so called “normal world”; he has an identity.

The wanderer needs and has supernatural help, the Anima with four eyes, an authority with the sight of wholeness. She can look inside and outside. I think of the Pharaonic books of the underworld, where the boat of the sun god navigating through the dangerous other world is always accompanied by the goddess, and in each hour a so-called hour-goddess allows him to enter the next chamber of the netherworld.

The presence of the four-eyed anima in the painting means that the self behind the anima protects the wanderer in his quest into the depths. We are not allowed to face the inner world without this protection, out of sheer curiosity or ambition. It is also important for the analyst that the soul of the analysand guides and not a program. One waits until for instance dreams encourage one to face the unconscious actively.

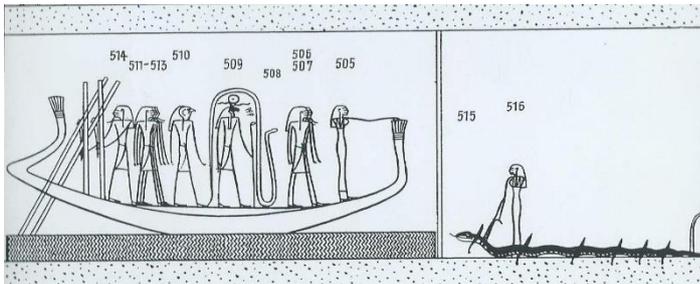
The four-eyed anima in the painting is already a familiar figure in Birkhäuser’s inner life. She appeared three years before in a dream, sat opposite him at his work table and stared at him with her four eyes. Her eyes showed signs of illness, slight madness, and neglect. The dreamer was very puzzled by this visit. Using the technique of active imagination afterwards, she appeared to him again and he tried to free and redeem her. She thus escaped her madness. Here, in the actual painting, she became his guide, a dominant in his psyche which is divine but with human features and related to the man. She is benevolent but still rather otherworldly.

She holds another feminine power in check, a terrible demonic cold-blooded, unrelated creature like a crab or spider, a chimera. This is the devouring aspect

of the archetype of the feminine; which tortures man in the form of depression and cold-heartedness toward himself, perpetual discouragement. She can also take on the aspect of greed and *concupiscentia*. She was a very dangerous negative mother-complex for the artist. Interesting, the chimera has also four eyes, indicating that she also belongs to wholeness. The eyes are arranged in a different formation, however.



An archetypal parallel could be the role of the goddess Isis in the Pharaonic book of the underworld, the *Amduat*. In the seventh hour of the night we see Isis with her magic, at the head of the boat that is carrying the sun god. Then there is the encounter with the dangerous serpent Apophis. She also is an aspect of the archetype of the feminine. The goddess in an additional and more human aspect, Selkis, holds the Apophis in check by a lasso and her helpers cut it into pieces. We see her standing on the neck of the serpent. (*The Egyptian Amduat, The Book of the Hidden Chamber*, Erik Hornung and Theodor Abt, 2007, p. 228 ff.)



Birkhäuser often dreamt about this constellation, which revealed the dominant role of the dual aspect of the archetypal mother image in his psyche.

We could say that this archetypal constellation was the “cross” PB had to bear. The wanderer is not in harmony, but stands in the fire of raging opposites. The painting expresses that these opposite powers are holding each other in balance. Or perhaps the benevolent side of the mother goddess controls the dark side. According to the painting, it is this tension of opposites which brings the wanderer down into the depths.

Where does she lead him, Four-eyes? She is the guide, like Beatrice in Dante's *Divine Comedy*.

A staircase takes him down. The wanderer is not the first who has made that descent. His own earlier experiences, those of Jung, Dante and Ulysses and finally all our ancestors have formed a culture of facing the invisible powers. Since time immemorial man has had to face the divine and demonic powers, and he has developed a culture to grasp it in religion and mythology. The *Amduat* of old Egypt is, for example, such a staircase. The Bible, as well. Such old testimonies, documents of the past, can bring understanding. They help to break the isolation of a suffering man who has strange inner visions.

The staircase disappears into an impenetrable fog. We do not know what exists there. It is the realm of the unknown powers, of the archetypes, of the gods.

But the wanderer is not yet so far. He is in the first section heading downward. And what he meets first is a cross-roads or a fork in the road. The cross-roads or the fork is an archetypal situation. One must stop a moment and deliberate which direction is the right one. Something unexpected can enter from the unconscious. Many fairytales describe this situation when the hero has to make up his mind, if he really has the courage to go ahead. Ascending again to the right could be in this painting a last chance to avoid what is coming now. Other fairy-tales describe how the hero meets the devil at the cross-roads or the fork. The protagonist has to negotiate with him and sometimes ends up making a pact with him. Therefore, the satanic figure often sits at the cross-roads and waits.¹

This is exactly what is happening in this painting. The wanderer approaches the fork and has no idea what is hidden in the dark. There is a frightening creature waiting, and he cannot avoid an encounter with him.

¹ In the encyclopedia of German folk-knowledge we find many beliefs about this specific spot. It is said to be the place where the supernatural forces are reigning and where all kind of protecting and evil magic happens or can be performed. Here one can look beyond the present time into the past and the future, one receives inspirations for good-luck and bad-luck, and about healing or death. In the encyclopedia one finds endless devices and advices from the folk-lore.



Let us look at this ugly creature! He is a man with human features and at the same time something like a beast. His face is covered with fur. His staring red eyes express affect, rage, panic, aggression, greed. Steam comes out of one nostril. He wears what looks like a uniform with a military cap, and over his shoulder a gun. The figure in the painting is a mixture of man and animal, neither a healthy animal, nor a genuine primitive, hairy man. He is distorted.

This unexpected figure indicates for the wanderer an encounter with the shadow. But what kind of shadow?

A key might be that he seems to be a lonely soldier. He has lost his troop or he deserted. He gives the impression of being a poor neglected creature; persecuted, suppressed into the underground, into the sewers; a being who has become aggressive, panicked, hungry, vengeful. He has become an autonomous complex. And in this form he is a danger. He is aggression and brutality. He has a gun, which means he has power.

I assume that the wanderer is missing this part within himself. He seems to be educated, sophisticated and would normally avoid primitive collective behavior, aggression and affect. He would be helpless if he were attacked, and could not hit back. In the painting he is well protected, cautious and pale. But it is he who should be in possession of the gun the shadow carries. How could he ever face such a demonic chimera, which *Four-eyed* still holds in check?

Marie-Louise von Franz, PB's analyst, once said to him, in regard to a dream which showed his negative mother complex, in the form of a spider mixed with a crab, paralyzing him:

"Perseus is your myth. You mustn't hesitate in rejecting all the advances of the devouring mother, open fire strait away. Anything along the lines of retreat or surrender (Oh, I couldn't do that. Oh no, that's impossible) is the effect of the terrible mother, who is trying to paralyze you". (*Windows on Eternity*, p. 48)

For this fight the wanderer needs the gun and he urgently needs to integrate qualities of the soldier and of the instinctive man. He must find access to instinct

because instinct, when it is healthy, is the energy and impulse to face and master life, inside and outside.

The figure in the painting drew me into a direction which could also express a collective problem, which we find ourselves in and which C.G. Jung often mentioned. The fellow-animal living in the underground is instinct, which is neglected and therefore becomes dangerous. He is a danger, a danger in the artist and a danger in general for us in these times. Instincts are the most conservative determinants of the psyche. We have had them since we have been (or because we are) primitive hairy humans. Instinct is collective and when it is too greatly suppressed, it resurfaces in the form of rebellion. Instinct, when channeled virulently, emotionally, as hate or even panic, can be misused by political ideologues, and this virulent instinct might be expressed by the uniform and the gun the dark chap wears. Uniform indicates a deprivation of individuality.

Let us look at our society and the actual period in which we live. I speak about 'us' in general, the collective Zeitgeist. 'We' live an artificial life. We can provide ourselves with the finest food any time we wish; we order it online. We do not even need to look into anyone's eyes when we buy it. We can have nearly everything and we can even produce our babies in the laboratory. We have lost contact with nature. As you all know, our civilization is heading toward self-destruction. At the moment (2018) you can open the newspaper and read about USA and North-Korea teasing each other with the nuclear bomb, inviting us to a mass-suicide. There are other signs of our deprivation from our natural instinct and respect of nature, developments one barely perceives: for instance, in Switzerland the groundwater that we think is plentiful and of highest quality is showing more and more residues of poison, pesticides, and insecticides. Although we eat beautiful looking food, there are innumerable examples of its decreasing nutritional value, and last but not least is the terrible way that we treat animals, such as laboratory-rats.

What comes up as an unconscious, autonomous reaction is the instinct of self-preservation. And it comes up in the most primitive form as hate, panic, aggression, racism etc. This is the hairy man or lonely soldier in the painting, envisioned as a collective problem. He is full of fear and aggression. And when he is used for military goals, he helps sparking war and the invasion of the mass-man.

This painting was created in 1956. This was the year of the invasion of Hungary by the Russians. Many refugees came to Switzerland and Birkhäuser became highly concerned. He cared for such refugees. I remember a friendly Hungarian guest at our table. Birkhäuser was deeply worried about the world situation.

What could realistically help in this charged world-situation and what does the painting suggest? Here we have an **individual** who is able to courageously go down to face the shadow. He can negotiate with him, struggle with him, take him seriously as a real part of himself. Maybe the enemy can become through this process humanized and even a friend.

And finally, this wanderer can descend deeper into the archetypal world, where the healing instinctual images appear; images which he can bring up to consciousness—treasures of the soul.

In practical words, this means listening to the spirit of the unconscious psyche, the spirit of the instinct, the archetypes, and integrating these intuitions and insights into one's attitude toward life and the choices one makes in his or her way of living.

The wanderer will continue to descend the staircase into the unknown. We know from PB's work that he was able to bring treasures from the unconscious up to the conscious level, discovering light-bringing spirit and creating a most impressive and consoling oeuvre.

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