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Trickster: the crossing of boundaries

Jean Hardy

People on the whole like to feel safe. Most of us most of the time want to feel we live in an orderly world we can rely on: the sun rises and sets at specific times, the traffic travels on the left (or the right, as the case may be), the government is elected and stays in power (in democracies), our friends stay friendly, people in general go on behaving in their accustomed ways. Regularity, security, predictability are reassuring and provide a reliable pattern to our lives. But we in the West live in a relatively comfortable world, at least at first glance.

However, from the beginning of human experience and thought, the existence and persistence of unpredictable change, surprise, complete reversal, death, transformation, coincidence, has also been acknowledged, often reluctantly. Heraclitus, an early Greek philosopher, living in the 6th century B.C.E., was one of the first people in the West to fully and articulately acknowledge that change, including destruction, is a force in the world equal to the creation we see all around us, and in fact, essential to creativity. He saw that force as elusive, easily missed by people who prefer to live firmly in the taken-for-granted reality in which they grew up: 'if we do not expect the unexpected we will not discover it, since it is not to be searched out and is difficult to apprehend.'¹ In Eastern thought, of course, change and destruction are much more readily acknowledged in the pantheon of Gods – Kali for instance, the destructive mother, the over-turner of certainty, is of profound significance in Hinduism, equal almost to Brahman and a Preserver and Creator as well as a Destroyer. And Krishna is the eternal child, lying to subvert the too-rigid order, as well as growing to be the revered Teacher of wisdom.



The Trickster, icon of unexpected change, not only demonstrates the universality of uncertainty in the human world, perceived or not, but also the unpredictability and sheer unlikelihood – to humans in our blinkered minds – of the nature of things. Penelope Lively in her perceptive and often profound (as well as funny) novels writes on this astonishment so well. In *Cleopatra's Sister*, her hero Howard is a palaeontologist gripped from childhood by wonder at the sheer existence of creatures scientists call *Opabinia*, *Wiwaxia*, *Hallucigenia* which lived 500 million years ago: here, she writes, 'was an array of creatures most of which were unrelated to any species in existence now, all of which had vanished. Here were animals like hairbrushes, or like lotus flowers, with nozzles, struts and frills, occasionally reminiscent of existing fauna, but always eerily different, as if you looked at the fantastic parade of an alternative world... The strange conjunction of likelihood and contingency which is at the root of life, in every sense.' She

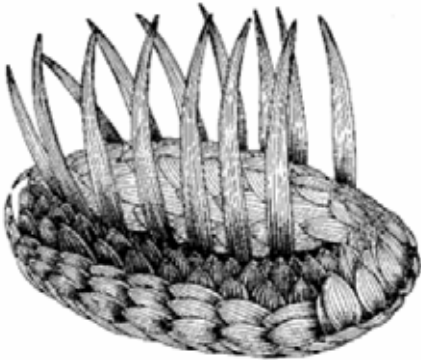
writes that the very accident of human existence has recently become clearer to us, for humans developed from one of the more ordinary of these creatures, called by us *Pikaia*. Lively's novels are vivid with an awareness of synchronicity, meaningful coincidence, which pervades the whole of life in the universe: and also of the sheer imagination of the universe, gratuitously creative and prolific, amazing to envisage.

The trickster image thus holds an awareness of the radical uncertainty in which we all live. We are all temporary arrangements, existing, as all life does, as a miracle, against the odds. The archetype of the Trickster, as recognised and developed by Jung, is the existence of the unexpected as it appears in every human society, sometimes fully acknowledged, sometimes feared and hidden. He is the opposite of order – but then he is the opposite of everything: he can turn into a she, for instance. He is the Green Man, the Jester, the clown, the witch or the wizard, Mercury, a shape shifter – he can change shapes, cross boundaries, the Fool with the potential at times for becoming a Saviour. He upsets normality and hierarchic order. He or she is the Wounded Healer. He can change the expected world, and therefore be an agent of transformation. He acknowledges something about the Universe which is beyond our usual awareness, a transcendent and impossible to double-guess creativity.

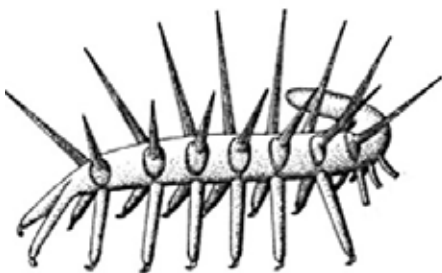
The notion of the Archetypes developed by Jung lies deep in human history. They are about the growth of all life from its beginning in unconsciousness – that is, not in conscious awareness – and about forces which affect us powerfully even though as humans we see ourselves as comparatively rational. Myths and stories in every society display similar patterns of perceiv-



Opabinia



Wiwaxia



Hallucigenia

ing the world, and these we now understand to be our early psychology. There are pictures of the Great Mother in all societies: she is endlessly loving and giving and often cruel and destructive too. The Father is another archetype, often perceived as a monotheistic God in later societies. Yahweh himself in the Old Testament was a bit of a Trickster in his own right even though he was God, with his 'senseless orgies of destruction and his self-imposed sufferings, together with the same gradual awareness into a saviour....it is just this transformation of the meaningless into the meaningful that reveals the trickster's compensatory relation to the 'saint'.²

These deep archetypes express something of the basic forces in the universe which are complex,

many layered, and always in opposites. Jung wrote that we should never forget that 'the world exists only because opposing forces are held in equilibrium.'³ The rational, ordered and secure is counterbalanced by the irrational, the totally unexpected and by chaos.

Jung believed that the Trickster archetype was very near to the origins of the human race, a structure of extreme antiquity, pagan and of primary importance to shamanism. He questions the dream of Paradise as a state of perfection. The trickster is 'a forerunner of the saviour, and like him, God, man and animal at once. He is both sub-human and superhuman, a bestial and divine figure, whose chief and most alarming characteristic is his unconsciousness.'⁴ He is clumsy and lacking in instinctive wisdom. These marks, Jung believed are true of his *human* nature 'which is not so well adapted to the environment as an animal's, but instead, has the prospects of a much higher development of consciousness based on a considerable eagerness to learn...'⁵

Such a force works on the edge, on boundaries, extending and crossing them, between heaven and earth, between known and unknown. Such a force can be very frightening, lawless, antisocial, yet deep. It is interesting that Doctor Who has once again appeared on our television screens. He seems to me an acceptable trickster for our period, as he moves through time - is a Time Lord - fights for justice but in the coolest possible way, is fearless and intelligent but does not get attached, has a much more comprehensive view of the universe than the people he is dealing with. He is also a shape shifter - is now I think in his ninth incarnation - the same function, with different but similar personal relationships which he can leave at will, but with the same determination to change the world/ the universe to what it could be. He uses but is not confined by the technology of the time.

Philip Pullman's *His Dark Materials*, recently astonishingly presented at the National Theatre, also has strong trickster elements in the ability of its characters to cross between alternative worlds, open the boundaries with the subtle knife into new universes. The usual boundaries are not there, or are passable, for Lyra, Will and all the rich variety of creatures: their souls/daimons in some worlds are outside their bodies, lived with as animal companions. Even J.K.Rowling's *Harry Potter* is part of a non-straight, non Muggle world, dealing with unconscious and fearful characters in his search for truth and for his origins. It is interesting that all this literature is presented for children on the edge of adolescence: adults in our society are probably less prepared to truly acknowledge the myths within which we live, and to question them. As Lewis Hyde writes in his recent reflective book, the Trickster 'is the character in myth who threatens to take all myths apart. He is an 'eternal state of mind' that is suspicious of all eternal, dragging them from their heavenly preserves to see how they fare down here in this time-haunted world.'⁶ As such, he is not popular with the powers of any land, or with the conservative elements of any nation or religion.

It may be that order held too rigidly is our real problem. Peace has always seemed me a rather undesirable and certainly unattainable goal, because if we look clearly at the nature of the world, it is full of forces which inevitably will disrupt each other, not particularly with ill-will, but merely because they work at different levels. This struck me particularly in the tsunami that occurred on Boxing Day, killing many thousands of people. It is difficult to envisage how truly horrifying for individuals that moment must have been, suddenly seeing this high wall of water racing towards you: it must feel like an act of God, a truly hostile force. But when you understand, as we now can do, that the

tectonic plates underlying land masses are constantly in motion, that nothing is ever still, and that the very life of the earth depends on this constant movement of land, we see that Gaia, the earth, is just continuing to experience the forces that have been working throughout the last five billion years. It is indeed us that have changed: with modernity, people are less attuned to the forces of the earth. Western people live recklessly on the coast whilst indigenous peoples still tend to inhabit the mountains. And the tribal peoples in the area had some forewarning that the earthquake was happening, so did the animals: few if any of these beings more sensitive to the earth, our Mother, were killed. The trickster factor here reflects our ignorance - perhaps it always does, because we wish to live rationally, safely and in many ways, unconsciously.

One of my most favourite books, that reflects a lot this understanding for me, is *Seven Life Lessons of Chaos* by John Briggs and David Peat, which applies modern chaos theory and an acknowledgement of the force of the Trickster to our lives and our understanding of a reality radically different from the taken-for-granted world. It starts for me very encouragingly: 'at one time or another we've all felt our lives to be out of control and heading towards chaos. For us, science has striking news. Our lives are already *in* chaos - and not just occasionally but all of the time.'⁷ As they make clear, chaos is nature's creativity which includes destruction, uncertainty, stunning beauty and huge diversity. It is the reality in which we actually live. I end with Grace Blindell's brilliant poem which expresses our two worlds, one of our occasional startled recognition of translucent beauty and the strangeness of things, the other of retreat into our taken for granted lives.

References

- 1) Geldard, Richard. *Remembering Heraclitus* (Floris Books, 2000), p. 29
 - 2) C.G. Jung. *Four Archetypes: Mother, Rebirth, Spirit, Trickster* (Routledge, 1972), p.161.
 - 3) *op. cit.* p. 31.
 - 4) *op. cit.* p. 169.
 - 5) *op. cit.* p. 170.
 - 6) Hyde, Lewis. *Trickster makes the world: Mischief, magic and Art* (North Point Press, 1998).
 - 7) Briggs, John and Peat, David. *Seven Life Lessons of Chaos: spiritual wisdom from the science of change.* (HarperPerennial, 1999), p.1.
- Astonishment* comes from Grace Blindell's *Temporary Arrangements*. Available from Greenspirit Books: www.greenspirit.org.uk

Also relevant:-

- Bowes, Pratima. *The Hindu Religious Tradition* (RKP, 1977).
- Gould, Stephen Jay. *Wonderful Life: the Burgess Shale and the nature of history* (Penguin Books, 1989).
- Lively, Penelope. *Cleopatra's Sister* (Viking, 1989).

Jean Hardy became a GreenSpirit member when working in the 1980s at St James Church, Piccadilly, where Creation Spirituality was then based. She has been a university teacher for most of her life, a Quaker for many years, and now lives in Devon close to Schumacher College and Dartington Hall, where she is much involved. She was, with Michael Colebrook, editor of GreenSpirit Journal till the end of 2004 - a job now shared with Marian McCain and Don Hills.

Astonishment

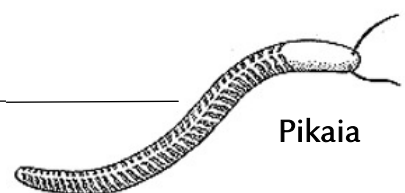
Yes, it is true, astonishment
Clouts me like a sledge hammer at times.
Where from though? This unexpected
And unexplained wonderment,
The familiar suddenly unfamiliar, or vice versa.

Is it perhaps the long view,
A sort of evolutionary gasp, that nowness is THIS?
This stone, this squirrel, this snowdrop,
This song, poem, dance, this love,
The fifteen billion year announcement
"Here I am, this is it".

Is it perhaps the enormity of being?
The in and out of breath, the conscious mind, these thoughts,
Mine? Not mine? Unanswerable questions.
But knowing also that answer or no answer
There is a rightness in Being.
Teasing and elegant, paradox has the last laugh.

Yet how capricious its coming, this astonishment,
And how fragile its attention.
The sheer luminosity of that pine tree now,
The pinkness of its bark
The blue-fuzz of its needles
Which cut through and across, giving depth.
So steady, so intense in the early morning light,
Whilst between me and it and beyond....
Teeming and frothing space, space, space.

Just seeing it I should be turned to water,
Prostrated by its presence.....instead
I hear myself to myself say
"Time to get up"! Yes it is true also
We cannot bear too much reality.



Pikaia