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Holy Vessel, Holy Grail

The archetype of the vessel, cauldron, bowl or chalice, that contains, heals, transforms and dispenses the precious spark of life, whether as seed, food or liquid, as blood or nectar, whether as wafer or light energy, has exercised its fascination on human beings ever since man started on his quest for truth. The transformations both physical and psychological or spiritual that occur throughout life and the mysteries associated with these, were soon gathered up and symbolized in the magic vessel of renewal, the cauldron of plenty or cornucopia, the alchemical retort or *uas hermeticus*, or in the Christian tradition, the baptismal font of spiritual regeneration and the Holy Grail.¹ The latter combines both the cup used by Christ at the Last Supper and the cup supposed to have received the blood from the body of Jesus as it was taken down from the cross. The blood is the life and the life is the soul, and for the Christian the blood of Christ is the seal of the soul's redemption.² The Grail is also the 'vase of election', now embodied in Mary who, for the Catholics, is the living human vessel that bore the divine child, the Christos. To her, the first company of the Grail, originally led by Joseph of

Arimathea, dedicated a church when they established themselves in Glastonbury. In it, as legend has it, they enshrined the holy cup. Now more or less identified with the chalice of the Eucharist, the Grail is also the cup of sorrow and sacrifice, the symbol of the divine sacrifice which Christianity completely anthropomorphized: its symbol thus extends from the cosmic sacrifice of Divinity that the world might be, as in the Vedic idea of the *Purusha*, to the sacrifice by the Father of his only begotten Son that humanity might be redeemed. The Grail is also the cup of destiny, for within it is inscribed the destiny of man. It is also the cup of transcendence, for its perennial numinous appeal beckons us to reach out beyond ourselves. And it is more, a more that defies articulation and eludes our mental grasp, for its profoundest significance lies quite beyond the orbit of the mind, in that realm of the soul to which only the intuition has access.

The undying attraction the Grail symbol has exercised upon the Western mind is evident during the Middle Ages in the proliferation of poems on the quest of the Grail, despite the Church's ambiguous and often hostile attitude

towards its mystery cult. Its later revival through Malory's *Le Morte d'Arthur* and Tennyson's *Idylls of the King* and its rise once again, phoenix-like in our demythologized twentieth century to become the subject of considerable scholarly and psychological work, is a sure sign of the vitality of the archetype at work behind the symbol and the vigour of the challenge it poses to every one of us searching for a meaning to life.

The Holy Grail as it has come to be clothed in the Christian tradition, is that numinous, enigmatic object, that holds the precious blood of life, that irradiates such a luminous splendour, a wonderworking vessel of divine craftsmanship that feeds as well as heals, but also blinds or wounds the unready; or it is a precious stone, an emerald dropped from the crown of Lucifer, the Light-bringer, in whose light all other lights pale into insignificance. These are all the mind's attempt at expressing, at giving form, not only to its own elusive, mysterious source, but also to its experience of that source. To those who catch a glimpse of the Grail, it acts like a call from afar, beckoning to the seemingly far-off land of bliss, reminding us of our true home, arousing in us that nostalgic longing for that home of glory we left so long ago, that seems so far away and yet is here, our very self; that made the knights of the Round Table depart instantly on their sacred quest; spurring them on, spurring us on, if we take heed, to choose the shorter path of return and make all due effort, finally to bestow on those who 'know', or whose faith is total, ecstasy and illumination, whence there is no coming back here. Only those who are destined by Heaven to find it, do so, those whose

name is inscribed on the cup itself; those whose evolutionary development has brought them to the point of sufficient maturity to grasp the ungraspable, to turn to their fiery source and in this turning to become integrated, made whole and holy. Their name, in that particular incarnation where they will achieve the goal, is therefore signed in the very substance of their being—the auric envelope, the holy vessel, the Grail Cup. The story with its trials, hopes, failures and successes is nothing less than an initiatory quest for the Inner Self and the making whole of man. It is precisely this making whole and restoring the balance so upset in present-day humanity that is sorely needed today. Only then will the deep scars of separatism and alienation which characterize our modern psyche be healed. The story of the Grail castle, its ailing guardian and the tests of the candidate worthy to become the next guardian, takes us far beyond the narrow confines of humanity. For just as the curing of the keeper of the Grail, of his ailment contracted through the misuse of his creative power and his consorting with Orgeluse or Pride, all of which symbolize the crippling of the soul, immediately restored the wasteland to fruitfulness, so the healing of the psyche will react upon the planet and the rape of Mother Earth will at long last cease. The wasteland, or today, the polluted and desecrated earth, man's disregard for the sacredness of Nature, is a mirror of mankind's barrenness, selfishness, want of spiritual understanding and man's living death. In our century this has brought us to a global crisis that is offering us a tremendous opportunity and a lesson to learn.³

In this connection, it is of interest to

note how in the various versions, the Grail finally disappears either into heaven, or the beyond, or in the Far East, or the mythical kingdom of Prester John who (in one version) is the son of Parsifal's half-brother, or simply in the unconscious of mankind. Emma Jung and Marie Lousie von Franz interpret this

'withdrawal of the Grail symbol into heaven' as indicating 'that the integration of this symbol and all that it signifies could not be achieved in the consciousness of medieval man'.⁴

'The Grail nevertheless appears to have acted as a guiding symbol ... in that as an image of the absolute totality of the individual, it established the process of the latter's development in the service of a higher goal.'⁵

From the psychological standpoint, the Grail is the symbol of the total man in whom there is no more cleavage, in whom the opposites that war against each other have been integrated into a whole wherein the 'coincidence of contradictories', to use Nicolas de Cusa's phrase, has found its resolution and transformed the man and indeed the world into a meaningful whole.

Today the reappearance in our consciousness of the Grail is indeed a sign of the times: we are once again faced with the riddle of the Grail as a symbol of wholeness appealing to us from the depths of our roots, to start on the journey of its quest, which means our own integration and thereby to solve the problem of the opposites, of good and evil, of the body and the soul, of the inner and the outer, of the two halves of the human psyche, which medieval Christianity failed to resolve. Are we able to measure up to this challenge in a more comprehensive

and dynamic way than before?

But the Grail legend in its fundamental archetypal pattern does not belong primarily to Christianity. Christians are often ignorant of its Eastern antecedents and a few scholars have even denied this obvious connection. However, a long line of development lies behind every archetypal symbol, myth and doctrine. Behind the Holy Grail stands the Celtic Dagda and Ceridwen and other cauldrons of plenty, the Greek *krater* in which the elements of life were mixed and *kronos*, the vessel of the Eleusinian mysteries whose initiatory drink seems to have been similar to that of the Vedic Soma, and above all the Persian *Hvareno* or Royal Glory and the Vedic *camasa*. All these are meaningful vessels with a numinous appeal and an enigmatic mission; all lead to some extraordinary vision, to some paradisaical state of being or other, to divine gnosis or illumination, as incorporated in the Corpus Hermeticum, is strongly reminiscent of the esoteric teachings. Here we find the higher consciousness offered to mankind in the shape of a *krater* sent down to earth by God as a prize for the soul to win. Those who heeded the invitation to dip themselves in the *krater* received a share of gnosis and became perfect. Those who heeded not still wander in ignorance and passion.⁶

In the Persian tradition, the magic cup is, like the Grail, far more than a food-providing talisman, and like the Grail it appears and disappears at will. It is a mirror of vision made neither of wood, metal nor stone, neither of horn nor bone, yet appearing as a cup or a magic stone, or assuming various other shapes

as required. Its main characteristic can be summed up in one Samskrit word: *tejas* which Professor Gonda explains as 'fiery energy, splendour, efficiency, majesty, supernormal potency, keenness'.⁷ In other words, *tejas* refers, when applied to human beings, to that glorious radiance of countenance and exaltation of feeling that manifests as a result of spiritual living. It is the divine radiance that emanates from the soul. This is also the *Hvareno*, the Royal Glory that marks out a man as 'kingly', or highly evolved. Hence the king possesses it,⁸ unless through ill conduct he forfeits the right to it.

The Persian legend, as embodied in Firdausi's national epic, *The Shah Namah*, is perhaps the closest Oriental parallel to the legend of the Holy Grail that we know of. It may even be that many of the inexplicable motifs of the Grail legend in its various presentations for which scholars strive to find an original, have their source in Firdausi's *Shah Namah*. The close parallels should not give any cause for wonder or doubt. The Zamyat Yasht of the Zend Avesta states that 'when the Glory departed from Yima, then Mithra seized that Glory, Mithra, the Lord of wide pastures, whose ear is quick to hear.'⁹ Mithra moves along the seven worlds and brings the glory, or turns it away from the nations that delight in havoc.¹⁰ As we know Mithraism had penetrated deep into the Roman culture and wherever the Roman legions went, as in Gaul and Britain, there the cult of Mithra flourished of which the many remains bear witness. Its influence spread far and wide and at one time vied with Christianity for supremacy.

But we are here concerned only with the aspect of the *cup*. First possessed by

Jamsid, the Yima of the Avesta and the Yama of the Vedas, the first man who laid down his physical body (hence third root race man according to the esoteric teaching), it remains the possession of the worthy only. The Glory clung to Yima, the good shepherd when he ruled over the earth and its denizens, when

'there was neither cold wind nor hot wind, neither old age nor death, nor envy made by the demons in the times before his lie, before he began to have delight in words of falsehood and untruth.'¹¹ 'But when he began to find delight in words of falsehood and untruth, the Glory was seen to flee away from him in the shape of a bird.'¹²

Then did Yima perish and Azi Dahaka the fiendish snake reigned. This is the Avestan version of the glory of divine man and of his fall therefrom.

In this cup, or glorious radiance, Kai Chosru¹³ one of the heroes of the *Shah Namah* who, because of his valour and righteousness, came into possession of it, perceived:

The seven regions of the world; of the activity and character of high heaven he made evident the what and the how and the how much. Within the cup he perceived the reflection all at once from Pisces to Aries.' etc.¹⁴

All the marvels of the world and the celestial galaxies and their workings are displayed in this glass of vision. There too, Kai Chosru finds out the treachery of his enemies. But only the pure can see in the *Hvareno*¹⁵. It tests the veracity of heroes. It is one of the five forms of ATAR, the flame divine, in fact his 'Royal Glory' or Light of Sovereignty and only the pure can raise their consciousness to these subtler, sublime levels. Fire, illumination

and insight are aspects of the higher vision, whose very essence is Fire, that vision embodied in the *Hvareno* which is therefore the gift of the Flame Divine. Whosoever longs for the illumination of the gnosis, says the Zend Avesta, longs for the gift of a priest of Fire.

The *Hvarend* can appear as chalice, as stone (as in the Christian poem by Wolfram von Eschenbach) or as lance — the lance¹⁶ plays a considerable role in the Christian legend but is separate from the chalice. In the Persian legend the *Hvareno* can be a vessel, a stone or a lance, thus combining these archetypal forms of the masculine and the feminine (lance and vessel) and of the Self and the transmutative power of the Self.

The dissimilarity of the two objects, chalice and stone, as descriptive of the Glory or the Grail, prompts the question how 'two objects so apparently different from each other as the chalice of the Eucharist and a precious stone' could 'represent precisely the same idea and are both of them the Grail'¹⁷ or indeed the Glory. This is where the meaning behind the symbol links all disparate elements; for the chalice or vessel or cup, is the container within which operates the mystery of transmutation, and the stone represents the transmuting factor. In the vessel¹⁸ occurs that supreme metamorphosis that grants illumination, gnosis, renewal and long life to him who is true, pure and brave and spiritually mature. The alchemical stone has a similar function. The Christian doctrine of the transubstantiation of the bread and wine combines this notion with that of sacrifice.

The inner meaning of the *Hvareno* as of all vessels of vision and gnosis is well

brought out by Omar Khayyam thus:

To find great Jamshed's world-reflecting
bowl

I compassed sea and land, and viewed the
whole.

But when I asked the wary sage, I learned
that bowl was my own body and my soul.¹⁹

In Sufi symbolism, the chalice and the wine of ecstasy play a role of primary importance. Abo'l-Mofakher Bakhrazi, a twelfth century Sufi master wrote on this subject:

It should be understood that the knowledge of God is termed 'a chalice' and that this term is equivalent in Persian to the 'wine-jar'... the 'goblet'... and the 'cup'. This chalice signifies the pure wine... of divine gnosis. To whom it is granted, i.e. those few devotees who are 'the chosen', is a mystery of Providence. The drinkers of this wine of gnosis may sometimes actually behold a cup in the formal sense, sometimes in a purely spiritual sense, and other times contemplate that cup only in the terms of knowledge... This chalice of wine is granted purely through Divine Grace, for 'it is the Grace of God, granted to whoever He wills'.²⁰

Here again we have a clear indication of the chalice being the vessel of gnosis, as granting that capacity for vision which leads to illumination, hence the notion of the third eye bestowed on those who are ready.

This aspect of the *cup* takes on a different twist when we turn further back in time, to the period of the RgVeda and the myth of the one cup fashioned by Tvastr, the artisan of Nature, from which cup the gods drank Soma, the nectar of immortality. This is the cup of sacrifice, to be sure, though the connotation here is different from the Christian idea which stresses the human, and the suffering, to

the exclusion of the cosmic aspect of eternal exchange as characteristic of the Vedic idea. The Vedic sacrifice embraces the perennial transformation of the divine life, *Purusha*, its assuming more and more restricting conditions of existence as it is immersed in manifestation, and its emergence out of the stranglehold of matter. This is symbolised in the circuit of the descending and ascending of the sacrifice through the agency of fire, *agni*, the circuit of giving and taking, of offering and accepting, a symbolic return to the cosmos, or gods, of the bounty of the cosmos, or gods. Such is the perpetual self-offering of the *Purusha*, whose sacrifice is embodied in the Soma plant that is crushed to death that from its essence the nectar may be brewed to be offered to the gods who in turn shower their blessings on men. Is this not the very picture of life, of its trials, tests and crushings out of which is extracted the essence of immortal life through which the Divine experiences all? Thereby the lower is uplifted and in the process may suffer by losing itself, and the higher is exalted and in the process effects that union whereby the bliss of completeness is experienced by all. This is the Vedic sacrifice whose symbol is not so much the vessel as the Soma in the vessel. Its keynote is joy for it is centred on the higher aspect.

But the sequel to the fashioning of the vessel of nectar, as related in the Rg-Veda, seems little known even to Hindus themselves. Tvastr's famed pupils, the Rbhus, dexterous craftsmen in their own right, were visited by *agni*, the fire, and commissioned

to make the chalice that is single into four, thus have the gods commanded. If,

O Sons of Sudhanvan, you will do this, then will you have a share in the sacrifice with the gods.' (RgVeda 1.161.2)

In other words, you will become immortal. This feat was accomplished, the one chalice of illustrious origin was transformed into four beakers, whereupon Tvastr, on beholding the four immaculate cups,, blanched with wrath at such 'desecration' of his work, but also with envy at this his pupils' feat, disappeared among the consorts of the gods, vowing death on his pupils. Then did these assume 'new names'. As the name is the essence of a thing and its power, so in taking a new name they entered into another level of being; in this respect they reached a higher stage of consciousness since they were made immortal.

The power of conferring transformation belongs to the archetype of the vessel. The Christian Grail itself suffers transformation and this, not only in its presentation by the various poets, as vessel, or stone, or chalice containing the precious blood of the Saviour, or the bread of life. In one of the later medieval texts (the *Perlesvaux*), the Grail is clearly stated to undergo five mutations, each unseen by anyone save King Arthur, the fifth being revealed to be a chalice. Too sacred and too mysterious are the changes to be openly described. Are they in any way connected with the five-fold constitution, unfoldment and achievement of the human being as taught in some esoteric traditions—the development of full self-consciousness through the experience of the five senses, through evolution on the five planes, and liberation through the five stages of planetary initiation—all of which is

symbolized by the five-pointed star, the star of man *par excellence*? In the Persian scriptures, the divine Fire ATAR is said to

appear in five forms, of which the *Hvareno* is his essence.

(To be Concluded)

NOTES

1. Many have been the etymological derivations of the word 'Grail'. Some are listed in E. Jung and M.L. von Franz's *The Grail Legend*, (1986) p. 116. R.S. Loomis (*Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance*, 1927, p. 290) derives the word ultimately from the Greek krater which yielded the Latin *gradalis* from which some would derive the French Graal, hence Grail. It means a deep plate, or a vessel.

2. Cf. E. Jung and M.L. von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, p. 124: 'The vessel containing Christ's blood is a symbol that emerges with absolute spontaneity. It is the main motif of the story, the Grail motif. It is as though it contained the living remnant of Christ and *his soul-substance, that element out of which a mystical continuation of his being is made possible.*' The connection between the two mysteries, one, the transubstantiation operating within the chalice, and the other, the resurrection, or the passage from death to life, occurring in the tomb (Christ's sepulchre), is worthy of notice and links the vessel and the tomb symbol in their transforming functions.

3. Cf. E. Jung and M.L. von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, p. 155, 341 & 343

4. Ibid. p. 300.

5. Ibid. p. 155.

6. Corpus Hermeticum IV. 3-6 Cf. *The Secret Doctrine (SD)*, Vol. 3, stanzas 7.24-9.34. (Adyar ed.)

7. J. Gonda, *Some observations on the relations between 'Gods' and 'powers'...* (1957) p.58.

8. Zend Avesta, Zamyad Yasht, 67-69.

9. Ibid. Zamyad Yasht VII. 35.

10. Ibid. Mihir Yasht IV. 16 & VII. 27.

11. Ibid. Zamyad Yasht VII. 33.

12. Ibid. Zamyad Yasht VII. 34. Cf. Lakshmi who, in the Hindu legend, departed from the Asuras when they fell a prey to falsehood.

13. Also spelt Kai Khusrau.

14. *Shah Namah* III. 275 ff. ed. Vullers Landauer, Leyden (1877).

15. Also spelt Xvamah. See also article by S. Lancri, *The Theosophist*, Feb.-March 1977.

16. The idea of the containing vessel and of the lance that pierces or goes straight to the point, has its somewhat veiled counterpart in the Mundaka Upanishad (II. 2.3-6). There the heart where indwells the OM is the chalice, the arrow is the lance that must hit the mark which is the imperishable Brahman. The heart itself is considered a mirror wherein the universe is reflected. For, as the Chandogya Upanishad tells us: As large as the universe outside, even so large is the universe within the lotus of the heart. Within it are heaven and earth, the sun, the moon, the lightning, and all the stars. What is in the macrocosm is in this microcosm. (8.1.3.)

17. J.L. Weston, *Quest of the Holy Grail*, London, (1913) p. 126.

18. Cf. E. Jung and M.L. von Franz, *The Grail Legend*, p. 145 & 159.

19. Quatrain 255. ed. & tr. Whinfield. London. 1883.

20. Quoted in *Sufi Symbolism* by J. Nurbakhsh. tr. by L. Lewishon and T. Graham, London, 1984, p. 138.

**Joy, beautiful radiance of the gods, daughter of Elysium, we set
foot in your heavenly shrine dazzled by your brilliance. Your
charms re-unite what common use has harshly divided: all men
become brothers under your tender wing.**

Friedrich von Schiller