

Traversing the Waters & the Reciprocal Blessing

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As in a ship convey us o’ver the flood. (*Rg Veda*, 1.97.8)

The world is my sea, the sailor the spirit of God.

The boat my body, the soul he who wins back his Abode. (Angelus Silesius)¹

Water, insomuch as it is flowing, represents flux, whether this be the ebb and flow of potentiality coming “in” and “out” of being, or the ever running river of time. Both are aspects of Heraclitus’ river,² the perpetual flux of *Samsāra*. The soul, born into these waters of becoming, is as a wayfarer engaged in a journey upon these turbulent waters, a journey whose final end is the Source, the Silent Sea (*Nirvāna*). The symbolism of the “traversing of the waters” is that of the movement from one state of Being to another. Ananda Coomaraswamy observed that the traversing of the waters can be related in three different ways.³ The voyage can be accomplished either by crossing over the waters to the other shore, by going upstream towards the source of the waters, or by going downstream towards the sea. Similarly, there are four paradigmatic forms of the “boat” or “ship” motif: the ferry of the dead, the ship of the hero, the barque of the god, and the Ark of the deluge. The first three categories of boats respectively correspond to the three forms of the voyage.

The ferry of the dead crosses the River of Death, from the shore of the living to the “Farther Shore” of the dead. In the Greek tradition this is the ferry of Charon; in Egyptian mythology, the ferryboat of Afu Ra;⁴ in the *Epic of Gilgamesh* this is the ferry of Ur-shanabi.⁵ There are numerous examples available, so much so that it has been said that ‘All civilizations have their boat of the dead.’⁶ René Guénon remarks that this crossing of the waters of death reflects the ultimate transition: ‘the shore which is left behind is the world subject to change, that is, the corporeal state in particular ... and the “other shore” is *Nirvāna*, the state which is definitely set free from death.’⁷ Death is to be viewed as a birth, where ‘new birth necessarily presupposes death to the former state’.⁸

¹ *Cherubinischer Wandersmann*, II.69, cited in W. Perry ed., *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, Louisville: Fons Vitae, 2000, p.386.

² ‘Upon those that step into the same rivers different and different waters flow’ (216); ‘Heraclitus somewhere says that all things are in process and nothing stays still, and likening existing things to the stream of a river he says that you would not step twice into the same river’ (218)—G. S. Kirk & J. E. Raven ed., *The Presocratic Philosophers*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp.196 & 197; see Plato, *Cratylus*, 402A.

³ A. Coomaraswamy, ‘Some Pali Words’ in *Selected Papers Vol.2: Metaphysics*, R. Lipsey ed., New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977, p.324-27; see also, R. Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols: The Universal Language of Sacred Science*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1995, Ch.58.

⁴ See Budge, *The Book of the Dead: The Hieroglyphic Transcript and English Translation of the Papyrus of Ani*, New Jersey: Gramercy Books, 1995, ‘The Abode of the Blessed,’ passim.

⁵ Tablet I, *Gilgamesh* from Dalley ed., *Myths from Mesopotamia: Creation, The Flood, Gilgamesh, and Others*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1991, p.102.

⁶ J. Chevalier & A. Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, tr. J. Buchanan-Brown, Middlesex: Penguin, 1996, p.106.

⁷ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p.234.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p.110.

The ship of the hero sails upstream to the source of the river, the *Fons Vitae*, the “Well of Honey in Viśnu’s highest place,”⁹ the Perennial Spring of Plotinus,¹⁰ etc. In the context of the hero’s journey this source is the hidden goal or treasure, the Golden Fleece, the Grail etc. This is the voyage of the “solar hero” entailing the passage through the symbolic Sundoor.¹¹ The case of going upstream is, as Guénon observes, ‘perhaps the most remarkable in certain respects; for the river must then be conceived as identical with the World Axis.’¹² As such this journey is analogous with the ascension of a “ladder” or more precisely the shamanistic climbing of the “greased pole.”¹³ To this Guénon adds the “rope trick” in which a rope is thrown into the air and remains, or seems to remain, vertical while a man or a child climbs it until they disappear from view. As with the voyage upstream, the movement must be continuous. The hero must remain focused and always facing forwards or risks being washed back downstream to his eternal detriment; hence the allusions, in myths of every provenance, to the danger of going back on one’s tracks or of looking behind. They must be ‘steadfast in the face of multiplicity,’ as Meister Eckhart says, so that the ‘light and grace’ of the Source may be revealed to them.¹⁴ In comparison to the “greased pole” the two parallel posts of a ladder represent the complimentary movement up and down along the axis.¹⁵ As Coomaraswamy remarks, ‘the Axis of the Universe is, as it were, a ladder on which there is a perpetual going up and down.’¹⁶

When we consider the “descent with the current,” remarks Guénon, ‘the Ocean must then be considered not as an extent of water to be crossed but, on the contrary, as the very goal to be reached and therefore as representing *Nirvāna*.’¹⁷ Here, as Nāgārjuna observes, ‘There is nothing that distinguishes *samsāra* from *nirvāna*’.¹⁸ Coomaraswamy remarks that the ‘eternal source is at the same time motionless and flowing, never “stagnant”; so that, as Meister Eckhart says, there is a ‘fountain in the godhead, which flows out upon all things in eternity and in time’; as is also implied by the “enigma” of *Ṛg Veda* v.47.5, where ‘though the rivers flow, the Waters do not move.’¹⁹ Heraclitus’ river, *Samsāra*, is not other than the still Sea of *Nirvāna*.

The god upon his “barque” is a symbolic manifestation of the cosmic currents, which, from one perspective, express the flux of potentiality, or primordial chaos, and, from another perspective, the stability and stillness of cosmic order. The barque of the god is the resplendent vessel upon which the god rests in stillness and peace. The god, like Aristotle’s “unmoved mover,”²⁰ does not move; rather the cosmic currents flow around the barque. It can even be said that these currents are caused by the “non-acting activity” (the *wei wu wei* of Taoist tradition) of the god. From a terrestrial perspective, the god traverses the endless journey upon the cosmic rhythm of *Samsāra*. This is all to say that the barque of the god is none other than Divine Immanence itself.

Joseph Campbell remarks on this symbolism as applied to the gods in general and, in turn, to the individual consciousness:

⁹ *Rg Veda* 1.154.5.

¹⁰ *Enneads* 3.8.10.

¹¹ See A. Coomaraswamy, ‘The Sun door and related Motifs’ in *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art and Symbolism*, R. Lipsey ed., New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977, pp.415-521.

¹² Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p.233.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.261, n.5.

¹⁴ Meister Eckhart, Pfeiffer ed., *Vol.1*, 1924, p.147, cited in Perry, *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p.383.

¹⁵ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p.229.

¹⁶ Coomaraswamy, ‘The Inverted Tree’ in *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, p.40.

¹⁷ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p.235.

¹⁸ *Mūlamādhymakakārikā* 25.19-20. As Mircea Eliade remarks, ‘This does not mean that the world (*samsāra*) and deliverance (*nirvāna*) are “the same thing”; it means only that they are undifferentiated’ (*A History of Religious Ideas Vol.2: From Gautama Buddha to the Triumph of Christianity*, Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984, p.225; see §189, p.222 ff.).

¹⁹ See Coomaraswamy, ‘The Sea’ in *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, p.410, n.9.

²⁰ Aristotle, *On the Soul*, 3.10; see also *Physics*, 1.2; 184 b 16.

As the consciousness of the individual rests on a sea of night into which it descends in slumber and out of which it wakes, so, in the imagery of myth, the universe is precipitated out of, and reposes upon, a timelessness back into which it again dissolves. And as the mental and physical health of the individual depends on an orderly flow of vital forces into the field of waking day from the unconscious dark, so again in myth, the continuance of the cosmic order is assured only by a controlled flow of power from the source. The gods are symbolic personifications of the laws governing this flow.²¹

For the ancient Egyptians the sky was “a vast layer of water” upon which the celestial bodies traversed in boats.²² The idea of the sun traversing the sky in a vehicle of some description is common and recalls the daily journey of Apollo, as Helios, in his fiery chariot, among others. There are several connections that exist between the boat, the chariot, and the throne. In the *Book of the Dead* it is said of Horus that Osiris has ‘made him to have his throne in the Boat of Millions of Years’.²³

The idea of a vehicle as a throne is explicit in the *Merkabah* (throne-chariot) mysticism of the Judaic tradition.²⁴ The “throne of glory” (Ezek.1:26, 10:1; Dan.7:9; Rev.4:2; 1En.14:18, 71:5-11; 2En.22; 3En.1:6; TLevi 5:1) is an epithet of the *Shekhinah*, the Divine Immanence. The chariot is, in turn, the dynamic expression of the “throne of glory.” As Leo Schaya says, ‘The “throne,” in its fullness, is the first and spiritual crystallization of all creatural possibilities before they are set in motion in the midst of the cosmos. When the “throne” assumes its dynamic aspect and cosmic manifestation begins to move, it is called the divine “chariot” (*merkabah*).’²⁵ Elsewhere Schaya remarks on the relationship between the tabernacle and the *merkabah*: ‘The tabernacle had provided the presence of God [*Shekhinah*] with no permanent habitation, for it was set up after the model of his heavenly “vehicle” (*merkabah*), in which he would lead His people through the wilderness to the fixed “centre of the world,” Jerusalem.’²⁶ The tabernacle and the *merkabah* are *imagines mundi* in dynamic mode. The throne is an *imago mundi* emphasizing the fixed Centre, complete and Eternal, both Transcendent and Immanent.

The barque of the god perpetually traverses the waters of becoming, while at the same time causing the flow of these waters. In contrast, the Ark of the deluge presents a voyage “on” the waters rather than a “traversing.” This is not a journey from one shore to another, nor is it like the tide which perpetually moves the sea. Neither is it like the voyage downstream into the Ocean whence the “barque” remains endlessly afloat on the currents of divine Harmony. Instead, as Coomaraswamy observes, the voyage of the Ark is ‘essentially a voyage up and down the slope (*pravati*) of heaven rather than a voyage to and fro, and quite other than the voyage of the *devayāna*, which is continuously upwards and towards a shore whence there is no return.’²⁷ The voyage of the *devayāna* (“the way of the gods”) is analogous with the voyage of the hero. We might note how many solar heroes are in fact either gods (Apollo, Mithra, Horus, Krishna, etc.) or of divine-mortal birth (Hercules, Gilgamesh, Christ, etc.).²⁸

In some instances a particular mythological journey may involve the shift from one to another of these boats, as seen in the move of Afu Rā from his “serpent-boat” to his “river-

²¹ J. Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, London: Abacus, 1975, p.225.

²² Budge, *The Book of the Dead*, p.133. Most notable are the boats of Ra, the two boats of the Sun (Mantchet and Semktet).

²³ Ch.CLXXV ii.20-21. It is considering one such mention of this “Boat of Millions of Years” that the eminent Egyptologist M. Naville recognises the Herakleopolitan legend of the Flood.

²⁴ See G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York: Schocken Books, 1995, pp.42-3.

²⁵ L. Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, tr. N. Pearson, New Jersey: Allen & Unwin, 1971, p.84.

²⁶ L. Schaya, ‘The Meaning of the Temple’ in J. Needleman ed., *The Sword of Gnosis*, Baltimore: Penguin, 1974, p.360.

²⁷ Coomaraswamy, ‘The Flood in Hindu Tradition’ in *Metaphysics*, p.400.

²⁸ In the case of Gilgamesh ‘two-thirds of him was divine and one-third mortal’ (Tablet I, Gilgamesh, Dalley ed., *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p.51), which bears comparison with the depth to which the ark of Ut-napishtim sat in the water (see p.111).

boat.”²⁹ In the *Epic of Gilgamesh* we have both the ferryboat of Ur-shanabi and the Ark of Ut-napishtim.³⁰ In each of these forms the journey of the boat expresses a transition between states, a “death” and “rebirth.”

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The “traversing of the waters” may also be accomplished via a “bridge.”³¹ Like the boat, the bridge is associated with the notion of “death” and return to the Source. ‘Death is a bridge’ says ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Sulaymān, ‘whereby the lover is joined to the Beloved.’³² The bridge is often said to be ‘broad for the righteous but as thin as a blade for the impious’.³³ Campbell recalls an Eskimo shaman crossing an abyss on a bridge as narrow as a knife.³⁴ In the *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* the path is a ‘sharpened edge of a razor’.³⁵ This is the “Sword Bridge” crossed by Sir Lancelot;³⁶ *Chinwat*, the “Bridge of the Separator” in Zoroastrian tradition; the “narrow” and “hard” way of St. Matthew (Matt.7:14).³⁷ This symbolism is again found in the assimilation of a bridge to a ray of light, on which point Guénon observes the double sense of the English word “beam,” which designates both a girder, in the sense of a single beam or single tree trunk as is the case with the most primitive form of bridge, and a luminous ray.³⁸ This is a bridge between the terrestrial domain and the celestial or solar domain; its narrowness indicates its treacherous nature—the “hard way”—and it is properly speaking the path of the “solar hero.” This bridge both *leads to* the Sundoor and, from a deeper perspective, *is* the Sundoor.

The “sharpness” of the Sword Bridge is again found in the analogous symbolism of the “Cutting Reeds” of Navajo tradition. Here the hero’s path is barred by “cutting reeds” that ‘tried to catch him, waving and clashing together.’ Coomaraswamy observes these as being the same, *mutatis mundis*, with the Clashing Rocks, the Symplegades, which are a form of the “Active Door” or the Sundoor.³⁹ As Coomaraswamy observes, this is the same symbolism as the crossing of the “Red Sea” (Ex.14:21), where this name, *yam soof*, is said to actually mean the “Reed Sea.” Samuel Fohr observes two articles by Bernard F. Batto questioning this reading of *yam soof* and offering instead the translation, “Sea of the End (of the World).”⁴⁰ Fohr remarks that the reference is to the primordial chaos.⁴¹ These three apparently contradictory readings in fact confirm each other. The Red Sea, like the “wine-dark sea” of the Ancient Greeks, expresses the “dark” or feminine nature of the colour red, associated with the idea of the womb in which life and death are transmuted the one into the other;⁴² this, then, is none other than the “womb” of primordial chaos from whence order is “born”; and born, moreover, by passage through the Active Door (the Cutting Reeds; the Symplegades). This is not all, for the Ark itself, which is analogous to the womb, is variously associated, if not explicitly constructed from, reeds (Noah, Moses, Ut-napishtim); and thus passage from the unmanifest to the manifest is effected through this symbolism of “reeds.” Moreover, the “reeds” “growing” in the sea of primordial chaos are said to be the very stuff of creation.

²⁹ See Budge, *The Book of the Dead*, p.146.

³⁰ See Tablet I, *Gilgamesh*, Dalley ed., *Myths from Mesopotamia*, p.102. Of course Gilgamesh does not actually travel on the ark of Ut-napishtim.

³¹ See Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, § 65 ‘The Symbolism of the Bridge.’

³² ‘Abd al-‘Azīz b. Sulaymān cited in Perry ed., *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom*, p.226.

³³ Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.122.

³⁴ J. Campbell, *The Masks of God: Primitive Mythology*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1982, p.333.

³⁵ *Kaṭha Upaniṣad* 3.14.

³⁶ C. De Troyes, *Arthurian Romances*, Middlesex: Penguin, 1991, pp.244-46.

³⁷ On this symbolism see M. Eliade, ‘The Bridge and the “Difficult Passage”’ in *Shamanism: Archaic techniques of ecstasy*, Middlesex: Arkana, 1989, p.482, also p.456; see p.455 on “sword ladders.”

³⁸ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p.260, n.2.

³⁹ Coomaraswamy, ‘Symplegades’ in *Traditional Art and Symbolism*, p.525.

⁴⁰ B. F. Batto, ‘The Reed Sea: *Requiescat in Pace*’: *Journal of biblical Literature*, Vol.102, 1983, pp.27-35, and ‘Red Sea or Reed Sea’: *biblical Archeology Review*, Vol.X, No.4, 1984, pp.57-63.

⁴¹ S. Fohr, *Adam and Eve The Spiritual Symbolism of Genesis and Exodus*, London: University Press of America, 1986, p.98, n.5.

⁴² Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.793.

Shaikh Ahmad al-‘Alawī mentions the reeds of which the cosmic mat is woven as symbols of the manifestation of Divine Qualities out of which the whole universe is woven.⁴³ Reynold A. Nicholson, writing about Rūmī, observes that the reed (the Persian *ney*) is none other than ‘an emblem of the transporting influence of Divine inspiration.’⁴⁴ This is the Spirit (*al-Rūh; Ruah*) that moves upon the Water; the Spirit, which is the *Logos*, both Uncreated and created, the bridge between the manifested and the Unmanifested.

The symbolic “bridge,” in the most general sense, connects the two “shores” which, as Guénon remarks, will always, from a certain level of reference, have between them a relationship corresponding to that between heaven and earth.⁴⁵ Guénon:

The bridge, therefore, is the exact equivalent of the axial pillar that links heaven and earth even while holding them apart; and it is because of this meaning that it must be conceived of as essentially vertical like all the other symbols of the “World Axis”—for example, the axel of the “cosmic chariot” when its two wheels represent heaven and earth. This establishes also the fundamental identity of the symbolism of the bridge with that of the ladder...⁴⁶

The symbol of the bridge is further associated with that of the “rainbow.”⁴⁷ In the Scandinavian Epic poem, *Gylfaginning*, the great king High explains to Gangleri, ‘Has no one ever told you that the gods built a bridge to heaven from earth called Bilfrost [or *Byfrost*]? You must have seen it, maybe it is what you call the rainbow.’⁴⁸ The rainbow is generally considered as symbolising the union of heaven and earth. However, Guénon, discussing the relationship of the bridge and the rainbow, is less happy with this assimilation or identification. On the whole, he feels, ‘the rainbow seems to have been above all connected, in a general way, with the cosmic currents by which an exchange of influences between heaven and earth operates much more than with the axis along which direct communication between the different states is effected’.⁴⁹ These “cosmic currents” derive from the action of the cosmic forces: expansion and concentration, the movement of which is better portrayal by a curve than the “straight” path of a bridge. The curved form of the rainbow is more precisely compared with the spiral winding around an axis,⁵⁰ from another perspective, this spiral corresponds to the two parallel post of the ladder. The difference here, as Guénon remarks, is that ‘between the “axial” way, which leads the being directly to the principial state, and the more “peripheral” way which implies the passage through a series of hierarchic states one by one [be they the levels of the spiral or the rungs of the ladder] even though in both cases the final goal is necessarily the same.’⁵¹

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The descending current, the celestial or spiritual influence, is symbolised by the analogous symbols of rain and light.⁵² As Guénon observes, the symbolism of dew, closely connected to that of rain by its very nature, is likewise to be recognised here.⁵³ This draws attention to the

⁴³ Shaikh Ahmad Al-‘Alawī in Lings, *A Sufi Saint of the Twentieth Century*, 1971, p.135; see p.148.

⁴⁴ R. A. Nicholson, *Commentary on the Mathnawī*, Bk.ii, 323, cited in L. C. Bauman, ‘Initiatic Grace in the Masterwork of Jala ud-din Rumi,’ *Sacred Web* 6, 2000, p.76, as discussing the “reed of the Spirit,” a winged horse (*faras*) like *Buraq*.

⁴⁵ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p.261, n.4.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p.261.

⁴⁷ See Chevalier & Gheerbrant, *Dictionary of Symbols*, p.783; Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, § 66 ‘The Bridge and the Rainbow.’

⁴⁸ *Gylfaginning* in S. Sturluson, *Edda*, London: Everyman, 1998, p.15.

⁴⁹ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, pp.263-64.

⁵⁰ A circular or semicircular form such as the ouroboros or the rainbow can be considered as the plane reflection of a spiral.

⁵¹ Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, p.266.

⁵² See Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, § 62 ‘Light and Rain.’

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p.246.

common identification of biblical *manna* with dew, which in turn connects dew with light, for as Schaya remarks, ‘The pure and redemptive light symbolised in the Talmud by “manna,” is called *Nogah*, “brightness,” in the Kabbalah.’⁵⁴ The rainbow is a bridge fashioned from the union of water and light. Pure light, colourless and a unity, refracts through the prism of water to create the spectrum of the rainbow which, through the six primary colours, gives birth to the multitude colours of creation.⁵⁵ Creation is born from the passage of light through water. The descending current is in turn answered by the ascending current, the terrestrial or human influence. This is found in the rising smoke of the sacrifice (cf. Gen.8:21; *Gilgamesh* XI, iv), which symbolises the flow of blessings or prayers that humankind offers “up” in response to the blessing of Creation. In the language of the Kabbalah, the universe is maintained by the “living waters” which flow down from above. In turn the “children of Israel,” that is humankind, must maintaining the recitation of prayer to ensure the flow of these “living waters.”⁵⁶

Rabbi Joseph Gikatilla observes that word *berakhah* (blessing) is a cognomen for the Name, *Adonay* (Lord). *Berakhah* comes from *braichah*, which means “pool.” The Lord, says Rabbi Gikatilla, is ‘like a pool from which a river draws its waters and carries the pool’s waters to irrigate the garden and provide water to drink.’⁵⁷ It is this blessing to which we respond through the traversing of the waters of our lives and through the reciprocal blessing of our prayers, which rise like dew returning to heaven in the heat of the morning. Macrocosm and microcosm: the living waters that flow from above are returned to God through the most precious water of our body, our tears. ‘Jesus wept’ (Jn.11.35). This is the great prayer of water. Let us finish with the beautiful words of John Chryssavgis:

Tears signify an opening of new life, a softening of the soul, a clarity of mind. They bring us to rebirth and the world to healing. They signify a true homecoming. Through tears we are able to enter the treasury of the heart.⁵⁸

⁵⁴ Schaya, *The Universal Meaning of the Kabbalah*, p.94.

⁵⁵ See Guénon, *Fundamental Symbols*, § 59 ‘The Seven Rays and the Rainbow’; also M. Lings, *Symbolism & Archetype: A Study of the Meaning of Existence*, Cambridge: Quinta Essentia, 1991, Ch.4 ‘The Symbolism of the Triad or Primary Colours.’

⁵⁶ Rabbi J. Gikatilla see *Gates of Light (Sha’are Orah)*, tr. A. Weinstein, Walnut Creek: AltaMira, 1994, pp.17-19.

⁵⁷ Rabbi J. Gikatilla, *Gates of Light*, p.16.

⁵⁸ J. Chryssavgis, *In the Heart of the Desert: The Spirituality of the Desert Fathers and Mothers*, Bloomington, IN: World Wisdom, 2003, p. 51, see Ch.7 ‘Silence and Tears’; also M. Lings, *A Return to the Spirit: Questions and Answers*, Louisville, KY: Fons Vitae, p2005, Ch.4 ‘What is the Spiritual Significance of Tears and of Laughter?’