

Archetypes: The Persistence of Unifying Patterns

Elemire Zolla

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That archetypes undergird our politics, our poetry, and our lives is the thesis of Professor Zolla's book.

The most familiar form of an archetypal experience is what Zolla calls a "metaphysical experience." This term is so crucial to his argument that he spends the first part of the book (some seven short chapters) discussing it. Briefly, a metaphysical experience occurs "when the experiencing psyche and the thing it perceives, subject and object, melt and are absorbed into one another. . . ." Such a state is experienced by many members of a theatre audience when they are transported beyond themselves in response to a moving dramatic performance. The remaining six chapters of Part I discuss various aspects of the metaphysical experience, one key feature of which is that the realization of the experience is dependent upon the will of the perceiver. The perceiver can conceive as he wishes to conceive. He need not be restricted to "paltry and silly representation" of himself unless he chooses to do so; he may equally acknowledge that he is "infinite." And should he do so he may succeed in overcoming "man's central, abstract terror, the root of dread in his heart, which is the sense of separation and isolation from the world, and hence of a surrounding cosmic, indistinct hostility." In this state, the individual has transcended time; he has lost his "grasping, deliberate, dense, deluded beta-self." He has recognized this self as comical and has moved to a deeper level where delta-waves dominate and "the second hand" stands still. He has thus realized oneness, unity.

The idealistic and ennobling notion of man presented in the first part of the book leads smoothly to Part II, Archetypes. The first of the great archetypes discussed is that of numbers, those numbers, that is to say, that "have the property of unifying, ordering the other numbers into sets, which make it possible to calculate and assort vast amounts of them. One-like numbers are the units of measure, the archetypes." The original state of Oneness, of

course, corresponds to a metaphysical experience. When the knower makes a distinction between himself and what he knows, he creates a second One: two. Through this process the knower descends from the one to the many. But the realization that the two (the many) were originally one produces a unity. The chapter goes on to discuss numbers as ways in which unity is divided and reunited into new Ones. Other chapters in this part of the book assert that everything we perceive depends on archetypes; that seals, names, certain images, ideas, shaping forms, meanings, and synonyms are archetypes; that clouds, masses of water, and vortexes are similitudes for archetypes; and that archetypes, originating so deeply in humans, are virtually uncountable. Even though archetypes are probably uncountable, all individuals have experienced them, for they are the experiences that "order objects into sets, gather together emotions, and direct thoughts."

Part III traces the archetypes of European politics from the founding of Rome to the more feeble modern versions of the myth of Rome. This myth, a "barracks myth," consecrates "the ruthless bully who, however roughly, provides for his comrades." Today, this and similar political archetypes prevail throughout Europe, for they are the product of enlightened leaders—leaders who have undergone a metaphysical experience and out of "Bodhisattvic mercy or saintly charity" have translated their experiences into political systems that are more comprehensible to the layman. These "dregs of metaphysical experience became the apology for Empire." Clearly, says Zolla, "Political myths are fallen, degraded empyrean visions."

If the political vision is a fallen version of a higher vision, the higher vision, discussed in Part IV, may be that of the poet, for when the poet succeeds in seeing "not with the eyes but through them," he may capture the ineffable, unutterable cosmogonical realization "of how being stems from non-being, multiplicity from undivided oneness, the Word from utter silence." This realization, a metaphysical experience, relates poetry to cosmogony, for "poetry is what cosmogony is about" and the "zero point of cosmogony is . . . the core of poetry." Zolla examines Vedic cosmogony as paradigmatic of his point, noting that "the poet's logic is that of the unconscious," which frequently couples contraries, substitutes a part for the whole, a thing for its class, and in general, is not troubled with coincidence. But the poet, having learned to observe with great precision the workings of his own psyche, cannot make his knowledge apparent unless he can somehow personify it. This Blake tried to do, of course, but he failed because few readers conceived of his giant men as he did. It is for this reason, as T. S. Eliot has noted, that the more traditional mythologies are so important to poets.

The Vision of the Rose, Part V of the book, discusses the rose (and the lotus) as a symbol of a unified vision. When the metaphysical experience is at

the center of being, the archetypes revolve around or are related to that center in a harmonious and unified way. But when the metaphysical experience is not known or is ignored, "When everyday, socially or individually-conditioned reality is taken as the true coign of vantage, the result can only be comical." On the surface the correction for such a comical vision is often thought to be tragedy. But tragedy is itself removed some distance from metaphysical experience. Tragedy and comedy, then, are extremes, the mean being metaphysical experience, which links both. To find that center ought to be the goal of spiritual education. It is this center that the rose symbolizes.

In this short book (140 pages) Zolla has amassed an impressive array of literary, political, religious, and anthropological evidence. So compact, the book is often difficult to read. It assumes a familiarity with archetypes, requires a willingness to consider speculative and imaginative evidence, and demands attentive reading. Not for the reader first coming to archetypes, the book is nevertheless well worth reading for those readers who wish to add to their understanding of archetypes. Professor Zolla is to be commended for writing this thought-provoking and synthesizing book.