



Job's Despair by William Blake

**The Book of Job:
Encountering Inner Multiplicity**

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“The self is like a crowd”, says Jung (Jung 1988, p. 102) *“when people integrate their unconscious (...) it is as if one man were becoming a whole town.”* (Jung 1988, p. 827). I could think of no better way of starting a presentation on the theme of “multiplicity” than with this quotation of Jung taken from his Seminars on Zarathustra. Inner multiplicity is a natural state of any human psyche. Individuation consequently can be understood as a process of engaging in a dynamic relationship with the elements of one’s “inner village”, thereby responding to the psyche’s natural tendency towards wholeness. I have chosen to observe such a journey as it is exemplified in the Biblical Book of Job.

This rich and complex text has always triggered a great interest among psychoanalytic schools and has generated a wealth of often very distinctively contrasted interpretations (see Merkur 2004, pp. 120-22). It gave birth among others to Jung’s “Answer to Job”, a powerful and most controversial text in which Jung focused his attention on the problematic relationship between Job and Yahweh, as symbolizing the relationship between ego and Self i.e., from a psychological perspective. However, this exclusive focus as well as Jung’s highly emotional reaction to the character of Yahweh brought him however to disregard extremely rich and revealing passages about the relationship between Job and other characters involved in the story. Approaching the text as a symbolic representation of an intra-psychic reality, not only can Yahweh and Job be seen as depicting Self and ego but all the other characters interacting with Job can be interpreted as aspects of the psyche. Following the evolving relationship between the main character and these part-selves results in an interpretation that complements Jung’s perspective, even if in many aspects it contradicts his. The integration of the part-selves brings new insights into the development of a rich psychodynamic process: a journey into wholeness.

Job's Initial Situation

At the beginning of his story Job is presented as a saintly man, *“one who feared God and turned away from evil”* and as enjoying, apparently thanks to this, a most enviable situation. He has seven sons and three daughters, *“seven thousand sheep, three thousand camels, five hundred yoke of oxen, five hundred donkeys, and very many servants.”* (Job 1:1-3).

With so many blessings, (symbolically speaking so many inner resources), Job seems to be in God's good graces. From a psychological point of view, such a



Figure 1 Job and his Family

description may well evoke at first sight an image of wholeness. Looking at it more closely however, Job's initial situation reveals a dissociated psyche: one notices for instance that a very important figure is missing: Job's wife. In this first section, she is not mentioned, it is as if she did not exist, which suggests a radical repression of the anima.

The following verses talk about Job's children and his own attitude towards them. *“His sons”,* says the text, *“used to go and hold feasts in one another's houses in turn; and they would send and invite their three sisters to*

eat and drink with them." (Job 1:4). One cannot imagine a more radical contrast between the God-fearing Job and his carefree, Dionysian children. For this reason they appear as clear representations of shadow-figures. This is also symbolized by the fact that they live in their own houses, therefore separated from Job and holding their feasts away from his sight. In spite of this Job is obviously aware of his children's unruly temperament. Fearing that their behavior could threaten his relationship with Yahweh, he tries to atone for their suspected sins: "*when the feast days had run their course, [we are told], Job would (...) rise early in the morning and offer burned offerings according to the number of them all; for Job said, 'It may be that my children have sinned, and cursed God in their hearts.' This is what Job always did.*" (Job 1:5). In other words, the ego attempts to avoid the potential inner clash generated by conflicting impulses by radically suppressing them in order to prevent their interfering with his relationship with Yahweh as well as with his own chosen self-image.

Job's compulsive rituals reveal a deep anxiety triggered by a fragile choice of one-sidedly incarnating saintliness. The stage is set for a neurosis. Inner petrification looms ahead.

"The Soul should always stand ajar", wrote Emily Dickinson. (Dickinson 1924, p. 121). Job has done the opposite: he has bolted himself in his self-created prison, preventing his soul from opening up for further developments.

"If a man leaves too many things to the unconscious and so gets into a tight corner", (says Jung), *"the archetype begins to stir as in compensation."* (Jung 1988, p. 532). Interestingly, in his "Answer to Job", Jung completely disregarded this neurotic aspect of Job's psyche, casting the blame exclusively upon Yahweh and seemingly forgetting his own most valuable insights about the

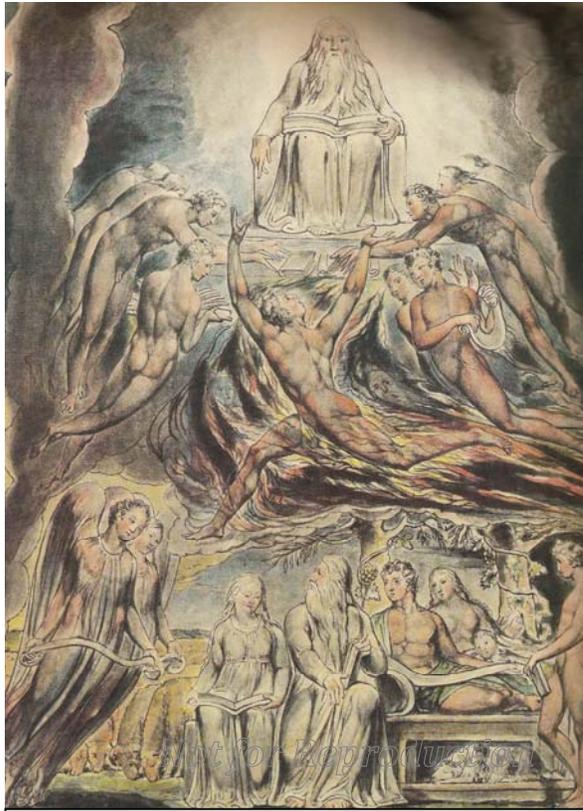


Figure 2 *Satan Before the Throne of God*

dark side of the Self is activated. Indeed Satan presents himself to the heavenly realm where he is welcomed by Yahweh and he suggests putting Job's faithfulness to a test. After a few weak hesitations Yahweh consents and delivers Job into Satan's hands. A violent discharge of the compensatory energy ensues. From one day to the next all of Job's children are killed; his servants as well; his house, farms, fields and cattle are destroyed and a painful illness pounces upon him.

compensatory energy of the unconscious. His emotional reaction towards Yahweh has led him to idealize Job and perceive him as an innocent victim of a totally arbitrary divine energy. Seen in the perspective of depth psychology however, the brutal event of Job's losses is far from being meaningless or arbitrary. As a result of a radical splitting-off from the dark side that has taken place at the level of the ego, the

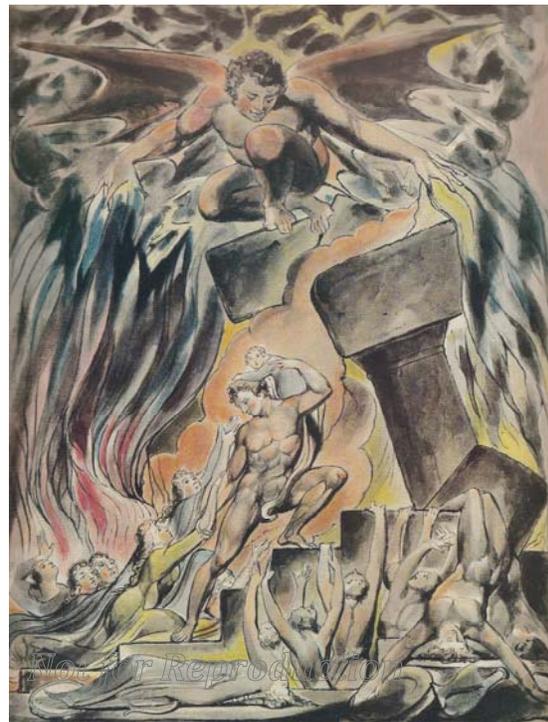


Figure 3 *Job's Son and Daughters Overwhelmed by Satan*

The Self is a most ambivalent reality. Not only does it contain a positive and negative side, as demonstrated symbolically by Yahweh's dealings with Satan, it also contains a dynamic aspect which promotes development and a conservative aspect *which keeps the individual from changing.*" (Weisstub 1993, p. 405). It is Satan who expresses the alienated state of being in which Yahweh is keeping Job. *"Does Job fear God for nothing?"* says Satan to Yahweh. *"Have you not put a fence around him and his house and all that he has, on every side?"* (Job 1:9.10). With these words Satan appears like the dynamic aspect of the Self, reminding the Self that it is complacently keeping Job in a state of spiritual infancy and affirming the necessity for a drastic change. As cruel and destructive as it may seem at first sight his role is analogous to the role of the fairy tale's witch, triggering a new development in the individuation process.

A Shattered Inner World

The revelation of Yahweh's dark side acts upon Job like an inner earthquake. All his energies have gone, sunk into the unconscious. His illusory paradisiacal world has fallen into pieces. Bewildered, totally disoriented, he nevertheless persists in his unconditional worship of Yahweh. *"Naked I came from my mother's womb,"* says he, *"and naked I shall return there; the LORD gave, and the LORD has taken away; blessed be the name of the LORD."* (Job 1:21).

This absolute submission to Yahweh's will has been highly praised by most if not all religious commentators on Job's story. From the point of view of depth psychology on the other hand it can be seen as a renewed attempt to avoid a conflict between the ego and the Self by submitting passively to the dictates of the latter, an understandable reaction of course on the part of an ego suddenly

confronted with the overpowering energy released by the Self. Should it persist, however, it would result in pure and simple annihilation of the ego, in other words, psychic death. Then Job *“took a potsherd with which to scrape himself, and sat among the ashes.”* (Job 2:8). The ego has sunken into a deep regression.

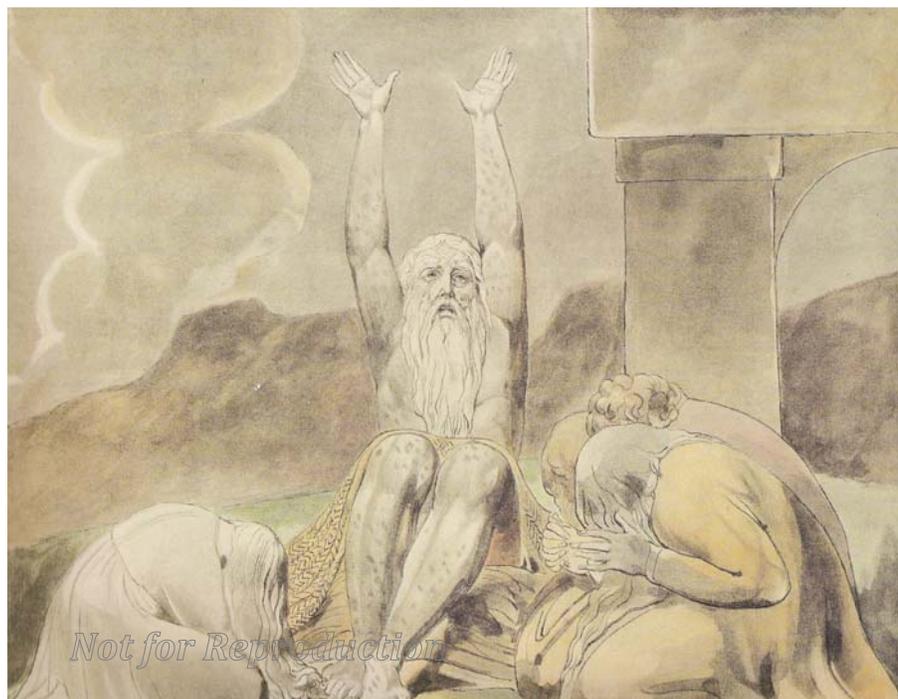


Figure 4 Job's Despair

The Activation of Repressed Part-Selves

Having witnessed Yahweh's ambivalence, Job's illusory sense of his own inner unity is soon being challenged, as his previously split-off part-selves begin unexpectedly to manifest themselves. He now finds himself painfully exposed to a multiplicity of contradictory inner energies and forced to confront these many voices that attempt to pull him in different directions.

The first one who approaches him is his wife. She addresses him violently: *“Do you still persist in your integrity? Curse God, and die.”* (Job 2:9). Job's anima speaks the language of the shadow, a phenomenon of contamination that often occurs as a result of a deep repression. Job immediately rebukes her and

she is not heard any more. With her intervention however she has nevertheless



Figure 5 Job's Comforters

gained substance in Job's inner world and, through her, energies of the shadow have come out of their hiding place in the son's houses to knock at Job's door.

Immediately after Job's wife, some other characters unmentioned until then appear: Job's three friends Eliphaz, Bildad and Zophar. The Bible commentators usually refer to them as "the comforters", a highly disputable term when their discourse is heard from a psychological perspective. Nothing that they express can indeed help Job to come to terms with the painful situation. On the contrary, ignoring the new reality Job is confronted with, all their arguments are expressions of neurotic defenses: denial, guilt and idealisation of Yahweh. For this reason I propose to interpret them as complexes.



Figure 6 Job Rebuked by His Friends

Complexes are blind to new events happening on the conscious level. As Job progressively attempts to affirm his painful new awareness, he comes up against his friends' hopeless neurotic messages.

For better or for worse our complexes are our most faithful friends. Job's struggle to bear witness to the distressing reality of Yahweh's ruthless will occupies the main body of the text.

From one chapter to the next a conflict progressively develops between Job and his friends. As his voice gains strength his anger begins to flow more and more freely against his *"worthless physicians"*, *"whitewash with lies"*, (Job 13:4) seeking refuge in *"defenses of clay"* (Job 13:12) and uttering nothing else but *"windy words"*. (Job 16:3). Conflict with one's multiple inner voices is an essential aspect of the path towards wholeness. Without it there is no differentiation but a formless magma of neurotic psychic massa confusa.

Overcoming his fear he then turns his anger against Yahweh as well, confronting Yahweh's unfair brutality and affirming his own reality. *"Does it seem good to you to oppress"...*, says Job, *"although you know that I am not guilty?"* (Job 10:3,7) ... *"If I sin, what do I do to you, you watcher of humanity?"* (Job 7:20).

At the end of this long contention, Job has definitely asserted his “otherness” towards his friends and towards Yahweh. “*As long as my breath is in me*”, says he, “*my lips will not speak falsehood ... until I die I will not put away my integrity from me.*” (Job 27:3-5). The conflict has reached its peak. Both the ego and the complexes stop talking, the arguments from both sides having been exhausted. The psyche seems to have come to a dead end while a huge tension between the opposite energies is palpable.

Elihu

At that moment a new character unexpectedly enters the scene: Elihu. He is a much younger man who has heard all the back and forth of the arguments. He has not dared to intervene until then



Figure 7 The Wrath of Elihu

because of his youth and of reverence he owes to his elders until the insolvable conflict between Job and his friends “*constrains*” him to talk. “*It is not the old that are wise,*” says Elihu, “*nor the aged that understand what is right. (...)* *Listen to me; let me ... declare my opinion.*” (Job 32:9-10). “*It is the spirit in a*

mortal, the breath of the Almighty, that makes for understanding". (Job 32:8).
"I will bring my knowledge from far away," says he. ... "Truly my words are not false; one who is perfect in knowledge is with you." (Job 36:3-4).

The new insight he then brings imposes itself upon the now silenced voices, breaking through old patterns of thinking. The very core of Elihu's speech is that neither Job nor his friends can open the path forward because they stick to the Ego's perspective, and to their one-sided truth; Job's friends are imprisoned in their conventional wisdom, and Job himself in his anger: a mental construct on one side, a blinding emotion on the other. Both are ego reactions. What follows is a long speech in praise of God, whose power and wisdom escapes all human understanding; God is an incommensurable reality, a "*phenomenon*" (Jung 1958-1969, par. 600), to borrow Jung's words, which cannot be affected by our deeds, whether wicked or virtuous, which cannot be apprehended and least of all judged according to human standards.

With Elihu's revolutionary speech the psyche has taken a radical leap into an entirely other perspective, beyond the dualism, which is characteristic of the ego's mode of functioning, towards the unifying symbol of the transcendent function.

Yahweh's Thunderous Speech

Amazingly, Elihu's speech in praise of God's infinite majesty seems unexpectedly to trigger Yahweh's anger. He cuts Elihu short with a severe admonishment: "*Who is this that darkens counsel by words without knowledge?*" (Job 38:2) thunders Yahweh. He then goes on flooding the poor human being Job with a flamboyant enumeration of His cosmic accomplishments since setting the foundations of the earth without forgetting his monstrous

offspring, the Behemoth and Leviathan. He even appears to take a special pleasure in emphasizing this frightening image of Himself. Instead of seeking closeness with the human reality, Yahweh seems on the contrary to want to affirm even more explicitly than Elihu had done, and with a thunderous voice that no human being could produce, the infinite distance between the divine and

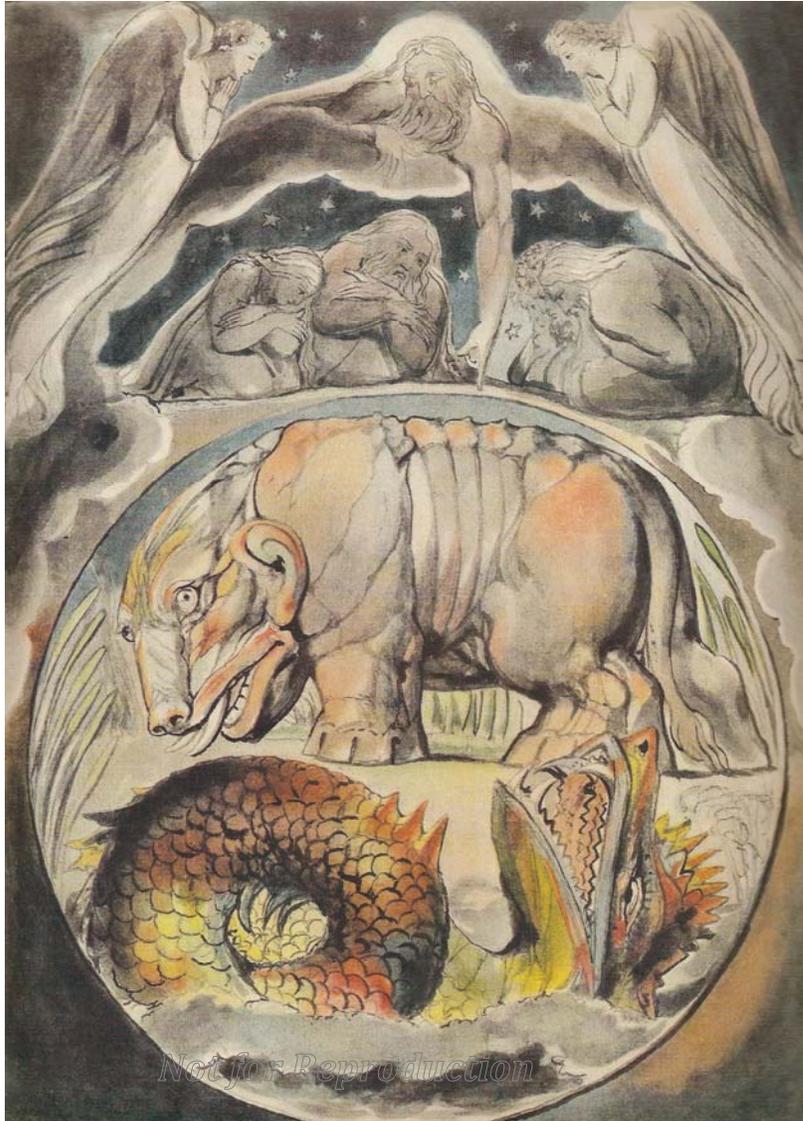


Figure 8 Behemoth and Leviathan

human realities.

This passage triggered a particularly powerful emotional reaction on Jung's part. He sees Yahweh's intervention as one more savage attack upon Job on the part of a totally unconscious, amoral divine power. Job, says Jung, "realizes God's inner antinomy, and in

the light of this realization his knowledge attains a divine numinosity." (Jung 1958-1969, par. 584). He *"can behold the back of Yahweh, the abysmal world of*

'shards.'" (Jung 1958-1969, par.595) and is raised by his consciousness and moral behavior above Yahweh himself. And this, according to Jung, is what Yahweh had not foreseen and cannot tolerate. Job "*evidently appears so dangerous to Yahweh that he must be battered down with the heaviest artillery.*" (Jung 1958-1969, par. 593).

My interpretation is very different and is brought about by a disturbing detail at the beginning of Elihu's speech. "*I will bring my knowledge from far away*", he said. ... "*Truly my words are not false; one who is perfect in knowledge is with you.*" (Job 36:3-4). The moment when a deeper consciousness begins to manifest itself and finds its voice is a crucial moment, pregnant with healing potential. But it is also pregnant with danger against which Jung himself warns us. The psyche may indeed engage in a highly destructive process if "*the ego lacks any critical approach to the unconscious*" i.e. if it attempts to assimilate the new content without discrimination. "*This, says Jung, inevitably produces an inflation of the ego, unless a critical line of demarcation is drawn between it and the unconscious figures. But this act of discrimination yields practical results only if it succeeds in fixing reasonable boundaries to the ego.*" (Jung 1959-1968, pars. 43-44). Elihu appears to me as the part of the psyche that has come close to the divine mystery and is tempted to identify with it. This of course could lead to an inflation, a direct path towards a psychosis. With this perspective in mind I experience Yahweh's forceful and seemingly unfriendly intervention as a saving grace, preserving the sanity of the Ego by setting impassable boundaries between it and the Self.

After Yahweh's speech Job reacts the way a healthy Ego should in front of a numinous reality, the totally Other with which no human Ego should ever attempt to identify. "*I have uttered what I did not understand, says he, things*

too wonderful for me which I did not know. ... therefore I despise myself, and repent in dust and ashes.” (Job 42:5-6).

Job’s Restoration

Having successfully sustained the confrontation with his own part-selves, having humbly acknowledged the absolute Otherness of the Divine, Job’s healing can take place. Immediately after, his children and servants are given back to him



Figure 9 Every one also gave him a piece of Money

and his possessions are restored in multiplied amount. Yahweh then admonishes Job’s three friends and commands them to ask Job for his forgiveness. They obey and come to him together with Job’s family members and all who had known him before, bringing offerings: money (psychic resources) and rings (signs of alliance). (Job 42:11-12). The previously dissociated psyche is now whole and the ego’s leadership over his “inner village” has been confirmed by Yahweh himself.

The Mutual Transformation of Ego and Self

Had Job's story been a fairy tale it would have probably ended on this happy scene. On the path towards wholeness however there is no "ever after". The creative potential of the archetypal realm being infinite, its manifestation in the human psyche is consequently an unending process. This is expressed at the very end of the story where we are told that after his full restoration Job "named"



Figure 10 Job and His Daughters

his three daughters and "*gave them an inheritance along with their brothers.*" (Job 42:14-15). By his full recognition of the previously repressed feminine Job opens the path towards further developments.

Even archetypal images are submitted to a similar process of progressive expansion. As collective representations drawing their evocative power from the archetypal realm, they always remain incomplete and in need of further

expansion. While fostering the enlargement of consciousness in a human psyche they are affected in their turn by any development happening at the level of the ego. Job's naming his daughters and giving them equal status with their brothers does not only attest his readiness to integrate the feminine in his "inner village": it also comes as a powerful message addressed to Yahweh. The one-sided masculine God-image is being challenged by a human consciousness and as Jung pointed out, it is certainly not by pure coincidence that the divine Sophia will start appearing in the biblical literature following the writing of the Book of Job. (Jung 1958-1969, par. 616).

The ego and the Self are engaged in a mutual transformative role towards each other. This thought expressed by Jung in "Answer to Job" is a ground-breaking and most hopeful perspective echoing the contemporary advances of quantum physics which reveal the cosmic reality as a "*participatory universe*" (see Wheeler 1979, p. 2 & sqq.) in which each one of us plays a creative, transformative role.

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