

PSYCHOLOGICAL REFLECTIONS ON THE MOVIE
MASTER AND COMMANDER: THE FAR SIDE OF THE WORLD

Running Head: Master and Commander

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The Movie, Master and Commander: The Far Side of the World, starring Russell Crowe and Paul Bettany is a cinematic adaptation of two books, the first and the tenth, of a saga of twenty volumes by author Patrick O'Brian (Tom McGregor (2003). I haven't read the novels and, at first, found the movie to be excellent cinematography but not particularly interesting otherwise. However, as I let the images wash over my psyche, the story turned out to be more meaningful than was first apparent. The realistic background for the movie is the rise of Napoleon and the British-French wars in the late 18th and early 19th century. While the French had their hero in Napoleon Bonaparte, on the British side was the sea-hero, Lord [Horatio] Nelson. The date indicated at the beginning of the movie was 1805, the actual year of Nelson's death at Trafalgar and the turning point in the war against France in favor of the British. From the symbolic point of view, which is the deeper truth depicted by the movie, it involves the classic heroic journey to the underworld, the Nekya, for purposes of rebirth. Relative to the more pragmatic British, the French typically represent deep Eros and feeling values. The heroic journey for an Englishman, therefore, likely involves integrating these qualities into consciousness and life.

The two main characters are the Captain Jack Aubrey and the ship's doctor and his best friend, Dr. Stephen Maturin. The captain is war-like, courageous and single-minded in his pursuit of the ship *Acheron*, which he was instructed to do for his king and country.

The ship first mysteriously appears out of the mists to the loyal Lieutenant Pullings while on watch. He immediately alerts Aubrey, who also spots it later on, along with Pullings. Mythologically, Acheron is the realm of Hades and death and the ship, which suddenly appears out of the mist, clearly embodies these values. Its figurehead, a stylized dragon, gives credence to this idea, while suggesting it is the object to be feared and conquered or tamed by the hero. This idea is supported by the fact that the captain of the ship *HMS Surprise* now finds itself 'on the far side of the world' that is to say in a realm foreign to normal ego consciousness, which is portrayed as Brazil. It may also symbolically relate to the fact that Nelson actually died the year the adventure, according to the movie, takes place 'on the far side of the world.' Indeed, Aubrey's identification with the British hero, under whom he served at the outset of his career, is suggested by the fact he wears his hat sideways in the unusual fashion of Nelson himself (Tom McGregor, 2003). The date indicated in the novel was actually set at 1812, the year of the American-British war, which would physically explain their being in the waters off the coast of Brazil (Michael Elliott, 2003). The ship's name, *Surprise*, meanwhile, suggests relationship to Hermes, guide of souls, who, as trickster, is renowned to function intuitively and by surprise.

Given the one-sided nature of Aubrey's aggressive pursuit, Maturin accuses him of having too much pride, which he denies. The doctor is also a naturalist and intrigued by the strange creatures, big turtles, sea-iguana, cormorant, both winged and effectively wingless, that he sees from the ship. But the captain doesn't want to land so much is he

one-sidedly in pursuit of his goal. This disappoints the doctor, who is given a black beetle by the young officer, thirteen (13) year old Lord Blakney, as compensation. The insect is the scarab that symbolizes death and creative re-birth. The midshipman himself earlier on has his right arm amputated, alchemically referring to the symbolism of dismemberment as sacrifice of certain ego attitudes, probably regarding one-sided martial activities and ambitions. He, in fact, also becomes fascinated by the natural world after the dismemberment, suggesting a need to integrate values of nature into his life. Doctor Maturin initiates this interest.

Maturin and Aubrey are best friends and play sea shanties and the lyrical music of Lochatelli and Boccherini together, the former the cello and the captain the violin (Richard Lacayo, 2003). They play throughout the movie during periods of relaxation. This augurs well as music is food for the soul and speaks of Eros and feeling values. Aubrey is not only a courageous man of action but a sympathetic man of feeling as well, conveying considerable inner strength. It is noteworthy that the captain plays a violin and the doctor the cello. The violin is a spiritual instrument reaching notes of an exalted and sublime feeling, while the cello is more connected to the rhythm of the natural world. In fact, the captain is an active, energetic and instinctually related man, who compensates with spiritual feelings evoked by the violin. Meanwhile, Maturin is introverted and book-learned in need of connection to the natural world. His instrument of choice is also a compensation for his more intellectual bent. Both instruments bring

together the male and female principles in that the shape is female while the bow is male.

Although there are no women aboard the ship there is one other indication that the journey involves the feminine, is even directed or pulled along by the feminine [anima], as the figurehead on the bow of the boat is shaped like a beautiful woman. During the initial skirmish between the *Acheron* and the *Surprise*, the latter vessel suffers considerable damage including damage to the lady-figurehead on the bow of the boat. The boat symbolizes a particular philosophy of life and action as embodied by the captain, whereas the figurehead, in particular, represents corresponding soul and life values, which also suffer damage. She is the leader on the journey. The captain decides to repair the vessel in order to carry on his pursuit, suggesting a healing process has taken place, involving perseverance and tenacity of purpose, as well as development in consciousness. The repair of the anima's image suggests life values themselves need to assimilate blows from the cannons of death, that is to say there is a need for a broader understanding and some relativization of life values. Since the guns come from a boat manned by Frenchmen, one can assume the needed integration involves a deepening of Eros and feeling values.

The heroic quest takes the *Surprise* through rough seas, which symbolizes overwhelming emotional disturbance. Risks involved in the heroic journey, a quest for an increase in consciousness, upset the more complacent, conventional psyche, which

responds with fear, foreboding and reactionary attitudes. The conventional gods, in other words, prefer the status quo react to the heroic search for consciousness, which involves their giving up their hegemony or themselves being subject to a metamorphosis. The crew's restlessness and the angry disrespect they show towards Midshipman Hollam, mirror the stormy seas. They perceive him as a contemporary Jonah and bringer of bad luck. He responds by trying to have them like him, which is an unpardonable mistake, as it caters to their rebelliousness rather than bringing authoritative leadership and discipline to bear. The young man lacks self-mastery and a feeling for power with regard to the rebelliousness of the crew in the face of danger.

At one point a winged bird makes its appearance to everybody's delight, especially the doctor's. But Captain Howard of the Marines tries to shoot the bird and wounds the doctor instead in the lower right side of the stomach near the liver. The spiritually inclined doctor, therefore, who has a natural kinship to the winged bird, is wounded by a member of marine military. The wound, in other words, takes place in the centre of power near the seat of life by a military man, indicating the quality to be absorbed for healing. In alchemy, the winged bird symbolizes the spirit. As a matter of fact, the doctor is too involved in his introverted, sensitive and spiritual [intellectual] pursuits and not enough involved in martial life, despite the fact he is on a ship-of-war. His healing involves becoming less aloof and absorbed by his studies and more involved in the aggressive and courageous efforts of his shipmates.

Doctor Maturin performs an operation on himself and removes the embedded bullets, fulfilling the ancient Greek admonition 'Physician, heal thyself (Richard Corliss, 2003, p. 61).' He, consequently, becomes a wounded-healer, now truly prepared to more sympathetically heal other's psychological and physical wounds than previously was the case (Edward Whitmount, 1993). From the point of view of the archetype of the healer, in addition to being wounded, he is also now more predisposed to actively inflict wounds for the sake of healing, when and if that should be necessary, and not just administer healing as succor. The archetype of the healer always includes the two aspects, both wounding and healing in accordance with the Delphic Oracle of Apollo's declaration 'that which wounds shall also heal (As recorded in Edward Whitmount, 1993, p. 56).' Ultimately, both the wounder and the healer are double aspects of the same transpersonal power that the human healer is ideally able to access. Moreover, as a doctor-healer, who was subjected to a wound from one of his own shipmates, the archetypal pattern being lived out is that of a *pharmakos*-scapegoat [victim], for whom suffering constellates transpersonal healing energies.

To complete the self-healing operation the doctor is taken to the land on a nearby island, so that once healed he can pursue his quest to document, study and capture the exotic reptiles, the sea-iguana and turtles. His friend, the captain, in other words, relents from his overly aggressive pursuit for the sake of love for his friend. Not only is the doctor healed but so is the captain and, presumably, the whole enterprise delegated to the captain and crew of the *Surprise* will benefit accordingly.

Once healed, Dr. Maturin, along with Lord Blakney, the adolescent with an amputated arm and another young man explore the island for these creatures. At one point he spots a wingless bird on top of a rock and hustles towards it to capture this rare bird. But the bird is illusive and disappears. The wingless bird in alchemy symbolizes the soul in contrast to the winged bird, which represents the spirit. In alchemy they initially fight each other, indicating the antithesis of spirit and soul. The spirit desires to soar to mental and spiritual heights, while the soul aspires to integrate all aspects of being, including both the natural psyche and the spirit. Its position on a high rock, connected to the earth and yet close to the sky indicates this is possible. Finally, the doctor reaches the other side of the island and spots the ship *Acheron*. He therefore realizes his duty is to return to his ship to warn the captain. He has to let go all the exotic animals and not pursue the wingless bird in order to expedite his purpose. This means he sacrifices his European cognitive and scientific attitude, which wants to classify life rather than live it. Indeed, the captain and crews friendly relationships with the primal people of Brazil, who live in harmony with the natural world, suggest the potential to assimilate more natural values.

Psychologically, it is essential for contemporary people to assimilate the reptilian mind and instincts in order to heal the great split in the Western psyche. The Western wound, which became exacerbated during the Age of Reason, the time of the movie, needs to return to the animal soul and reptilian mind for self-healing. Indeed, healing in all traditions involve relationship to the reptilian mind, usually a snake or, as in the North

West Coast Indian tradition a frog (C. A. Meier, 1967). Without connection to the natural mind, not only does the ego take on monumental hubris, there are all kinds of destructive disturbances to the psyche, both collectively and individually, with the inevitable dire consequences.

The doctor brings two insects back to the ship, another black beetle or scarab symbolizing death and creative renewal and an insect that disguises itself as a twig as its evolutionary way of survival. Maturin shows the latter insect to the Aubrey, who realizes that that is the way to get close to the *Acheron* without suffering a catastrophe. Here we are reminded of Odysseus who was taught by Athena how to master disguise in order to trick his wife Penelope's suitors and eventually kill them. He did so by taking on the appearance of a humble man. Such trickery is also the province of Hermes. The disguise taken on by the captain and his shipmates is, likewise, that of ordinary humble sea folk, presumably manning a Whaler.

The ship's name *Surprise* denotes another of captain's tactical attitude. He also believes the captain of the *Acheron* will take the bait out of greed, which is undoubtedly psychologically related to death. This suggests that humbleness is essential to conquering psychological and spiritual death. The *Surprise*, disguised now as a Whaler with another name, advances to be broadside the *Acheron* and surprises them with a violent attack. Doctor Maturin, now healed, is also involved. So, too, is the young Lord Blakney, who even appears to relish his aggressive martial role despite his amputated

arm and his new found interest in the natural world. Perhaps, symbolically, it is better put to say that, because of his interest in the natural mind, when called upon, he is now prepared to instinctively act as a warrior.

After a bitter battle the *Surprise* conquers the *Acheron*. Captain Aubrey eventually reaches the centre of the *Acheron* and sees whom he believes is its captain lying there dead, with his doctor standing beside him. The captain of the *Acheron* appears to lie there, dark and beautiful in his death. Aubrey is then told that, prior to dying, he instructed his doctor to give the captain of the *Surprise* his sword, which he did. The captain of the *Acheron*, at least the dead man, is either Hades himself or one of his delegates. This sword symbolizes discernment, in this case, of the realm of Hades and death, a just gift for the courageous captain.

There seems to be a certain victory over death, but not without suffering and sacrifice. Back on the ship the dead crew of the *Surprise* is sent to the watery deep along with prayer. Those who died include a young midshipman, a favorite of the captain, whom he made a lieutenant. Earlier, the young lieutenant, whom he replaced, committed suicide by jumping into the cold sea because of lack of courage and strength in relationship to the ship's crew. The heroic quest involves a sacrifice of weakness, but also the high qualities of courage and strength also involve a sacrifice for the greater good and higher Will. The final prayer is *The Lord's Prayer*, which includes the lines, "Thy Kingdom come, Thy Will be done, on earth as it is in Heaven." These words represent the desired

outcome of the hero's quest, which is to be able to embody these very values in his life. This is only made possible by integration of the natural psyche around the soul along with relationship to a higher Will.

But it only seems to be a victory over death because, as it turns out, it is not the *Acheron's* captain who is dead, but the ship's doctor. There is only a partial victory. The antagonist's captain is also a master of disguise and will more than likely take back his ship. But the *Acheron* doctor is dead, suggesting that death may prove to be the ultimate place of healing or destiny for the captain and his crew. Death, in other words, is the great teacher, an important truth of alchemy and spiritual literature, well articulated, for instance, in the *Katha Upanishad* (Edward Whitmount, 2003). The heroic quest is not yet over, and there are undoubtedly more adventures in store, more Eros and feeling and relationship to a higher Will to assimilate. In the meantime, Captain Aubrey of the *Surprise* has been handed a sword of discernment and has gained some consciousness of his adversary from the underworld.

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