

Karma, Art and Liberation: The Function of the Archetype in Art

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“The finite world will be changed through the eyes of men who have the vision to comprehend the infinite,” says Ox-Ho. This statement is particularly apropos to our study of the relationship of art to archetypes and the spiritual mysteries. With every successful creative act the artist changes the finite world, and he changes it not only materially but also spiritually. The forms that he creates are *energy equations* – that is, they are the visible expression of invisible forces which, through the artwork, exert their influence upon our consciousness. No form exists, whether good or bad, which does not affect the consciousness of man. If this be so, then it is not a matter of indifference what kinds of forms or images the artist creates for us. Because his art is a force *affecting our consciousness*, we have a right to demand of the artist forms which *elevate*, which *expand* our perceptions and intuitions – forms which give us a vision of a Higher Life. For it is the vision of the infinite which liberates us, which sets us free from the limiting and destructive forces of ordinary existence. If an artist would meet his responsibilities and aid us in attaining our freedom, then he must, either intuitively or consciously, bring us into touch with the archetypal forces which lie back of the Universe and human consciousness.

Let us turn now to an analysis of the liberating power of true works of art.

If we could write the history of mankind around one central, guiding theme, it would be the struggle of mankind for freedom. There are many kinds of freedom – freedom from hunger, disease, fear, political repression, freedom of thought, that inner freedom which comes with psychological maturity and integration. And there is *spiritual freedom* – the freedom of man’s Higher Self from the limitations of earthly existence. In the New Testament we read: “You shall know the Truth and the Truth will set you free.”

If we are to know what freedom is, we must understand first what it is that binds us, what it is that limits our freedom.

Nature or the Universe is ruled by definite laws, which I shall not go into here.¹ But it is the purpose of these laws to keep harmony and balance throughout the Universe. “Order is heavn’s first law,” says Alexander Pope. Could a single atom disobey the laws of attraction and repulsion, a single quantum of energy divest itself of its electromagnetic properties, the Universe would be thrown into chaos. For something would exist *greater* than the laws of nature and their Creator! Thus whenever we find a thing that is “out of harmony”, so to speak, with the forces of nature, we can be certain that it is but a matter of time until some force, catastrophe or event will come along and reestablish the original state of harmony. This natural state of harmony between things may be thought of as Nature’s LOVE for all things. When I speak of Harmony and Order, it is not to deny Change. *Pantas re*; everything changes. But all change is according to Law.

Now obviously things *do* get out of harmony. Trees fight for the same growing space. Animals kill each other for food. And real harmony and love between human beings is almost unknown, our usual claims to peace and love being a mockery of the genuine article. What we humans have failed to understand is that nature’s balance can *only* be disrupted by *self-conscious* beings – beings having the conscious freedom to act *in disregard* of nature’s laws. *Man* is the originator of the imbalances and disharmonies not only within his own life, but also in nature. The violence of nature is a “spill-over” from human consciousness. This is a complex issue which I can not do justice to here, but let me say simply that it is because *mind* is a higher force or energy in nature than rock, plant or animal life that the latter are affected by our thoughts and emotions. Heisenberg acknowledged that the physicist, whenever he investigates the atom, introduces forces *greater* than those operating on the “material” plane. No, it is not nature who is the breeder of conflict, for nature always strives for the balance of her forces. “Every action has its equal and opposite reaction,” says Newton’s Third Law. Human thoughts and feelings have breed inharmonies for thousands upon thousands of years, and *our discord* has its *accumulative effect* upon the life of nature. When the time comes that *man* is at peace, then the lion and the lamb will lie down together.

So the thing that *imprisons* us is the disharmony we generate by thoughts, emotions and acts that are *out of tune* with nature’s fundamental laws and principles. I cannot lift even my little finger without setting in motion the forces of nature, so I must give thought to the kind of forces I wish to set into operation.

¹ See my discussion of *The Law of Vibration* as an example of Law as the governing factor in all our thoughts and actions.

Now within the life of nature we have the forces of *momentum* and the forces of *inertia*. All of the energies of nature are in constant, ceaseless motion, but all motion is “pulled upon” slightly by inertia. Because of this fact, all energy – from the electron to light in interstellar space – travels in an arc or curve which sooner or later describes a circle. Thus it is a law of nature that all things *return to their origin*. Our thoughts and emotions, as well as our physical actions, are *energies in motion*. And under the law every force that we set in motion is destined some day to return to us. Hence the teachings of the great world religions: “Be not deceived. God is not mocked. As a man sows, so shall he also reap.” “Cast your bread upon the waters (energy) and it will return to you.” “Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” “Forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors.” Here we have the spiritual counterpart of Newton’s Third Law. It is strange that the Western world has never had a term to describe this cyclic process in human actions, but Eastern philosophy calls it *Karma*. For lack of a Western term we shall use the Eastern. KARMA, then, is the *return* to us of all the good and all the evil that we have ever generated in this world. Its action is governed by the circular return of nature’s energies which returns to us the fruits of all our past thoughts and actions. So whenever we speak of *Freedom* or *Liberation*, we are talking about release from “the wheel of Karma”.

But Freedom is not only freedom *from* something. It is also freedom *to* something. And that *to which* we are set free when we have balanced all our Karma is our own HIGHER SELF. It is Liberation to the Divine *Life* and *Light* which is within man. Would that I had space here to take you through an analysis of the Self, that to which we refer with the words “I AM”, for our very *consciousness* is, in truth, independent of the physical body, our emotions and thoughts. The *Source* from which you draw your Self-awareness lies beyond this physical world, and is your Higher or Spiritual Self. So when I speak of the process of Liberation, I am talking of *releasing the Divinity* of the Higher Self within the heart and mind of man. So long as we are ignorant of the law of Karma and of the laws of nature’s life, so long shall we remain prisoners bound by the chains of our ignorance. *Ignorance is poor Karma*.

Now whenever any one of us has *disrupted* the forces of nature, we have “made Karma”. We have disturbed the equilibrium of the Universe, and we, not another, must *restore that equilibrium*. To set forces of destruction in motion and then cry out that life, God or the Universe is unjust because we experience suffering merely keeps the *destructive cycle* going – round and round like a wheel from which we cannot free ourselves. This is “neurotic, compulsive repetition” on a grand scale!

It is only when we decide that *we are responsible* for the wrongs we have committed and that we must restore the equilibrium we have upset that Freedom or Liberation can begin. The moment I ask, “How can I make good my mistakes?” is the very moment Karma begins to lose its grip upon me. In that moment I begin to be free. By accepting responsibility for my Karma I begin to release the Divinity of my Higher Self, so that it can flow into my life bringing Peace, Light, Wisdom, Harmony and Love. The process of freeing ourselves from Karma is a process of *character-building*. One by one we begin to correct our wrong thoughts and substitute acts of peace and love for those of hate and violence. We build virtues in the place of vices, good habits in the place of bad.

Perhaps you’re thinking, What does all this have to do with art? But you need think for only a moment to realize that the habits of the old Karma-filled life must be replaced by *habits that set one free* – that *Destructive* acts must become *Creative* acts and that this can only happen if an individual is capable of being CREATIVE. This is why, as Jinarajadasa has said, “We cannot come to liberation until we have first freed ourselves by means of creation.” *Releasing the Divinity within the Higher Self is a profoundly Creative act!* And it is through the *arts*, perhaps more than anywhere else in society, that the *creative powers* of the soul are trained and brought to maturity. And without this training and *strengthening* of these powers by every means possible, WE CANNOT CREATE OUR FREEDOM FROM KARMA. So here you have the first function of art in aiding Liberation. It is the training ground of our creativity.

But we cannot create a world of freedom for ourselves unless we can conceive of a world where Harmony and Order – that is, where Love – is supreme. We cannot enter into such a world unless we can first form a VISION of it. From the study of forms in art, we learn that all artistic vision is a process of *ordering* – of bringing harmony between the many elements of the work – by means of simplifying and unifying principles. Every *great vision* in art is thus a fresh vision of the world, and it is an *ordered* vision. So we have the second value of art for Liberation – its ability to give us a vision of Order, Harmony, Unity and Balance.

Whatever the eye perceives enters directly into the consciousness, the soul. The energies within form cause the inner life to *vibrate* in precisely the same way they do in the form perceived. Draw a circle and enter a dot off-center. You feel the disturbance. Now place the dot in the center, and all the hidden forces harmonize. In both cases your consciousness is *directly affected*, and it is the disturbance or balancing of

the *hidden forces* within the circle which produces the effect within your mind and feelings. From this simple experiment, we begin to realize that the Order and Vision of every great work of art sets up vibrations within our innermost soul. Thus it exerts its healing, lifting, expanding influence upon our inner life and consciousness.

This leads me to my third point. We have “made Karma” by means of the disharmonies we have generated. Now there is only *one* state of Perfect Harmony – and that state is *perfection* itself! So you see that the only “Karma-less” state is the state of human perfection. It was to this Karma-less state that Jesus called us when he said, “You therefore must be perfect as the Father in heaven is perfect.” He was saying that we must *cease* generating disharmonies and *attune ourselves to our own Divine Perfection* if we wish to be FREE!!!

Now let us begin to apply these ideas to art.

Let us imagine that we can quantify all the good and evil in our thoughts and lives. Let us say that on the inharmony side we have a million Karmic debts and on the harmony side half a million. We have half a million debts to pay before we can be totally *free*. How do we pay these debts? Of course, the first thing we must do is stop generating new Karma, stop setting destructive forces into operation. Assuming we can do this – and that’s a very big assumption! – what of the remaining debts carried over from the past? All our *disharmonies* must be offset by the *creation of harmonies* to balance the scale. The great tragedy is that we can never *undo* the wrongs we have done. We can only hope to outweigh them with future good. Only in this sense can balance be achieved.

Every Harmony we introduce into the Universe – by thought or act – goes forth forever into the Universal Life *as harmony*, for energy is indestructible and its actions irreversible. Each kind thought, each act of love “reverberates” infinitely throughout space and time.

So what have we done when we create a successful work of art – one in which Order and Harmony pervade the whole Vision? Have we not created *Harmony*? Have we not given birth to a *Higher Vision* of things? Have we not done for nature what she could not do for herself – have we not brought forth a *greater unity* from her complex life and forms? Have we not *redeemed nature* just a little bit when we paint a *Starry Night*? Is not man made a little more perfect by Michelangelo's *David*? Yes, with art we bring Order, Unity, even Love into the Life of forms – and it is our creation, *our vision* which has done this! Every man, woman and child who ever sees these works of art will be *lifted* higher in his or her *consciousness* because of what the artist has set to work through the life of forms. The one who *created* this work – that is, each artist who has ever made a true work of art – has brought Order into the universe. And how can any one of us ever measure the amount of *Karmic debt* that is paid off with a *Starry Night* or a *David*? How much further along the path of Liberation *today* are the souls of Rodin and Kandinsky for their creations? Are we not liberated by the good we do for others – in *visions* as well as in deeds?

So we have the third principle of Liberation through art: by bringing Order in the place of Inharmony, art makes its creator, as well as all who view the work, *more free*. The Harmony of Forces brought into being through a work of Art derives from the *mind* and *soul* of man, from a *higher* domain than do the forces of material nature. The creations of man's higher nature are of a greater potency than those of his lesser nature. What thief ever left an influence upon the world comparable to that of Socrates or Buddha? Thus a true work of art, created by the higher (spiritual) intuitions, balances many a Karmic debt incurred through the passions and failings of the lower nature. Here, too, the law of nature holds: *the higher rules the lower*. And here we see a further implication of art: belonging to the higher or spiritual nature of man, art frees us from the lesser Karma-making life through that *transformation of consciousness* which comes from the energies of the vision. Indeed, Art is one of the major paths to human freedom, releasing the soul from the wheel of Karmic debt.

We have yet to touch the deepest mystery of art – the power of the Archetype, reflected through the form or image, to *draw us* toward that state of PERFECTION which alone is perfect freedom. Not until we understand this power of the Archetype and its function in art can we fully understand the role played by art in the spiritual evolution and liberation of mankind.

Before we proceed with our investigation of Archetypes, we must understand that *all* art is symbolic. Modern art has given up illusionistic references to things beyond the work itself and has established the artwork as a creative thing in its own right. The story is told that someone, once watching Picasso at work, remarked, "That doesn't look like any woman I ever saw." To which Picasso replied nonchalantly, "It isn't a woman. It's a painting." Nevertheless, the work is still a *symbol*. For it is the visible, tangible, material expression of hidden mental, psychic and spiritual forces – the inspirations of the artist, the activity of his mind, but also of forces which transcend the human and physical world, just as your "I AM" Self transcends your body, emotions and thoughts and is the cause of their existence. We are thus justified in saying that the *Art* within the artwork is not the form or image, but that these merely *reveal* the Art which has its reality on a higher plane than that of the material creation. If the painter's paint or the sculptor's stone were the Art in the artwork, then they would be Art before the painter or sculptor ever touched them. So whenever we seek the reality of Art, we must treat the artwork as a symbol and look beyond the symbol for the reality. Thus it is with every search for reality. The writer Mary Gray says:

When a man at last seeks reality, all that is impermanent must pass away from his consciousness, so that he holds only to the Eternal Verities of which these phantasies are but flickering shadows sent to teach him to search for the real.

At the heart of every delight lies the germ of reality which leads man to seek the perpetuation of this delight. It is but a toy given to a child to teach him to yearn for the reality it represents, as a girl is given a doll to teach her to long for children and to love their care. So life offers us the symbols of Eternal Things but breaks them in our hands lest we believe them real.²

As soon as we turn to the study of Archetypes, we find that there are several ways of investigating these intangible, transcendental Forces. We can investigate them *psychologically* through the phenomena of the mental life, as did Jung. We can study them *culturally*, through myth, symbols and art. Here Mircea Eliade, Erich Neumann and Jung well serve us. We may approach the question of Archetypes *philosophically*, as did Plato. And it is my belief that we can approach them *scientifically* through the study of the phenomena of nature – through the electro-magnetic behavior of energy and the form-building forces within the material world. Finally, we may approach the Archetypes *mystically* or spiritually, by undertaking the rigorous spiritual disciplines which awaken our intuitive powers, what is sometimes called "the third eye", and acquiring the faculty of seeing upon

² Mary Gray, *The Gateway to Liberation*, New Age Press, 1935, p. 117.

the mental and spiritual planes of the Universe. This higher awakening is usually called Illumination or Universal Consciousness, and to a mind thus awakened there comes the ability to perceive the Archetypes at work in all things. The philosopher Plotinus, the mathematician-mystic Pythagoras and the ancient Egyptian Master, Hermes Trismagistus, would be examples of such awakened, Illumined individuals.

Space does not permit a thorough analysis here of the nature of the Archetypes. A good starting point for those wishing to go further is Carl Jung's book, *The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious*. For my purposes here, I shall simply define an Archetype as the *Perfected State* of each thing upon its own plane of existence! Actually, such a condition would merely be the *manifestation* of an Archetype – the Archetype being the invisible, spiritual *Force of Perfection* acting upon all things that are in manifestation in the Universe. Plato's great contribution to the problem of spirituality was his understanding of these Archetypes as *Essences* or *Divine Ideas* acting upon things, *shaping* them like some sort of powerful, invisible *mold*. Plato held that the Archetype is *Absolute Beauty* since it is inseparable from the Creator or the Creative Forces of the Universe.

That some kind of invisible, form-giving Forces are operative within our Universe is a scientifically observable fact. Let us take the example of frost forming on a windowpane. If frost forms on a windowpane in the absence of light, say at night, the pattern formed is similar to that of prehistoric plant forms found in fossil remains. But frost forming upon a windowpane in sunlight will take on a rose-like pattern. It does not matter where upon the surface of the earth this process takes place. Geography is not a factor. One merely needs frost, a windowpane and the presence of light or darkness. The similarity between the frost patterns formed in darkness and the patterns of prehistoric plants suggests to us that perhaps these early life-forms came into being under conditions when, perhaps, the earth was still surrounded by heavy mists or gasses which prevented sunlight from reaching the earth as it does today. If this was in fact the case, then we may reason that certain invisible form-giving forces are in operation, without regard to space or time, which merely need the conditions of darkness and a receptive material for their manifestation, while other form-giving forces seem to operate only in the presence of light. Now what are these forces? They obviously do not *belong* to the material shaped by them or to the space-time world in which they manifest. It would seem that we are in the presence of some sort of higher cosmic forces. I hesitate to call these forces Archetypes, but we note that they have certain qualities in common with our notion of Archetypes – namely, they are *independent* of space, of time, and of the three-dimensional material world. It is quite a leap from our example, but the next thing I

want to say by way of defining an Archetype is that it is *Universal* and *Eternal* – that is, independent of the spatiotemporal world as we know it. Therefore, to the extent that any work of art gives expression to an Archetype, it *partakes* of the *timeless* and *universal* – the Eternal Truth of things.

Goethe said, “The Ever-Womanly draws us on high.” In other words, the Archetype of the Feminine draws us ever onward toward its own perfection. And so it is with every Archetype. Being *timeless*, it belongs to the past, present and FUTURE. And being Perfect, it is *to imperfection* always manifest as the *future state* still to be achieved. In some mysterious manner the *future* – that which is inevitably going to be and which is the fore-ordained Divine Plan of Perfection for all creation – is *revealed* in Archetypes and *activated in the present* through each thing which manifests the Archetype, however imperfectly. Thus in some mysterious way the *future* – which can be known to the Illumined, Perfected Consciousness! – is ever *drawing* the present toward itself. From the first moment that the Divine Spark or Monad of each one of us began its evolution through this Universe, its development has been under the influence of the Archetypes, and they are influencing it still. The Archetype is the Future Perfection each of us will someday attain. Thus the Archetype of the Androgynous or Whole Man – the Archetype of the Christ or God-Man, symbolized by the perfect union of the divine and human triangles in the Star of David or Seal of Solomon – these are the Archetypes of our Destiny. Were it otherwise, how could we account for the *Power* which these *images* of Wholeness and God-Like Perfection have exerted upon human consciousness through all the ages of man’s existence? Thus by means of the Archetype, each of us is being steadily molded *in the present* BY THE FUTURE. And it is when consciousness is *Awakened* to the Vision of the Archetype that True Liberation begins. There is an old saying that knowledge is power, and never is this as true as when we acquire *knowledge of an Archetype*. Once I know the Archetype of my own being – that is, once I intuit my Divine Destiny – I can call upon that Archetype to *descend into manifestation* and begin even now to shape my earthly life. I can make use of the Archetype to guide and shape my evolutionary development. I can call Eternity into time NOW! Knowing that the Archetype is my Eternal Self, I can draw from it the *Energy* to raise myself toward that Archetypal State, for the higher Form always possesses greater energy. I can look to my Archetype and say, I AM THAT! And when I look at my fellowman, I can see in him the Archetype, his Higher Self, that which he is destined to become, and all need to judge his present failings vanishes into insignificance.

You may ask, “How am I to know my Archetype?” *By means of Art!* For it is by means of *Intuition*, not logic or science, that we gain a vision of the Archetypes. And art is the training ground and liberator of our intuitive powers. When intuition functions, we see the archetypes behind all things. Mystics call this “the Vision of visions”.

Art, then, is the difficult work of *calling out the Archetypes* in that which stands within one’s field of perceptions. It is the *out-working of a deeper Vision*. In this way, art brings us to Liberation. For when we have gotten a Vision of the Archetypes, we have freed ourselves from *illusion* – from what Hindus call *maya*. When, by means of art, we have gotten vision of the perfection of anything, we have *come to its innermost essence* and in this place of the *inner reality* there is neither ignorance nor illusion to imprison us.

Every artist, then, knowingly or not, is at work upon the problem of immortality. For as he seeks the perfection of forms so that the Life of the Spirit may radiate through them, he is laboring to bring Eternity into time, Spirit into matter, and a higher Vision before our sight. To the extent that he succeeds – to the extent that he reveals to us the Archetype – he has served Eternity and earned the title of immortal artist.

I do not propose that Art be viewed as a Savior, but I am suggesting that insofar as it reveals to us the Archetype, it speaks the *Soul’s language*, and not even the blindest man or woman can fail to be moved by the Eternal Power which pulses through the Archetypes. *Whenever the Archetype appears* – in the life of man, in art, in religion or philosophy or science, the *Consciousness* of all who encounter it is *raised* and *attuned* in greater or lesser degree to the Archetype. Thus did Thomas Carlyle regard Art as the highest expression of truth, because through Art we get to know *the soul of things*. And we cannot achieve Liberation until we have acquired the ability to perceive the Soul behind all forms contained within the Universe. But once we have intuitively grasped the Archetype, every possible experience of *that type* within the Universe is ours. We have become *attuned*, AT ONE, with the *Reality* behind the phenomena of creation. In that moment we know TRUE FREEDOM!

Author’s Note, 2007: This is one of those examples of my more youthful thinking. Though I stand by its fundamental principles and recognize the need to simplify complex ideas when addressing a general audience such as the one to which I was speaking, the *realities*, and philosophical framework required to grasp them, is both profound and far-reaching. Only in the context of the Divine Science can the true depth and significance of my premise be grasped. But that would be a different essay. I’ve chosen to let this one stand on its own.