

THE HUNT FOR THE WILD UNICORN:

Containment, Sacrifice, and Evolution©

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Introduction

In 1966 my wife and I visited the Cluny Museum in Paris at the suggestion of a German graduate student—whom I have thanked many times over in my mind! The Lady and the Unicorn tapestries at the museum had a powerful impact on us.

Later I became acquainted with the tapestries at the Cloisters in New York—the Hunting Series. These reinforced my fascination with the enigma of the Unicorn. Over time, I became more entranced by the Hunting Series because it is vital and emotional, whereas the Cluny series is a more abstract reflection on the senses.

The mystery of the magical beast that never was captured my imagination. Later I connected this mystery with the animal paintings of the Paleolithic caves and the animal rituals of Native Americans, along with the animal as key to dreams and fairy tales (Hinton, 1991 & 1993). As the earliest human beings contemplated their place in the universe, and tried to comprehend their own presence in the world, they consistently focused on the Magical Animal.

This dimension of the life of the psyche has not changed with the decline of hunting cultures, for we continue to see an endless proliferation of animals in our own dreams and those of our analysands.

The tale of the Wild Unicorn expresses the strangeness of the Unknown when it impacts our familiar world, continuing the long fascination of the human race with the mystery of the Magical Animal. What is the meaning of this strange, powerful animal that emerges out of the Unknown? How can we contain it so that it feeds our souls with its aliveness, and does not destroy us?

There is a strong connection of this mystery to psychoanalytic work. The Age of Reason, the increasing pressures of collective life, and technology have led to an alienation that Jungian and other analytic approaches have sought to heal. We, and most of our patients, suffer at times from feelings of psychic deadness. We are often Hamlets

who do not know what to do or how to be.¹ In contrast, animals know how to be what they are. The Unicorn tapestries derive from a time—perhaps the last time in the Western world—when the gods and goddesses were felt to be alive, and everyday existence was imbued with meaning. With immediacy and aliveness, the Unicorn embodies a primal vitality stemming from the Unknown. It expresses something we have lost, and need to recover to heal others and ourselves.

The vicissitudes of the Hunt for the Wild Unicorn illustrate, in their way, elements basic to the analytic process—most especially containment, sacrifice and evolution. By participating in the drama of the Unicorn, the Hunt and capture, we enter into the ancient human mystery of the Magical Animal that appears out of the Unknown.²

I will speak here of “the Unknown,” meaning something like the Kantian “thing-in-itself” that can never be known. Paradoxically, it is also the ground of our aliveness. This concept is related to the Jungian Self (big S) or Uroboros, to what Bion called “O,” and what Grotstein has named “the Ineffable Subject.” Dwelling with the Unknown produces or provokes surging movements of affective life, thereby keeping experience free and open. This is a “cleansing” effect that rescues us from a deadly literalness, and enhances the capacity to use symbolic thought (Eigen, p.45ff.). Keats used the expression “Negative Capability,” by which he meant, “when a man is capable of being in uncertainties, mysteries, [and] doubts, without an irritable reaching after fact and reason” (Symington, 1997, p. 169). Freed of the strictures of the literal, truth and insight may be unveiled, and inner space can expand.

¹ It is interesting to see that the recent interpretations of Shakespeare interpret him as a transitional author between the Medieval and modern, rather than as a Renaissance figure per se. In fact, the Renaissance is being re-thought as a late manifestation of the Medieval, rather than merely the beginning of the modern era. Thus Hamlet’s tragedy is that of a man caught between eras—post-modern in a sense! In the story of Acteon and The Hounds, the identification with the Magical Animal is complete. That is, Acteon becomes one with the Hunted. This could be seen as a sort of apotheosis of the mystery of the Hunt. Acteon is the experienced initiate of the Hunt. For more on this, see *The Soul’s Logical Life* by Wolfgang Giegerich.

Encountering the Unknown also provokes a constantly moving stream of emotions that often makes us over-full. This inner flow is always evolving from containment to containment; and, in the best case, toward differentiated inner and outer life. The philosopher and psychoanalyst Jonathan Lear describes the psyche as functioning with an inherent tendency toward disruption (Lear, 2000, p.106 ff.). There is an “over-fullness” in the system that it cannot contain. As a result, life is lived under conditions of tension and, to quote Lear, “...Because we are always and everywhere living under pressure, we must live with the possibility of breakthrough in any psychological structure we have thus far achieved...There is always and everywhere the possibility of being overwhelmed.”³

On the one hand, our ongoing encounters with the Unknown may unveil small epiphanies such as the Unicorn tapestries, or may emerge in ordinary experiences such as a meal, a meeting with a friend, or an analytic session. On the other hand we flee from the terror of being overwhelmed, often becoming reactively stuck in concreteness, rigidity, and sometimes deadness. The overload of emotions may be “too much,” causing dissociation and fragmentation of the self (little s).

Encountering the Unknown deeply affects consciousness, and yet the Unknown remains wholly Other. The need to contain and transform our surplus of emotion is part of the necessity of the human condition. To evade the anxiety of Not-Knowing, we employ an endless bag of defensive postures such as paranoia, schizoid detachment, and manic denial. From infancy onward, we struggle to maintain emotional regulation, striving to contain and transform our over-fullness into something that is humanly connected and creative.⁴

³ To look at this in a more cognitive way, one could say that our worldview is constantly being tested, and is chronically limited in its ability to contain our fullness. While this situation can be terrifying, the Unknown frees the individual from a concrete way of thinking and being, and keeps the worldview open and creative.

⁴The words of Li Tai Po express these ideas more poetically: “No one can embrace...The Moon on the Yellow River.”

However, even though we may be dominated and at times overwhelmed by our over-fullness, still we also seek, we Hunt new experiences at the expense of containment. Pribram has written of the brain as a stimulus-seeking organ. Jung's description of individuation is certainly not a path of contentment and avoidance of stress! We have a hunger for aliveness, Truth, and meaning that over-rides our dread of the Unknown. The presence of the Unknown foments a disruptive over-fullness, and at the same time creates openness and opportunity.⁵

Seen in this context, the tale of the Wild Unicorn is a complex parable of our over-fullness: a story of the Unknown impacting on the Known. As a Hunt, it is a quest for something enigmatic and unpredictable. There is both fascination and danger in this enterprise. We seek contact with the Unknown because it brings aliveness and meaning. We dread it because the experiences it provokes may overwhelm us.

After the events of September 11th, comparisons of our own time with the time of the Tapestries have come to my mind. The over-fullness of much of the world psyche has come to our doorstep in terrifying fashion. We are so overwhelmed that it has been very difficult to even begin to get a handle on events so huge.

One thing that has been recurring to me is a contrast between *Moby Dick* and the Unicorn Tapestries. The nineteenth century was the height of the Age of Reason, and one could see *Moby Dick* as its shadow. To the possessed Ahab, the great whale, symbolizing the enigma of life and the Unknown, has become the enemy. The wounds inflicted by the whale feel deeply *personal* to him—narcissistic injuries. In his wounded, monomaniacal fury he wants to destroy it. The enigma of life has become a *personal* enemy rather than a part of the mysterious round of life and meaning. It must be eradicated. Such a dark, magnetic vision of destruction lurks in the contemporary psyche, a reaction to the confusing diversity of a globalizing world.

⁵ Interestingly, there is one ideogram in Chinese that represents both danger and opportunity (Knight,

From within this perspective the world must be made pure. That is the core of the genocidal and terrorist mentality. A Marxist paradise, the Third Reich, an Arcadian Cambodia, or the purity of Heaven after a martyr's death are similar visions of taintlessness. The adherents of these views identify with the pure and split off and project the impure. The idea is to eliminate the impure. Life being at root impure, the end result is the overt or covert nihilism that manifested in the genocide and terrorism of our times.

I invite you to contrast this modern attitude toward the white whale with the cultural attitude toward the Unicorn around 1500. As you will see, there is violence and destruction in the Unicorn Hunt, but it is contained. The Unknown is a moving thread in the midst of life. Being and becoming are, at root, one. By contrast, in these modern and post-modern times we have lost our containers, lost the possibility of enlivening ritual contact with the Unknown. Instead it feels out of control, a haunting demon.

Analysis is one small container for ritual contact with the Unknown, but we lack meaningful containment on the community level. We can only live with what we have and hope that new structures of meaning come into being over time. If we consciously bear our almost unbearable tensions, a new vision may emerge, like an unexpected dream. Otherwise, globalization and the modern Western state remain the white whales, assaulted by endless Ahabs filled with narcissistic rage. Seen psychologically, much of the world is in a massive crisis of over-fullness. The contemporary question is whether the mind/brain/soul/psyche can evolve to creatively encompass it. In the meantime, we can only sadly envy the rich symbolic containers of other times in history, such as the era of the Unicorn Tapestries.

The Unicorn was a creature of dread and Mystery. Only a virgin could finally entrap and contain it. Its pursuit and capture illustrates multiple dimensions of containment and breaking of containment. It is like the analytic process, during which the

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potent new life that we encounter forces us to break free of the concrete and expand our world.

Five hundred years old, the Unicorn tapestries were woven in Belgium, and were created for a wedding. The identity of the couple is not known, although their initials are visible in most of the scenes. The Late Middle Ages was a time of cultural transition when Christianity was losing its authority and pagan beliefs forcefully reasserted themselves. Alchemical ideas also emerged during this time.⁶ Gods and goddesses were portrayed in the world in everyday clothes, and there was an air of excited and almost dreamlike extravagance in the significant human activities. This was the time of the artists Hieronymus Bosch (1450-1516), and Pieter Bruegel the Elder.

To quote the historian, Huizinga (p. 1):

“When the world was half a thousand years younger all events had much sharper outlines than now. The distance between sadness and joy, between good and bad fortune, seemed to be much greater than for us; every experience had that degree of directness and absoluteness that joy and sadness still have in the mind of a child.”

The Unicorn tapestries were created in a feverish atmosphere when the old order was breaking down and the new was not yet. Typical of the strange extravagance of the times, the cost of such tapestries was great.

Later, the tapestries barely survived the French Revolution, having been taken and used for decades by peasants to cover haystacks and such things, before they were recovered by the Rochefoucauld family.

John D. Rockefeller, Jr. obtained the tapestries in 1923. This event twice appeared as front-page, headline news in the *New York Times*! They quickly became one of his

⁶ Alchemy has an air of abstraction and detachment that connects it to the modern scientific tradition. In contrast, the Unicorn tapestries fully display the emotional reality of the process of spiritual and psychological evolution.

most beloved possessions, and he built a special room for them that became a cherished place of retreat. In 1937, he donated the tapestries to the Medieval collection of the Metropolitan Museum that was being established at the Cloisters, a beautiful amalgamation of French convent buildings in a forested setting overlooking the Hudson River.

The Unicorn myth originated in China or India, emerging in the Western world around 300 BC. In Chinese legends, a Unicorn announced the birth and death of Confucius.⁷ In India, it sometimes assumed the form of a pursuing destiny. In our own times the unicorn is often depicted in a sentimental, Walt Disney kind of way. However, to the medieval mind, as in the Asian context, it was a daemonic creature with uncanny powers. And it had a raucous bray!

Typical of late Medieval times, the Unicorn tapestries utilize multiple mythologies. Christian and pagan endlessly intermingle. Every flower and every animal had a symbolic meaning. These were employed in rich narratives that could easily be read by ordinary people. I will only have time to touch upon a few of these meanings.

Created in an age when the Unknown world was closer to the everyday, the rich emotional symbols and contexts of the tapestries give them a power and beauty unique in their directness.

The drama of the Unicorn Hunt illustrates the many ways we contain, sacrifice and evolve during encounters with the emotional life provoked by the Unknown. This speaks to the core of the analytic task. The drama of the Unicorn Hunt evokes clinically

⁷ Jung wrote on the Unicorn in *Psychology and Alchemy* (Jung, 1968). He was mainly interested in the alchemical allusions of the Unicorn. He considered the Unicorn as a manifestation of the Spirit Mercurius, and saw the pairings (in other depictions than the Hunting Series) of Lion and Unicorn and Lady and Unicorn as illustrations of the dual nature of Mercurius. In my opinion, this does not take into account the unique dimensions of the Hunting Series as an evolving sequence. In addition, unlike Mercurius, the Unicorn in this series does not change into other forms or manifest overt duality. It may be that Jung was not familiar with the entire Hunting Series, since he refers only the well-known tapestry of the Unicorn in Captivity. Be that as it may, those who find the alchemical model to their liking can find much in the Unicorn lore to feed their interests.

relevant questions such as: What are the varieties and levels of containment that we see? Which lead toward evolution of consciousness and which tend to abort the enterprise?

To reflect on such questions together I will show you slides of the seven tapestries in sequence, commenting briefly on the central symbols of the evolutionary process that is depicted. I will weave in commentary connecting these depictions with relevant dimensions of the analytic experience. There is a great deal of material, but I hope that the beauty of the tapestries themselves will provide a fine container for any over-fullness!

The Start of the Hunt

I think of this scene as Breaking out of Containment. A period of stasis is about to change. This fits with the season of *early Spring*. The animated conversation of the three nobles in dapper dress contrasts with the darkness of the background forest. A *cherry tree* stands in the middle of the scene, ripe with fruit. This signals the possibility that something new may emerge.⁸

The dark wood is the threshold of the journey in many fairy tales and in the analytic process. The forest itself is outside cultivated areas, outside the usual boundaries of the self, and dimensions of the Unknown dwell there.

The *Divine Comedy* commences with the words (Luke, p. 4):

Nel mezzo del cammin di nostra vita
mi ritrovai per una selva oscura
che la diritta via era smarrita.

Or, in English:

Midway through this way of life we're bound upon,
I woke to find myself in a dark wood,
Where the right road was wholly lost and gone.

For the individual, a joyless mood may dominate the soul, with no way out visible. Perhaps a tormenting sense of psychic deadness pervades the psyche. Waiting for

⁸ The cherry is the earliest tree to bloom and was lauded for its “courage” in both Eastern and Western lore. For this reason, it is a frequent subject in Korean, Chinese and Japanese painting.

a better season seems to be the only choice. Here, the cherry tree suggests new possibilities, and the scout signals that he sees something worthy of note.

The smallest new openings may signal the presence of the Unknown. These are exciting occasions because of their potential. Such nuclei of meaning can eventually gather more bits of significance around them, eventually unveiling some new aspect of Truth and Being. Spots of aliveness bring hope and excitement, but also dread. That is because to explore them requires a journey into the dark wood of emotions and psychic presences conjured by the Unknown.

The scout calls out the new possibility. The handlers prepare the hounds and the Hunt is about to begin!

In Medieval times, there was a belief that Christ remained in the Underworld throughout Winter and arose in the Spring. This was intermingled with the myth of the Oak King of Spring who superseded the Holly King of Winter. From both viewpoints, the “Silent Power of the Possible” is more manifest in early Spring.⁹ Christ is in the Underworld, the world of the Unknown, and when He re-emerges in the Spring like the Oak King, He can re-vivify the world.

Eros’ pursuit of the Lover was also a prevalent motif in the late Middle Ages. The well-dressed Hunters probably represent Eros, or Love, and the quarry is the Unicorn: the Lover they seek. One is drawn into the Unknown by desire for Love and connection.

The hounds were known by names such as Beauty, Kindness, Intelligence, Courage, Largesse, Gentleness and Sincerity (Freeman, p. 107). Sometimes they were connected with the Archangel Gabriel. They represented the virtues of differentiated feeling that serve relationship and consciousness. Shame is a crucial element in shaping the emotional self, and most of these virtues are shame-based (Hinton, 1998). Such

⁹ This is a term from Martin Heidegger.

probity is essential in containing the raw emotions provoked by contact with the Unknown. Without a steady sense of integrity, catastrophe is all too possible.

There are times during analysis when interpretations seem endlessly fruitless, and both parties may wonder about the point of it all. Then an awkwardness of mind, a strange bit of emotional turbulence appears, and finally something that stands out in a new way (Rhode, p. 43). It may be something quite disturbing, like seeing some new aspect of the shadow. From that point, the process may take on a renewed sense of life and possibility.

It is difficult to know why such openings surface at one time rather than another. Until they do, we can only proceed with faith and bear the tension of Not Knowing. This requires the quiet, persistent Eros of the Hunter. It is often tempting to stir things up artificially or to take the “unproductive” darkness as a sign of failure. But one must keep the hounds leashed until the quarry is sighted, else the analytic enterprise founders.

The Unicorn Dips its Horn in the Fountain to Rid it of Poison

I call this one The Time of Choice. The Hunt has not fully begun. This is the darkness of *Winter*, the night of the world. The legend was that the serpents of evil intruded to poison the wellsprings of life for the other animals. The Unicorn bends its horn into the water to rid it of those poisons. There was a generalized belief in the Middle Ages that the Unicorn had this power, and drinking vessels made from “Unicorn Horns”—in actuality, usually horns of the norwal—were prized for their protection from poisoning.

Psychologically, the Unicorn’s action can be seen as a decision to emerge from defensive postures and take responsibility for the toxic poisons of one’s own psyche. In this tapestry, we see a choice that can be a powerful, moral moment in life as in the analytic process.

The Unicorn is contrasted to the *Fountain*, which is actually the *Fountain of Narcissus* (Williamson, p. 102). Two pheasants sit on the edge of the fountain. One gazes at its own image. In Medieval times, it was believed that placing a mirror in a cage could trap the pheasant. The story was that when it saw itself in the mirror, it thought it was a rival, struck at the mirror, and was thus caught! It succumbed through its jealousy and envy (Freeman, p. 82).

This is an apt depiction of defensive, narcissistic containment. The possibility of real relationship or change—any contact with the Unknown—is seen as a threat. Life is sought on the cheap—stolen, manipulated, seduced. Symbolic thought, when it exists, is misused in a concrete way, rather than used to expand mental life. Stagnation results, for there is no living connection with the stream of renewing emotion.

Narcissus holds desperately to his image in the Fountain, sensing that everything changes when the Unknown encounters the Known. Teiresias had warned Narcissus that he would remain eternally youthful only if he did not know himself. Therefore, he holds tight to the present.

The analytic process can get stuck in such a deadening container. In a mutual defense against the Unknown with its strangeness, suffering and terror, the “analytic couple” sometimes falls into a comfortable sharing of the same perceptual and conceptual universe.¹⁰ A subtle attitude of “already knowing” may develop, avoiding questions outside the envelope of the Known (Lear, 1998, pp. 43ff.).¹¹ This results in stasis, or worse.

The pomegranate at the top of the fountain symbolizes the potential. The Water of Life is flowing from the Unknown into the Known, but what we do with this possibility is a matter of choice.

¹⁰ Theodore Dorpat has discussed this phenomenon extensively in his book, *Gaslighting, The Double Whammy, Interrogation, and Other Methods of Covert Control in Psychotherapy and Analysis*.

¹¹ Lear also analyzes the Oedipus myth in this light. Oedipus is the man who “already knows,” who will not stop to reflect. His impatience and impulsiveness are at the root of his tragic character. The modern person is viewed as similar to Oedipus in his/her impatience and lack of reflectivity. Oedipus is in this sense quite contemporary.

Some authorities equate the twelve men here with the Disciples of Christ (Williamson, p. 118). They convey a sense of awe and respect. The animals present are mostly connected with the fight against serpents and evil. The panther in the foreground is interesting in that, in medieval legend, it represented the scent of the divine. The sweetness of the panther's breath was equated with resurrection and immortality.

In Egyptian religion, the scent of the body of the Pharaoh was likewise connected with his eternal nature. This seems to equate with a deep intuitive awareness of the Unknown in its paradoxical fruitfulness. We smell it, we know it, but it may not be apparent to everyday, pragmatic thinking. This is also a function of the helpful hounds of the psyche, who scent the invisible in a way that is not accessible to the ego.

We may follow the scent of the Unknown or we may not. For the most part, these are not conscious, cognitive decisions but are made with one's very being. Probably the process of choice begins very early in life. As analysts we can only help bring the individual to the place of choosing, for we cannot choose for another.

Often the choice is not overtly dramatic, and frequently seems acasual. The analysand may come in and announce a new awareness or behavior. Symington describes a case when a severe alcoholic, sitting on a bench outside a hospital ward from which he had been banished, suddenly decided to quit drinking (Symington, 1996, p.90-91). The decision simply surfaced in him. Symington speculates that, if a helpful therapist had come up at the moment of decision with a fine set of insights, it would have aborted the enterprise. The lineaments of truth would have disappeared back into the depths, perhaps never to return.

The Unicorn Crossing the Stream

Now there is commitment. The preliminaries are over. It is time for the full engagement of the Unknown with the Known, and all the fateful process of containment and sacrifice that entails. I call this tapestry Danger and Possibility.

The predominant, leafy, *Oak tree* in the foreground shows that the season is *May*, the time of the Oak King. A *hawthorn* silhouettes the body of the Unicorn as it crosses the stream.

This was a crucial time for farming people. If there was an early drought or late frost, they could starve the following Winter. As a consequence, there were important Maytime rituals to protect the still-vulnerable crops.

Here the Unicorn is fully immersed in the Water of Life, the Stream of Life. One could see this as an act of acceptance of the Unknown future—an act of faith. The descent into the water by the god, whether in antiquity or in the Christian baptism, was an auspicious event that brought good things to the community (Williamson, p. 124).

May Day was celebrated especially by the gathering of hawthorn, a tree connected with goddess Maia, who had both benevolent and malevolent connections that are appropriate for a precarious seasonal change. Sharing of food expressed great joy in the abundant aspect of Nature, and a sense of *Unus Mundus*—the wholeness of human community. These occasions included fertility rituals, symbolized by the May Pole, that sometimes scandalized the conservatives of the time (Williamson, p. 128). In the tapestry, we see the Oak tree in the foreground, emphasizing the May Pole connection.

This scene can be seen as depicting the crossing from one state to another. Crossings create a liminal space where we meet the Unknown. There is a small bridge on the lower right, emphasizing this symbolism. The Iris next to the bridge represents the rainbow, which connects worlds. The crossing and the bridge underline a process linking the Unknown—the Unicorn—with the everyday world. The hunting party and their dogs

seem to be carefully containing it, herding it onward in its crossing. It cannot be killed by ordinary means, but can be contained and directed.

This is a picture of full engagement, fraught with feelings of both fertility and danger. It is like a time in analysis when stasis has been fully broken and there is excitement and possibility but no clear-cut sense of direction. There is danger of acting-out and dissipation of the energy of evolution. The analysand may be a bit manic, and both analyst and analysand are tempted to be overly optimistic about the course of things. The excitement of the crossing is a time of ambivalence. There is danger that the entire enterprise could go awry if the sense of manic excitement is not adequately contained. Astute herding is crucial, although heavy-handed interpretations may abort the process.

The Unicorn Defends Itself

An *orange tree* centers this tapestry, along with the battling Unicorn. To the Medieval mind, the orange was connected with the sun and with fruitfulness. It is the time of the *Summer Solstice*. The *Holly Tree* now predominates over the Oak, signifying a new phase of the cycle. This scene is full of action. The Unicorn has no ears in this or the following tapestry. The time for fine words, for reason and debate, has ended. Therefore, I entitle this Total Commitment and Terror. The Unknown has begun to impact the Known, and vice versa. There is a sense of inevitability, mutual wounding, and sacrifice.

The figure blowing his horn at the lower left is believed to be the Archangel Gabriel. On his scabbard is the inscription, *Ave Regina C[aelorum]*, which translates as “Hail Queen of Heaven”(Ibid. p. 158). It was a common belief in medieval times that Christ was reluctant to undergo incarnation and His inevitable Passion. God sent Gabriel to enforce His will that those profound events take place. The Archangel often had his own hounds. The “Divine Hunter” was often seen to be a messenger of God. An old German folk song describes how the “hunter who hunts the beautiful unicorn” came

“from the throne on high” (Freeman, p. 23). When the Will of God comes to bear, there is no further choice. We must fully commit to the encounter with the Unknown in its terrifying depths. This is the voice of Ananke, or Necessity.

Such times occur in analysis, manifested by a sense of inevitability regarding some especially difficult task. Often it is summarized in a dream, where there is something to be done or something to be faced that seems almost impossible to bear. Sometimes the task is an external one, such as a call to vocation or a demand for a new level of Truth in relationship. These are often special times in analysis: nodal points that are never forgotten.

To speak more of the tapestry: at the upper left, there is a felled beech tree and a young man with an ax. The young man seems to be giving an unhappy-looking older man some instructions. The beech was symbolically equated with the oak. The theme of death, of sacrifice, is clear. The time of the old Oak King is waning. The Oak King has conducted the course of the drama to this point, but his capacity to contain is now exhausted. The drama must move forward to another level of containment, symbolized by the younger man, the Unknown future. The orange tree exemplifies the fulfilled fruitfulness of the old Oak King who is passing from the stage.¹²

Both analyst and analysand may sense that the time has come for a painful but deeply necessary sacrifice. Old defensive containers, often at the narcissistic core, are about to be given up. This new level of commitment to the process risks exposure to a terrifying, out-of-control, over-fullness. A profound vulnerability, fueling ambivalence and volatility in the analytic relationship, is frequently present. Fluctuations between dependent longings and angry accusations are common. The analyst feels the intensity of the blame and the discomfort, and perhaps some guilt at the pain created by the analytic

¹² The heron on the lower right is both an icon of silence and a symbol of the end of a preliminary cycle. The Unknown is close. The heron is connected with Hermes and Thoth, conductors of souls to the other world after death. This underlines the theme of the death of the Oak King, and is a foretelling of the coming passion of the Christ/Unicorn.

process itself. The analysand desperately wants containment of the flood of emotions, and may inject these into the analyst—to his or her distress.

This is exemplified by the wounding of a hound by the Unicorn. The blood of the dog flows onto a clump of blue violets—a flower that had close associations to the goddess of love, Aphrodite (Williamson, p. 147). Love always has an aspect of wounding, and this certainly includes the analytic relationship. As mentioned earlier, the dogs represent shame-based virtues. When such developed patterns of the self encounter the primal intensity of the Unknown, there is wounding. This is a sacrifice in the service of containment and transformation.

When defensive and destructive presences pierce us, we can respond with the endless rage of a Captain Ahab or we can accept the voice of Necessity. Mutual wounding is often part of the process. Projective identification is its usual guise. One must struggle to remain aware that these are wounds in service of the Magical Hunt, and are intrinsic parts of psychological evolution.

The Unicorn is Tamed by the Lady

This tapestry continues the theme of wounding. I call it Love and Betrayal. The time is *Early Fall*. Here, the Unicorn is lured into the container of human relationship by Love.

The Unicorn is for the first time overtly in an enclosure: the *hortus conclusus*, or enclosed garden. In the center is an *apple tree* with abundant fruit.¹³

The enchanted animal is apparently staring into the face of a Lady, whose arm and hand are all that remains (note the fabric for reference to a later scene). However the surviving fragments are extensive enough to convey profound layers of meaning. The Unicorn's eyes seem almost daemonically possessed and it still has no ears. It is so entranced that it does not appear to feel the wounds being inflicted by the hounds.

There is a maiden visible who has a sly and deceptive expression. She seems to be betraying the Unicorn by signaling to a Hunter, who blows a horn outside the enclosure.

A Holly tree stands inside the enclosure as well, and just outside is an Oak. Roses cover the fence.

The enclosure is an old emblem for Mary's virginity. It was a predominant belief that only a virgin could capture a Unicorn. Hildegard von Bingen suggested that several maidens were better than one to effect a capture! (Freeman, p. 23) Some depictions of these dramas were overtly erotic. And if the maiden was found not to be virginal she often suffered a bloody death.

This is a profound drama of attraction, innocence, and betrayal.

In my opinion, the emphasis on virginity is related to the basic stance that the analyst must try to maintain—an openness that is, in Bion's terms, without memory or desire (Symington, 1997, p.166ff.). Jung frequently said to put away all books and theories when entering the consulting room. An over-emphasis on the past as the "cause" of the present, or on future goals, including teleology, may impede the analytic task. In this view, the crucial element is genuine openness to the Unknown. If there is an excess of reductionism or too much attachment to concrete goals, the process is aborted. That is, the Unicorn destroys the maiden because she is not virginal. Psychologically speaking, that means the horizon of the Unknown has been lost because of the failure of the analytic container. Evolution cannot ensue and there will have to be a return to the beginning.

The state of calm relaxation or reverie is highlighted in much of the analytic literature (Hinshelwood, p. 420; Ogden, 1997,p.107ff; Symington, 1997, pp.168-9). An analyst's capacity for reverie is crucial for the evolution of the emotional core of the

¹³ In the original weaving the apples were interwoven with silver-gilt thread which has now tarnished; this would have created a shimmering effect.

analysand. This can provide a transforming island of calm spaciousness.¹⁴ It is what the infant requires from its mother, in order to transform its terrifying over-fullness into tolerable bits of emotion and symbol.¹⁵

It is important to note that the Unicorn is powerfully attracted to the Lady. Seemingly, this animal stemming from the Unknown desires and seeks evolution into a more coherent, humanized form.

This picture is complicated by the treacherous betrayal that we see. This is the other side of the picture. The innocent, guileless Unicorn is delivered to the Hunters by a maiden who is apparently an alter ego of the embracing Lady.

This hints of a universal drama that we all experience. In discussing the myth of Isis and Osiris, Neumann spoke of the ambivalence of the Mother who both nurtures and betrays (Neumann, p. 79). Those who bring us into the world cannot protect us from the pain and suffering of life, and it stifles us if they try too much. The analytic process—and therefore the analyst—cause pain by uncovering the past and bringing Truth closer (Grotstein, p. 236). Guilt over the necessity of causing pain seems intrinsic to life and evolution.

The betraying maiden is as crucial to evolution as the accepting one. There must be a sacrifice of the containing oneness, or the containing reverie of the mother/analyst would become a trap, and a kind of chronic psychological death. We would return to an envelope of self-absorption like the well of Narcissus.

In order to evolve, we must first use and then, in our imaginations, destroy that upon which we were originally dependent for protection (Ibid. p. 241). That is, to become

¹⁴ In the last half of the first year of life, shame normally begins to shape and refine these containing patterns. As development progresses, these become our basic values, the faithful hounds within us (Schore, pp.32-3 and pp. 461-2).

¹⁵ The infant's embryonic self encounters the Unknown, resulting in a terrifying over-fullness. To survive and evolve, the infant needs to insert this incoherent, intolerable set of emotions into the mother's mind. The mother's mind must be in a state of calm receptiveness to take in these emotions and give them meaning. Such attuned reverie can transform the over-fullness into contents that can be tolerated, and

free beings, we must break out of the fantasy of dependency and develop a sense of personal courage and destiny.

The Unicorn is Killed and Brought to the Castle

Here we see the violence of a Medieval Hunt. I call this The Somber Transformation. The emotional pathos of the scene is especially moving, and to our modern eyes may seem brutal. The subdued Unicorn is in its death throes. Most of the observers have a very serious demeanor, as they witness and accept this tragic side of life.

This is very different from the air of celebration that accompanied an ordinary hunt.

A well-dressed lord and lady are there, ready to receive the body. In this scene, *Oak trees* predominate in all directions both near and far. The death scene and the noble entourage are separated by a watercourse that is, due to fading, only barely visible. At the lower left a hazel tree conceals a squirrel.

Both an Oak and a Holly tree silhouette the dying Unicorn. In fact, the only Holly is behind the animal, signifying another shift in the sequence of seasons. The iconography seems to signify the *mid-Winter Solstice*, when the Holly King is sacrificed and the Oak re-emerges.

The eternally green Holly tree was the repository of fertility when the earth was encompassed in winter. The Unicorn is here equated with the dying Holly King, but also, paradoxically, with the Oak King who will be reborn at the Solstice. This seasonal change was often connected with the Crucifixion and the end of the wintry time of Christ

eventually used as elemental thoughts and symbols. The analytic attitude at its best is a cultivated, virginal receptivity, a reverie without attachment to past history or future goals.

in the underworld (Williamson, p. 175ff.). The Oak signified the potential new life, the reborn sun, and the Resurrection.

The Unicorn is brought to the Lord and Lady. Since the over-riding dedication of the tapestries is to marriage, one could see this as a final evolution of the energy from the Unknown into human relationship. The material of the Lady's dress seems to identify her as the same Lady that tamed the Unicorn and brought about its capture.

A Hunter catches the blood of the dying Unicorn in his horn, like a chalice. This is another Christ metaphor, and underlines the importance of the death of the animal for the entire community. Psychologically speaking, this container signifies that the transformation of the toxic affects stemming from the Unknown is complete. The Unicorn's sacrificial death makes participation in a transformative Communion possible. The emotional over-fullness fomented by the Wild Unicorn can now foster the renewed abundance of everyday life.

A squirrel on the lower left runs up and down the embryonic World Tree, showing there is now a living connection between worlds. The wreath of Oak around the dead Unicorn's neck shows an underlying identity with the Green Man and fertility. Swans in the distant pond symbolize commitment, since they mate for life.

Marriage, communion, the swans, the World Tree, and the Green Man underline the themes of commitment and fertility evolving from the Unicorn's sacrifice. These are the boons that may come when the Known accepts the suffering and turbulent emotions provoked by the Unknown. Broadly speaking, this is the cycle of death and rebirth that must be maintained to ensure the fertility of the land and its people. Certainly this seems true of the individual as well. The alternative is the Waste Land.

A sacrificial death has occurred. We mourn the loss of our original vision of beauty and perfection—the Unicorn in its untamed magnificence. This mourning releases us, opening us to a more vigorous embracing of the everyday. Loss is thus a paradoxical

gain, since it transforms our relationship to self and world, and can eventually foster an enduring bridge to the transcendent dimension.

Parenthetically, it should be noted that the couple in the castle tower seems to be in a sort of jail. Perhaps this is the harbinger of a new cycle, when the container again becomes a prison that must give way!

The Unicorn in Captivity

This to me is a misnomer, since the situation of the Unicorn seems entirely voluntary. I wonder whether this title reflects our modern, individualistic view of “total freedom.” We think so much of freedom from rather than freedom to. I think of Jung’s statement that freedom consists of doing gladly that which one must do!

It is a *perpetual Springtime*. The Unicorn drips not with blood, but from the juice of the ripe *pomegranates* from the tree above.¹⁶ The Unicorn’s decorative collar and chain, resembling those of the loyal hounds, is no impediment for such an all-powerful beast. It must have assumed them voluntarily. It could also leap the small fence in one bound. This enclosure is a place of equipoise between the wildness of the Unicorn and its perfect containment. I call this the Position of Faith.

The botanical images are connected with copulation and fertility. The *hortus conclusus* is here a heavenly enclosure, a fecund paradise where male and female unite. Evil may not enter, and many of the plants have the property of repelling and destroying serpents (Ibid. p.199ff).

To quote Williamson, “[This is] the apotheosis of the Hunt, in which the resurrected Unicorn symbolizes the rebirth of Christian and pre-Christian vegetation gods. This tapestry is an epigram or coda to the yearly cycle, mirroring the death and ultimate resurrection of the fecund seasons, and the sexual powers of plants and

¹⁶ Jung refers to this tapestry as “Mandala of the Unicorn and the tree of life,” in his discussion of how the Unicorn includes both masculine and feminine components: both horn and cup (Jung, 1968).

animals—a reflection of heavenly perfection, where there is perpetual springtime, abundance, and an absence of malign forces.”

Clinically, this would seem to coincide with the transcendent position. To quote Grotstein, “Transcendent means having the ability to transcend our defensiveness, our pettiness, our guilt, our shame, our narcissism, our need for certainty, our strictures in order to become ‘one with O,’ which I interpret as becoming one with our *aliveness*, or with our very *being-ness*” (Grotstein, p. 300). This is the position of faith vis-à-vis the Unknown.

Called by many names, this is the foundation of our other endeavors, enabling us to go on in the midst of pain and terror, loss, and sacrifice. We are granted small glimpses of the Unknown in all its promise and fecundity. This gives us faith. Without such moments of vision, life would not be worth living and the analytic enterprise would not be possible.

The ultimate container may perhaps be this potent vision itself, this ongoing glow of animal life at the core of our being. It is both Unknown Presence and container. This Unknown Presence makes possible the small and great epiphanies of life and underlies faith, the ultimate container. Such faith, won through sacrifice and suffering, fosters a continuing connection to emotional aliveness—the truest “*joie de vivre*.”

Conclusion

The story of the Unicorn stems from the intense imagination of a culture on the brink of the Unknown future—what was to become, ironically, “The Age of Reason.”¹⁷ The Catholic Church was losing its hold, the fascination with old “pagan” symbols surged to the fore, and yet Christian symbolism was still quite alive. The time was intense and over-full.

¹⁷ This is like a Kuhnian paradigm shift. See his *Culture of Scientific Revolutions*.

As a consequence, the need for containment was pronounced. The Unicorn tapestries depict a noble attempt at containment, sacrifice and transformation. What useful perspectives have we gained from this astounding work of art, and how do they relate to the analytic process?

The steady patience of the hunters stands out prominently. Jung was fond of saying that the main ingredient of change was “patientum”: the capacity to let things emerge from the Unknown and not act precipitously.¹⁸ At the same time, the hunters were experts at their art and the habits of the game they pursued. They have faith in the enterprise and they are totally committed. Patience, knowledge of the lore of the Hunt, faith and commitment stand out as crucial traits of the Hunter—and not bad ones for an analyst!

The hounds, the basic virtues, are of crucial importance. Integrity of presence is deeper than cognition. The civilized and civilizing affects of the core emotional self must be congruent with the task at hand. Without an embodied psycho-affective presence, there will be no deep analytic work and no fruitful evolution. The hounds work by scenting the Unknown in ways the ego cannot. Only such evolved affects can contain the turbulence of the human psyche in its encounters with the Unknown.¹⁹

The willingness to be wounded, like the hound gored by the Unicorn, is part of the enterprise. The process must touch analyst as well as analysand. The relationship itself becomes over-full. Out of this a third thing may be created, something more than the mere addition of two separate psyches (Ogden, 1994, p.61ff.). This is also a container that endures.

¹⁸ This is Kairos, the right time or the Moment of Opportunity (Knight, 2001).

¹⁹ Antonio Damasio, a philosophical neuroscientist, has written of the layers of the emotional self in very experiential and yet empirically grounded terms. In my opinion, we chronically undervalue the complexity of the layers of the “affective self” (my term) and the crucial importance of affects and feelings in consciousness itself (Damasio, 1999).

Nature is a profound container implicit in the tapestries, and the circularity of the seasons underlies the entire drama.²⁰ The various plants and animals are there to amplify and supplement the narrative meanings. One envies the wonderful familiarity that people of Late Medieval times had with nature. Everything was alive, and could be read like a book.

There is a social container. The tapestries were made for a marriage and there are people and castles all around. An order and stability in the social realm contains and enables the task. Indeed, the death of the Unicorn seems to mainly serve the social group centered on the castle and its lord and lady. The aura of Marriage and relationship pervades the enterprise.²¹ The final, death scene seems to involve the whole community as well as the noble couple. There are hints as well that another cycle of change will ensue, and that this container will eventually be superseded by another encounter with the Unknown.

The Virgin and her entrapment of the Unicorn is a fulcrum of the series. Due to our inherent “over-fullness,” we long from birth for such transforming reverie to contain us. The attuned maternal container takes in our painful surfeit of emotion. These raw elements must be returned in a transformed state as tolerable affects, and the basic elements of thoughts and symbols. The affective core of self is also shaped and patterned. This is an essential part of the analytic task.

This profound reverie culminates in the Unicorn’s betrayal and death. There is guilt in this, and yet it is only through such a sacrifice that the emotions from the Unknown can enter into everyday life. For evolution to occur, maternal reverie must finally become an inner container or organ of perception— what Jung called the anima. At some point, the outer container must be sacrificed. Grief and mourning are appropriate

²⁰ An entire additional study could be made of the importance of circularity in this drama, such as the role of the goddess of the changing year, Nemesis, and the Triple Goddess figure. This is evident in the Lady, and the three women in the sixth tapestry. Among other things, they symbolize Birth, Love, and Death (Williamson, pp. 170-1, 174, 175, 188).

parts of that experience because there is a true loss of a kind of beauty and innocence. In this process, psychic structures become internalized and inner space evolves. Useful symbolic thought can take place. The ultimate, internal container that can result is a self with true dimensionality (Horne, 2000).

The Unicorn in the enclosure summarizes fulfilled containment, and is the ground of faith. It is that which is and always was, that for which we yearn, that which makes the whole undertaking worth the cost in pain and suffering. Submission to the turbulent stream of life is the prime attitude of transformation. This experience of the Unknown is mainly emotional and embodied. “Amor Fati,” as Jung was fond of saying: embrace your fate!

There remains the containing and entrancing figure of the Unicorn itself, the animal that never was and yet endlessly fascinates. In analysis and in life we know it intuitively, feel it emotionally, but cannot possess it. It is a manifestation of the Unknown that, at special moments, graces us with its presence. And yet those moments make the endless effort of our Hunt worthwhile.

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²¹ The concrete ritual of marriage and preparations for marriage are a vast theme that would require an entire work of its own. The pursuit of the Lover, the submission, the hymeneal blood are but a few of the important motifs here. Among other related works, see *Le Roman de la Rose*.

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