The Unmourned Wound: Reflections on the Psychology of Adolf Hitler

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ABSTRACT: Fifty years after his death by suicide, Adolf Hitler continues to arouse profound feelings of revulsion and attraction. This paper is an exploration of Hitler’s psyche from the perspective of a depth psychology. After examining analyses of Hitler’s personality by Richard Rubenstein and Alice Miller, the argument is made that we need C.G. Jung’s concept of psychic inflation to understand more fully Hitler’s impact upon the world. Hitler is seen as inflated by the compensating energies of the Self in response to his deeply wounded ego, a wound he could not mourn. Consequently, he became identified with the dark and destructive energies of the Self which inflated and then usurped his ego. Hitler’s demonic and destructive career resulted from that inflation, which he was not able to neutralize. The paper concludes with reflections on the role of mourning in protecting us from the experience of psychic inflation, especially by the Self in its dark and destructive aspects.

Friedrich Nietzsche gave us one of the great prophetic texts of the nineteenth century in the parable of the madman that appears in his The Gay Science:

Have you not heard of that madman who lit a lantern in the bright morning hours, ran to the marketplace and cried incessantly: “I seek God! I seek God!” As many of those who did not believe in God were standing around just then, he provoked laughter. “Has he got lost?” asked one. “Did he lose his way like a child?”, asked another. “Or is he hiding? Is he afraid of us? Has he gone on a voyage? Emigrated?” Thus they yelled and laughed.

The madman jumped into their midst and pierced them with his eyes. “Whither is God?”, he cried; “I will tell you. We have killed him—you and I. All of us are his murderers. But how did we do this? How could we drink up the sea? Who gave us the sponge to wipe away the entire horizon? What were we doing when we unchained this earth from its sun? Whither is it moving now? Whither are we moving? Away from all suns? Backward, sideward, forward, in all directions? Is there still any up or down? Are we not straying as through an infinite nothing?"
Do we not feel the breath of empty space? Has it not become colder? Is not night continually closing in on us?\textsuperscript{1}

In this haunting tale, Nietzsche seems to be struggling to articulate something he felt was taking place within the psyche of Western people at a deep unconscious level, still very far away from collective awareness. The reach into the depth of this parable might well make one seem mad to one’s contemporaries.

For Nietzsche, the death of God meant the loss to Western civilization of a transcendent ground for value and meaning. This loss of a sense of transcendence, carried especially within the Jewish and Christian images of God, had already overtaken Western civilization, however unaware most may have been of the event. What comes in its wake is what Nietzsche called the time of nihilism,\textsuperscript{2} which Western culture was going to have to pass through on its way to the complete “transvaluation of values” he believed we must move toward.

Nihilism, for Nietzsche, is a complex experience.\textsuperscript{3} One senses that “nothing” grounds and validates our historical existence; that human values are, ultimately, constructed from a people’s root instinctual apprehensions of life. Good and evil ultimately refer to a people’s sense of what promotes or thwarts its common life. Values, then, serve the will-to-power. Nietzsche was passionate about exposing the underlying will-to-power he believed lurked behind the mask of morality in order to promote life. Still, in spite of his profound sense that we must will the death of God for the sake of our own liberation and embrace the fundamental nothingness at the core of our being, Nietzsche knew that the dawning time of nihilism was a dangerous and potentially destructive time in history. In the words of his parable it means that we have unchained ourselves from the sun, from that form of rational consciousness that sees moral order in the universe, that confers eternal ontological validity upon our values and constitutes the ultimate purpose of our existence. This loss of the sense of transcendence, though in a sense advocated by Nietzsche, was a profound loss for him and, I believe, a loss he was unable to mourn.\textsuperscript{4} Perhaps his most disturbing metaphor for the age of nihilism is that it will be the \textit{time of night} in our history.\textsuperscript{5}

Nietzsche’s parable of the madman who seeks God after God’s death, who knows, in fact, that God is dead and that the death of God has profound consequences for us, is prophetic, it seems to me, because it anticipates the radical experiment in nihilism of European civilization that remains a central defining feature of the twentieth century. Clearly, this experiment is not what Nietzsche himself had in mind in his own advocacy of the destruction that would have to precede the emergence of the ego of the Superman that the prophet Zarathustra came to announce. Not even Nietzsche, in his intuition of wars to come, could have imagined what shape the experiment in nihilism actually would take. Nor could he have imagined the figure who, partly in Nietzsche’s name, felt called upon by “Providence” to carry out this experiment in nihilism: Adolf Hitler.\textsuperscript{6}