

## The River as Metaphor

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Rivers constitute the lifeline for any country and some of the world's great civilizations (Indus Valley, Mesopotamian, and Egyptian) have all flourished on the banks of rivers. Hindus consider rivers as sacred and have personified them as deities and sung their praises in their religious literature, the *Vedas*, *Manusmriti*, *Puranas* and the *Mahabharata*. These cite names of several rivers that existed during the Vedic period and which had their origin in the Himalayas.<sup>1</sup>

One such river, the Saraswati, has been glorified in these texts and referred by various names like Markanda, Hakra, Suprabha, Kanchanakshi, Visala and Manorama. The *Mahabharata* has exalted the Saraswati River as covering the universe and having seven separate names. The Saraswati flowed as a great river before it was obliterated in a short span of geological time through a combination of destructive natural events.<sup>2</sup>

Legend has it that the beautiful goddess Saraswati sprung from the forehead of her father Brahma, the god of creation. It is said that as soon as Brahma looked at her beauty, he was filled with desire for her. Unhappy with the amorous attentions he bestowed upon her, she tried to dodge and hide. This is why the river Saraswati flows underground. And the brief appearance she made aboveground is the

moment, legends assert, that she stopped to rest from her tiring run.<sup>3</sup>

Saraswati symbolizes purity and knowledge. She represents the mind and intellect which must be used with love and kindness to promote prosperity. The rosary she carries signifies concentration and meditation and her union with God. The musical instrument she plays signifies that the seeker of knowledge must use his mind and intellect in order to live in perfect harmony with the world.<sup>4</sup>

Carl Jung in his long essay, "*Archetypes of the Unconscious*", writes about a theologian who had a recurrent dream: He stood on a mountain slope with a deep valley below, and in it a dark river. He knew in the dream that something had always checked him from approaching the river. This time he resolved to go to the water. As he approached the shore, everything grew dark and alarming, and a gust of wind suddenly rushed over the face of the water. He was seized by panic and awoke.<sup>5</sup>

This dream shows us the natural symbolism. The dreamer descends into his own depths, and the way leads him to the mysterious water. And now there occurs the miracle like the pool of Bethesda: an angel comes down and touches the water, endowing it with healing power. In the dream it is the wind

that blows over the surface of the waters. Man's descent to the water is needed in order to evoke the miracle of its coming to life. But the breath of the spirit rushing over the dark water is unnatural, like everything else whose cause we do not know — since it is inexplicable. It hints at an unseen presence and there is no rational answer.<sup>6</sup>

*Water is the commonest symbol of the unconscious.* As with bodies of water, we often see the surface, but cannot easily see into the depths. Also, the vastness of the ocean symbolizes the immensity of the unconscious mind. Jung observed long ago that the unconscious mind was *much* greater than the conscious portion. The river in the valley is the unconscious, which lies, as it were, underneath consciousness. Psychologically, therefore, water means spirit that has become unconscious. So the dream of the theologian is quite right in telling him that down by the water he could experience the working of the living spirit, like a miracle of healing in the pool of Bethesda. The descent into the depths is necessary to experience healing and wellbeing.<sup>7</sup>

According to Brian Collinson, 'We are water'. A famous scene from the movie "Ben Hur" provides a gripping illustration of the symbolism of the "water of life" in both its physical and psychological sense. William Wyler's depiction of this thirst in the movie is powerful. The water of life for which we yearn relates directly to the waters of the unconscious. Christ is portrayed as the 'Water of Life'. He is

the embodiment of the "immortal" or "living water."<sup>8</sup>

This is the spiritual water that Christ referred to when he spoke to the Samaritan woman at the well:

"Everyone who drinks of this water will thirst again, but whoever drinks of the water that I shall give him will never thirst; the water that I shall give him will become in him a spring of water welling up to eternal life." (John 4: 13-14)

The Chalice, the wellspring of the "living water" that Christ offered the Samaritan woman (John 4:10), is a form of the archetypal Grail. Throughout diverse traditions the Grail represents the feminine side of God; the cauldron of the Goddess in pagan ritual, the cup borne by the Maidens of the Well in medieval folklore, and the chalice that upholds the Mother of God in Christian iconography, all attest to the archetypal association of the Grail with the Divine Feminine. The "water of life" contained in the Grail is also a deeply feminine symbol. For the Feminine is the Source of Life: just as all of life began in the waters of the maternal sea, so all human life begins within the waters of the mother's womb. In Christian symbolism, the Virgin Mary - Mother of God — is often associated with water; her very name in Latin, "Maria," means "the sea."<sup>9</sup>

When we drink from the "living water" of the Life-giving Source, our inner being opens to the awareness of our true nature as the 'Eternal Self'. As the pagan Greeks taught, when we incarnate on

Earth we drink from the ‘Well of Forgetting’ and lose the memory of our True Self as we identify ourselves with the limited body/ego. Spiritual illumination occurs when we drink from the ‘Well of Recollection’ and remember who we truly are – the divine Self – and where we came from – the heavenly realms of the Spirit.<sup>10</sup>

Christ is the river of life from where we draw nourishment for our deepest Self – the Divine within us – that gives us “abundance of life.” This leads us to the willing surrender that allows us to flow within the Oneness of Being. The “water of life” that comes from this Source is a bitter-sweet draught that contains all of life’s joy and pain, for this is the richness of Life. We are only fully alive when we reject nothing of what life offers; then we are able to live in the present moment and appreciate life in its entirety. Thus when we drink deeply of the “living water”, we fully experience the happiness and sorrow in our own life and feel our connection to all other beings in their pain as well as their joy.<sup>11</sup>

Whereas drinking the water of the Life-giving Source bestows upon us the gift of illumined consciousness, immersion in the Fountain itself unites us with the Wellspring of Life. This is the spiritual baptism that represents mystical union with the Source of Life, the Ground of Being, or God. Carl Jung refers to the alchemical symbolism of this image when he says:

“The perpetual, permanent...divine water...was also the bath of regeneration,

the spring rain which brings forth vegetation.”<sup>12</sup>

Through immersion in this bath we experience “regeneration,” the greening of our souls that results from union with the Divine at the center of all creation. Baptism in the “living water” signifies the attainment of unitive consciousness, an experience of oneness with the divine Spirit that pervades all of life.<sup>13</sup>

Jung maintained that much goes on in the depths of those oceanic waters. One of the most frequently encountered of water symbols in dreams is the river. One of the most impressive characteristics of a river is the power of water flowing in a definite direction. The river as symbol embodies the flow of life: the “teleology”, as Jung says, or goal-directedness of the psyche. It also embodies the fatefully powerful direction of that flow- the flow of our lives.

In some cultures there are myths of a diver who plunges to the bottom of the sea and brings up treasure. The water as we have seen is a symbol for the unconscious, and the treasure is the new self, one finds, when previously unused psychic resources are given appropriate expression in one’s conscious life.<sup>14</sup>

*Siddhartha* by Hermann Hesse deals with his quest for enlightenment through the religious doctrines he discovers. Siddhartha is questing after a transcendent, spiritual understanding of himself and the world. He devotes himself wholeheartedly to the pursuit of this

understanding, even when the path is difficult. Outside forces do not easily sway Siddhartha, and he follows his heart.

After several failed attempts with the Samanas, with Gotama -the Buddha, he abandons the path of enlightenment and succumbs to the wiles of Kamala, the beautiful courtesan who introduces him to love. From Kamaswami he begins to learn a trade and becomes a successful businessman. When he has had his fill of material indulgence, he dreams that Kamala's rare songbird is dead in its cage. He understands that the material world is slowly killing him without providing him with the enlightenment for which he has been searching. One night, he resolves to leave it all behind and departs without notifying either Kamala or Kamaswami.

He goes to the river to and meets the ferryman, Vasudeva, who teaches Siddhartha how to learn the many secrets of the river. In contemplating the river, Siddhartha has a revelation: Just as the water of the river flows into the ocean and is returned by rain, all forms of life are interconnected in a cycle without beginning or end. Birth and death are all part of a timeless unity. Life and death, joy and sorrow, good and evil are all parts of the whole and are necessary to understand the meaning of life. By the time Siddhartha has learned all the river's lessons, Vasudeva announces that he is through with his life at the river. He retires into the forest, leaving Siddhartha to be the ferryman.<sup>15</sup>

According to Greek myth those who wished to enter the underworld had to be ferried across the Styx by the ferryman, Charon. Five rivers of the Underworld served as a physical barrier between the Underworld and the mortal realm. Their presence made sure no one could enter or escape unharmed. There were a number of rivers in the Underworld, and each served a purpose. Acheron was the river of lamentation. Cocytus was the river of woe. Lethe was the river of forgetfulness. Phlegethon was the river of fire and Styx was the river of unbreakable oath, by which the gods swore. It was also the river of hate.

The Styx is probably the river most often mentioned in mythology. Like most river deities, the Styx was an offspring of Oceanus and Tethys that flowed nine times around the borders of Hades or the Underworld. Its waters were not only fatal to the living, but it also broke vessels that tried to contain it and corroded all materials except the hooves of horses. It was also the river in which Thetis dipped her son Achilles in order to make him invulnerable to any wound.

The river Lethe was also considered important because, since many cultures believed in the transmigration of souls and reincarnation, the souls going back had to drink from Lethe to forget all their former lives and the Underworld.<sup>16</sup>

In English culture and literature the river Thames has a special place. It runs through the language, and we speak of

its influence in every conceivable context. It is employed to characterize life and death, time and destiny; it is used as a metaphor for continuity and dissolution, for intimacy and ephemerality, for art and history, for poetry itself. Water reflects it has no form of its own. It has no meaning. So we may say that the river is in essence a reflection of circumstance – a reflection of geology, history, sociology and economics. In *The Principles of Psychology* (1890) William James first coined the phrase ‘stream of consciousness’ in which “every definite image of the mind is steeped ... in the free water that flows around it’. Thus ‘it flows’ like the river itself.<sup>17</sup>

Virginia Woolf’s *Mrs Dalloway* is written in the ‘stream of consciousness’ technique. The novel does not follow a linear progression but meanders like a stream backwards and forwards. Waves and water regularly wash over events and thoughts in *Mrs. Dalloway* and nearly always suggest the possibility of extinction or death. While Clarissa mends her party dress, she thinks about the peaceful cycle of waves collecting and falling on a summer day, when the world itself seems to say “that is all.” Time sometimes takes on waterlike qualities for Clarissa, such as when the chime from Big Ben “flood[s]” her room, marking another passing hour. Rezia, in a rare moment of happiness with Septimus, lets her words trail off, “like a contented tap left running.” Even then, she knows that the stream of contentedness will dry up eventually. The

narrative structure of the novel itself also suggests fluidity. One character’s thoughts appear, intensify, then fades into another’s, much like waves that collect then fall.

Traditional English society itself is a kind of tide, pulling under those people not strong enough to stand on their own. Lady Bradshaw, for example, eventually succumbs to Sir William’s bullying, overbearing presence. The narrator says “she had gone under,” that her will became “water-logged” and eventually sank into his. Septimus is also sucked under society’s pressures. Earlier in the day, before he kills himself, he looks out the window and sees everything as though it is underwater. Trees drag their branches through the air as though dragging them through water, the light outside is “watery gold,” and his hand on the sofa reminds him of floating in seawater. While Septimus ultimately cannot accept or function in society, Clarissa manages to navigate it successfully. Peter sees Clarissa in a “silver-green mermaid’s dress” at her party, “lolloping on the waves.” Between her mermaid’s dress and her ease in bobbing through her party guests, Clarissa succeeds in staying afloat. However, she identifies with Septimus’s wish to fight the cycle and go under, even if she will not succumb to the temptation herself.<sup>18</sup>

In the following example of stream of consciousness from James Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Molly seeks sleep:

a quarter after what an unearthly hour I suppose they're just getting up in China now combing out their pigtailed for the day well soon have the nuns ringing the angelus they've nobody coming in to spoil their sleep except an odd priest or two for his night office the alarm clock next door at cockshout clattering the brains out of itself let me see if I can doze off 1 2 3 4 5 what kind of flowers are those they invented like the stars the wallpaper in Lombard street was much nicer the apron he gave me was like that something only I only wore it twice better lower this lamp and try again so that I can get up early.<sup>19</sup>

The river as a token of the unconscious also suggests depth and invisible life. It is a symbol of eternity, in its unending cycle of movement and change. It is one of the few such symbols that can readily be understood, or appreciated, and in the continuing stream, the mind or soul can begin to contemplate its own possible immortality.

In the poetry of John Denham's 'Cooper's Hill' (1642), the Thames is a metaphor for human life. How slight its beginning, how confident its continuing course, how ineluctable its destination within the great ocean:

*Hasting to pay his tribute to the sea,  
Like mortal life to meet eternity.*

The poetry of the Thames has always emphasized its affiliations with human purpose and with human realities. So the personality of the river changes in the course of its journey from the purity of its

origins to the broad reaches of the commercial world. The river in its infancy is undefiled, innocent and clear. By the time it is closely pent in by the city, it has become dank and foul, defiled by greed and speculation. In this regress it is the paradigm of human life and of human history. Yet the river has one great advantage over its metaphoric companions. It returns to its source, and its corruption can be reversed. That is why baptism was once instinctively associated with the river. The Thames has been an emblem of redemption and of renewal, of the hope of escaping from time itself.<sup>20</sup>

When Wordsworth observed the river at low tide, with the vista of the 'mighty heart' of London 'lying still', he used the imagery of human circulation. It is the image of the river as blood, pulsing through the veins and arteries of its terrain, without which the life of London would seize up.

Sir Walter Raleigh, contemplating the Thames from the walk by his cell in the Tower, remarked that the 'blood which disperseth itself by the branches or veins through all the body, may be resembled to these waters which are carried by brooks and rivers over all the earth'. He wrote his *History of the World* (1610) from his prison cell, and was deeply imbued with the current of the Thames as a model of human destiny. It has been used as the symbol for the unfolding of events in time, and carries the burden of past events upon its back. For Raleigh the

freight of time grew ever more complex and wearisome as it proceeded from its source; human life had become darker and deeper, less pure and more susceptible to the tides of affairs. There was one difference Raleigh noticed in his history, when he declared that 'for this tide of man's life, after it once turneth and declineth, ever runneth with a perpetual ebb and falling stream, *but never floweth again*'.

The Thames has also been understood as a mirror of morality. The bending rushes and the yielding willows afford lessons in humility and forbearance; the humble weeds along its banks have been praised for their lowliness and absence of ostentation. And who has ventured upon the river without learning the value of patience, of endurance, and of vigilance? John Denham makes the Thames the subject of native discourse in a further sense:

*Though deep, yet clear; though  
gentle, yet not dull;  
Strong without rage; without  
o'erflowing, full.*

This suggests that the river represents an English measure, an aesthetic harmony to be sought or wished for, but in the same breath Denham seems to be adverting to some emblem of Englishness itself. The Thames is a metaphor for the country through which it runs. It is modest and moderate, calm and resourceful; it is powerful without being fierce. It is not flamboyantly impressive. It is large without being too vast. It eschews

extremes. It weaves its own course without artificial diversions or interventions. It is useful for all manner of purposes. It is a practical river.

The Thames has been a highway, a frontier and an attack route; it has been a playground and a sewer, a source of water and a source of power. It has been what the Romans called a 'public' river, but it has also been a scene of deep private contentment. It has a personal, and an historical, force. John Keill, in *An Examination of the Reflections on the Theory of the Earth* (1699), remarked of rivers that 'without them there could be no great Towns, nor any converse with far inland Countries, since without them it is almost impossible to supply a vast multitude of People with things necessary for life'. The Thames has created civilization here. It fashioned London.<sup>21</sup>

The Aborigines believed that their ancestors taught them and showed them how all life is interconnected and interdependent.

*The mountains are my bones  
The rivers my veins  
The forests are my thoughts  
And the stars are my dreams  
The ocean is my heart  
It's pounding is my pulse  
The songs of the earth write  
The music of my soul.*

Unknown

That is how they think about the natural world, because in the long run, they believe, when everything is in balance,

what is good for the earth will be good for us as human beings too. Aborigines believe that they are living, breathing, thinking physical manifestation of their land – a thread in the pattern of creation. Dr. Winch is convinced that if the land is in bad repair, then so are the people. If the rivers dry up and become polluted, then this can be equated with the body's lifeblood; and it means that life cannot be sustained.

Rivers then play an important role in our lives. They once sustained ancient civilizations that thrived on its banks. It soon became a symbol of the unconscious and the underworld and the path way to lead to divine truths and inner healing. Poets and writers drew inspiration from it. Its very flow is a metaphor for life itself. One's life may flow like water, be turbulent, violent and choppy, or like swirling rushing water, be swelling over, sometimes with self-pride, or be hardly moving like dead stagnant water, or happy and content, gurgling cheerily over fields and meadows, rocks and mountains.

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