



Reflections on Mediating the Analytic Process  
as Imaged in the Mermaid

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Midway through my first year of analytic training, my young daughter began to depict me as a mermaid in her drawings. And, much as the selkie daughter unlocks the mother's seal skin, my daughter's depiction began my fascination with the mermaid image as it might inform my role as an analyst in training.

I turned to ARAS for amplification of the mermaid, an image which seems most thought of as an alluring, overwhelming, destructive and often fatal siren. Yet, she is also a mercurial intermediary, half human and half fish or serpent, and in her own way, a holder of the tension of opposites.



Illustration from the Jean d'Arras work, *Le livre de Mélusine* (The Book of Melusine), 1478

Melusine is a primary example of the mermaid, albeit one who shape-shifted and was not known as a mermaid to her husband Raymond. Jung recounted that “when her husband once surprised her in her fish-tail, which she had to wear only on Saturdays, her secret was out and she was forced to disappear again into the watery realm. She reappeared only from time to time, as a presage of disaster” (CW 13 para. 179).

There seem to be two problematic aspects depicted in this banishment: on the one hand there is “disintegration of the individual who seeks openness at all costs and in consequence destroys the beloved and his or her own happiness,” but on the other, “In the process of individuation, that person is unable to accept... his or her own shadow, his or her own animality and their share in the dark and unknowable” (Penguin Dictionary of Symbols, p. 646). One destructive way of relating depicted in the mermaid image has to do with the total uroboric dissolution in the unconscious. It is a dissolution that occurs mutually when the seeker goes in with no regard for his limits, like Raymond who sought out Melusine entirely without respect to her separateness. Alternately, when the unconscious is glimpsed in the “fish-tail” this may be terrifying so that out of fear, it is banished.

There can be, as Jung noted in *The Psychology of the Transference*, a “secret fear of the unconscious” (para. 374). In my experience at the beginning of analytic work, the emergence of unconscious contents is resisted, especially when one seeks a solution to the presenting problem from what is already known to consciousness. I have found myself in this dance of reflecting back to my

analysands their emergent unconscious aspects, in my efforts to aid in the gradual expansion of their consciousness, and not a few times my efforts have resulted in termination. When an analytic dyad works, what is operative that the unconscious contents can be tolerated rather than altogether terrifying?

Sometimes individuals find themselves lost at sea in the midst of terrible storms, as in the story of *Peter Kagan and the Wind* (Bok, 1977). In this story, the fisherman's wife shifted to her selkie form and in so doing was able to save him from the storm. It was her knowledge of that watery territory that could save the other from total devastation in it. Often, analysands enter treatment already out at sea in disorienting unconscious material, but without a sea guide, an anchor, or land in sight. In such circumstances, a figure that has some familiarity with the unconscious contents but can also work with them in a conscious, ego-preserving way is needed to mediate the process. In this vein, Jung noted: "Consciousness, no matter how extensive it may be, must always remain the smaller circle within the greater circle of the unconscious, an island surrounded by the sea; and, like the sea itself, the unconscious yields an endless and self-replenishing abundance of living creatures, a wealth beyond our fathoming. We may long have known the meaning, effects, and characteristics of unconscious contents without ever having fathomed their depths and potentialities, for they are capable of infinite variation and can never be depotentiated. The only way to get at them in practice is to try to attain a conscious attitude which allows the unconscious to co-operate instead of being driven into opposition" (CW 16, para. 366).

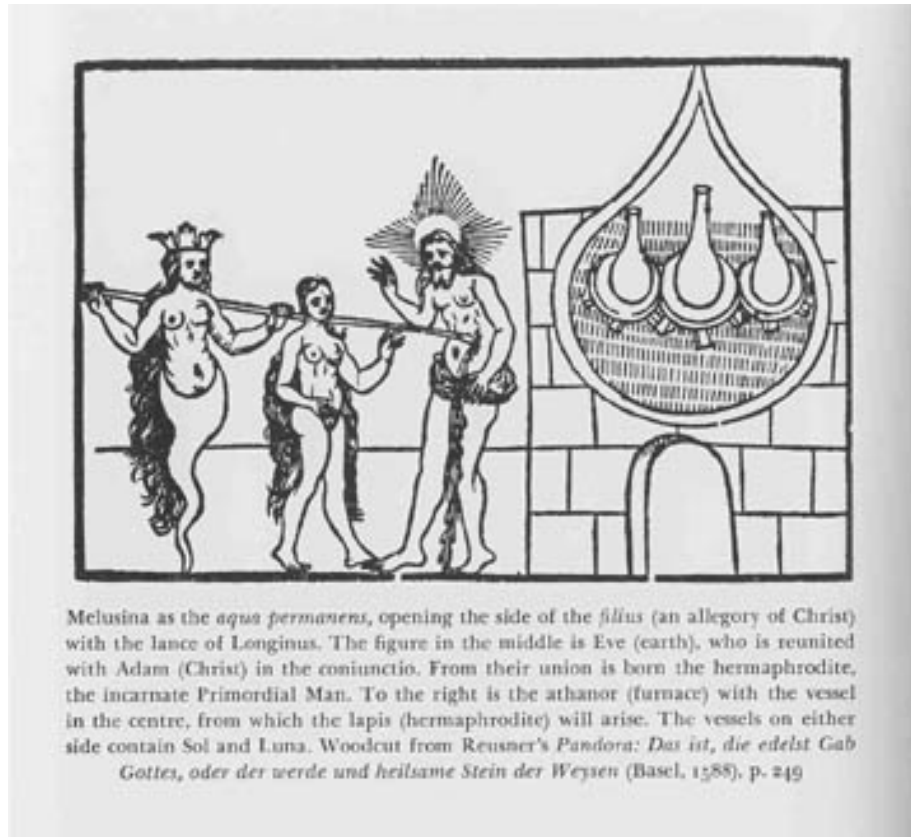


Image B4 in CW 13, Reusner's *Pandora*



Ulysses and the Sirens, ca. 1350-75

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At other times, the mermaid is seen as directly wounding. Jung describes Reusner's image as "Christ being pierced with a lance by a crowned virgin whose body ends in a serpent's tail" (CW 14, para. 23). Similarly, the image of Ulysses and the Sirens depicts Ulysses and his men being shaken, pulled down, and potentially prevented from returning home. Although there is certain resistance to this descent, it can also be necessary in order to remove one from the known, ruling principles of the comfortable ego. Edinger observed that "the fixed, static aspects of the personality allow for no change. They are established and sure of their rightness. For transformation to proceed, these fixed aspects must first be dissolved or reduced to *prima materia*. This is done by the analytic process, which examines the products of the unconscious and puts the established ego attitudes into question." (1985, p. 47-48).

It is not surprising that many images of mermaids are found on churches, perhaps serving as warning signs against beastly feminine impulses. In this image from the façade of a French church around 1200, the mermaid is depicted above a sea monster, implying a proximity to devouring and dangerous contents.

However, from another point of view these same contents are also generative, and offer new, life-giving material. "The maternal significance of water is one of the clearest interpretations of symbols in the whole field of mythology, so that even the ancient Greeks could say that 'the sea is the symbol of generation'" (CW 5 para. 319). Furthermore, from out of the unfathomable depths of the amorphous sea comes the more specific form of the mermaid. Jung comments: "the tree stands in the nuptial bath, either as a pillar or directly as a

tree in whose branches the numen appears in the shape of a mermaid (=anima) with a snake's tail," and he extends this idea in a footnote: "there is a widespread idea that souls and numina appear as snakes.... For what the mother is to the unborn child, that water is to the believer. For in water he is moulded and formed" (CW 14 para. 75). In the mercurial form of the mermaid we are reminded that the unconscious seeks the light, and consciousness seeks connection to its source and meaning.



Fish tailed siren with sea-monster below, 11<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> centuries



Faroese stamp, *The Seal Woman*

Two last features of the mermaid in need of comment her mirror and her golden comb, the tools she uses to reflect upon her nature and calm her sea-flung hair. The *Book of Symbols* notes that combing is “participating in the eros of unknotting, disentangling, smoothing, caressing and bringing light to the deep-rooted mysteries of psyche and nature,” and that this act with fingers “carried the numinous potency of enacting and shaping the creative ideas of emerging consciousness” (*Book of Symbols*, p. 526). An analyst’s careful sifting through and reflecting the lesser known contents of an individual’s psyche can help one to feel the unifying tension at work in oneself.





Mermaid with mirror and comb,  
Stained glass window at Yale HGS

In writing this piece, I realized that the mermaid has become a potent symbol for me, particularly at the initial stages of analytic training. Although I have practiced psychotherapy for a decade prior to training, and with the benefit of some analytic influences, my training has nevertheless proved to be an initiation into something new. In relocating to a new state I started a new practice and began to work more intentionally to hear the compensatory unconscious affects and attitudes alongside the conscious attitudes and goals. Thus I stand at an initiation with each of my cases, some wanting the impossible comfort of a total connection, some terrified and turning away from what they see, and some bravely embarking on their own complex journey.

The other well-known piece of beginning analytic training is the personal, coming to deeper conscious relationship with one's own unconscious. For me, the mermaid is also a symbol for becoming more at peace with crossing over into

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affect and the unknown, mysterious parts of my own life. *Secret Places* by Rumi (2007) is a beloved poem appearing in a compilation fittingly titled *Bridge to the Soul*. His “lovers” are those who bravely seek out the mysterious unknown and provide a complement to an otherwise one-sided rationality:

"Lovers feel a truth inside themselves  
That rational people keep denying.

It is reasonable to say, *Surrender*  
Is just an idea that keeps people  
From leading their lives.

Love responds, No. This *thinking*  
Is what is dangerous.

Using language obscures  
What Shams came to give."

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