

## **AFRAID TO BE FATHER - a commentary on the film 'Effie Gray'.**

On seeing this film about the relationship between John Ruskin and his young wife 'Effy', I felt it to be both personally and intimately, a tragedy. It connected with my deepest fears as a partner and parent. It confronted me with the joys and at times terrifying responsibility of fatherhood and the both blissful and frightening experience, the reality, of actually being father. Others have not seen this film as a tragedy in any way, but as the triumph of the individual spirit in breaking free from abuse and oppression. Effy escapes the nightmare of denied instinct.

So what is going on between the father, Ruskin senior, who I refer to as 'the father', and his son John Ruskin? And what from this can we apply to ourselves?

### **The Archetype of Father:**

The much respected London analyst and lecturer on Jung, Jim Fitzgerald, to whom I owe so much in preparing for this brief talk, says:

**"The encounter with the father in childhood is a moment of destiny for every man."**<sup>1</sup>

This 'moment' he says, is not necessarily a single point of time, but may be spread over the whole of childhood and adolescence.

From the film we learn little about John Ruskin's youth; we see<sup>1</sup> him as a young man in apparent maturity. He seems to be sensitive and kindly; erudite and successful. He has as we might say, 'got his life together'. But then gradually we become aware of his shadow, everything that neither he nor his parents want to talk about and confront. Paradoxically it is by confronting then integrating our shadow and being transformed that we have the chance to realise our potential.

Archetypes, or patterns which emerge from the collective unconscious, are the counterpart to instinct and we have seen not only how Effy's instincts are denied and smothered with disastrous results, but how John Ruskin himself denies his natural instinct and potential to be father.

The word 'father' carries the social, personal, and intimate uses of the word. For some 'father' may be predominantly endearing, for others full of authority. It can be both terrifying and reassuring, abusive and caring. To hold out the possibility of being father or mother

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<sup>1</sup> 'The Father's Shadow and the Source of the Masculine' Jim Fitzgerald, 1995, Guild paper no.305.

and then to unconsciously interrupt that potential, is devastating. We see that clearly happening to Effy when her body naturally prepared for a safe sexual relationship, instinctively reacts to the denial. Her hair, the symbol of fecundity, gets through to her consciousness that this instinct is being betrayed, and falls out, a warning to those around her of the crisis. But they are blind and deaf, they are living in their own shadow, unconscious to the danger in the girl. In John Ruskin himself his natural reproductive instinct is interrupted, betrayed by his fear of being father. The consequences of this betrayal of the father archetype is withering, literally, and we need to look at how this can come about.

### **The Father's Shadow.**

Friederich Nietzsche, the German writer at the end of the 19th century, wrote in his book about choosing truth over lies, 'Thus Spake Zarathustra':

**'What was silent in the father speaks in the son, and often I found the son the unveiled secret of the father.'**

John Ruskin's father, played by David Suchet, presents himself as a benign and reasonable man, well mannered and courteous, attentive and intelligent. What could he possibly be hiding or be unconscious of? He appears to be prosperous, wealthy enough to be able to afford and show off expensive paintings and portraits. Remember when he shows Effy his new acquisition, a work by Turner "purchased" he says "in celebration of your nuptials" i.e., bought solely for himself because John Ruskin through his critique of the artist's work, had already made Turner so famous that the painting "is already worth a great deal more" - he the father is the one to benefit; reflected glory is all that Effy deserves.

The father is in fact mean in not hiring a scullery maid to relieve the abusive slavery of the multi-tasking servant Anna, and is disrespectful of the man-servant George, denying him his name John. The father is pre-occupied with the persona, the mask of prosperity.

In my own childhood, in the 1950's in the suburbs of London, everything was focussed on impressing the neighbours, the collective persona; 'What will the neighbours say?' was ground into us. Maybe it still is? A hundred years earlier in the 1850's, there was an even greater focus on the model Victorian family and on class. Being human and related was sacrificed in favour of status and social standing.

For me the key scene of this social shadow is when the sick Effy has to be taken to bed and the visitors have left. The angry father turns on his son and spits:

“Your poor mother is in floods”,

“There was nothing I could do” whimpers John,

“God knows, we've protected you with every sinew in our bodies from childhood, from *all* the obstructions that could have prevented your unique talent from emerging to the full”.

“And you succeeded” mutters John,

“Every talent needs its patrons”, continues his father. “Tonight, for the first time, the President of the Academy himself, the greatest patron any man could wish for, graces our house, and your wife is unable, or *unwilling*, to make the effort required to make the event a success. Careers have foundered on less, John.”

And then John says these chilling words:

**“I'm sorry to be a disappointment to you both”.**

But oblivious the father continues:

“You were warned about that girl, but you chose your own path. It's up to you to ensure that she does not lead to the destruction of everything we have wished for you.”

The father has grandiose dreams for his son, which to a great extent were realised, but they were perhaps compensating for his own unrealised fantasies about the perfect wife. What was hidden in Ruskin's father was projected unconsciously onto his son, blocking the instincts. When we act out of our unconscious the deepest wounds can follow.

The boy was an opportunity for the father to make good, a dumping ground for the father's hopes and dreams. His son has the potential to be famous; so everything and anybody, including Effy, must be sacrificed to achieve that fame.

John, again unconsciously, is contracted to live out his father's fantasies. When the President of the Royal Academy says to the mother “I am trying unsuccessfully to congratulate your son on his writings” John mumbles “which are no more than a wretched rant”. He persistently puts himself down.

So what happens to John's own individuality?

Our personal psychological priority is to be true and loyal to our own needs and instincts. To be authentic means discovering who you are and being true to yourself, not to the fantasies of someone

else. The son has his own healthy narcissism to revel in and then grow out of, without having to carry that of his parents.

We often talk about the feminine 'mother's web' which ensnares, entraps and devours the masculine. But it is the father's web which we also see so clearly in this story and which is just as paralysing and seemingly impossible to escape from.

The father has a profoundly deep shadow "the thing a person has no wish to be"<sup>2</sup>. He is an incomplete man who in compensation develops what Jung describes as "a persona of what (he thinks) a man should appear to be...a mask of the collective, a mask that feigns individuality"<sup>3</sup> and it is the immature, sexually stunted son who has to bear his father's shadow.

Where does an imaginative, creative and intelligent but isolated boy go if he is not integrated with the external world? I shall return to that at the end of this talk.

### **Defending your son against the Medusa:**

One of the key roles of the mother is to defend the boy against the anger of the father. Because that's what fathers tend to do, they stomp about like giants wreaking havoc and mayhem to get their own way. Their wrath is fed by the anxiety that they are growing weaker as the son grows stronger; remember that horrifying painting by Goya of Saturn devouring his sons before the sons can overthrow him. The conscious mother protects the son, maybe even absorbing the attacks within herself.

But it also works the other way round, it is the job of the father to protect his son from the paralysing gaze of the Medusa, of the Death-Mother, as Marianne Woodman calls her, the negative anima.<sup>4</sup>

Confronting the death-mother when she is at full blast is a dangerous business. Intervening on behalf of his son, the father may be turned to stone himself, the marriage may collapse; her curse may even make him impotent.

The father of Ruskin fails in his clear task to champion the son's manhood, to intervene if necessary against the mother, however unpleasant, uncomfortable and potentially confrontational that may

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<sup>2</sup> Collected Works vol.16 para 470

<sup>3</sup> Collected Works vol 7 "The Persona as a Segment of the Collective Psyche," para. 245f.

<sup>4</sup> In Greek mythology Medusa was a monster, a Gorgon, generally described as having the face of a hideous human female with living venomous snakes in place of hair. Gazing directly upon her would turn you to stone. So Perseus looks at her indirectly, through the reflection in his shield, and chops her head off.

be. The consequence of not intervening is to allow a devastating wound to damage the young man which will take decades to resolve.

I would like to quote from 'Confronting the Death Mother' by Woodman<sup>5</sup>:

“... when we are wounded during childhood, we become vulnerable to Death Mother, whereupon our lives become ruled by shame and its concurrent fear of exposure. We fear being exposed as inadequate for who we are. We fear being exposed as inadequate for what we have done. We fear being exposed as inadequate for what we have not done. We fear that our supposed inadequacies, if exposed, will lead to our abandonment and annihilation.”

In the film John Ruskin repeatedly expresses his feeling of inadequacy, saying to his parents as we have already seen: “I am sorry to be such a disappointment to you both”. It is the role of the conscious, fearless father, to teach the boy how to confront and integrate the death-mother, by confronting her himself. But if he is afraid to be father, afraid to take on this role then they both may become impotent under her gaze. John Ruskin seems never really to have left home, he remains trapped. They have not ‘kicked him out’ into the world and so now he himself is afraid to try and be father himself. His parents are in an unconscious ‘participation mystique’, each depending on the other to become what he or she is. It is a union from which John feels powerless to escape. When the mother is on the offensive this defenceless tolerance is strongest “you know what mothers like” he says of her to his son, absolving himself of responsibility. We have the clear impression that Mr & Mrs Ruskin senior are colluding in the emasculation of their son for their own purposes, their own benefit, their own reflected glory. When compliant and inexperienced young Effy, who could be the catalyst of John’s independence, moves into the house, she also falls under this curse.

### **Killing off the father.**

In the usual course of events we kill off our parents. They die some time before us and we inherit their power. Adolescent rows and hissy fits are an encouraging and prefiguring sign of this inevitable process. Usually the confrontation is painful but not life threatening and if after 21 years

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<sup>5</sup> [http://www.academia.edu/1188306/Sieff\\_D.F.\\_2009\\_Confronting\\_Death\\_Mother\\_An\\_interview\\_with\\_Marion\\_Woodman](http://www.academia.edu/1188306/Sieff_D.F._2009_Confronting_Death_Mother_An_interview_with_Marion_Woodman)

neither side has murdered the other then we deserve to celebrate and open the champagne. By providing an arena for potential mortal combat we allow growth and development to take place.

However in the film David Suchet, in the most charming and oleaginous way has not allowed there to be an arena where mortal combat may be enacted, where son and father can square up to each other. John Ruskin like any other son, has to find the male figure within him which will wake up the masculine archetype so that he can separate from his parents and live out his own potential. So long as his parents keep him tied down, his masculinity withers and the psyche becomes increasingly stropy at the sacrifice of his instincts. His anger is then not focussed on the father and mother, but on the nearest compliant, deferential carrier of his frustrated life, Effy. She lives out the archetype of the servile young wife, accompanied by all the physical and emotional self-defence symptoms that denial, sacrifice and sado-masochism can bring. More worryingly, just as he has been abused by his parents so John abuses his wife Effy. The pattern of abuse continues.

John Ruskin does not have a 'good father', a self-aware, affectionate, kindly parent lacking in hubris and persona. Instead he has an inflated, insecure and greedy man as a father who believes that his role is to motivate his son through fear of failure. Rather than slay his father, metaphorically speaking of course, John repeatedly defers and says to him "I am sorry to be a disappointment to you". Maybe John hopes for a denial from his father, a rebuke even, to stop beating himself up, or reassurance that he is not a disappointment; perhaps even some encouragement and praise. But no, all he gets back from his father is gloating satisfaction, an endorsement of his inferiority; silent agreement that he is indeed a 'disappointment'. The effect and affect on the psyche is to reinforce an earlier wound. The father coldly twists the knife as he eviscerates the boy's masculine potential.

At the end of the film the father is faced with his son's psychological impotence. He is also facing the consequence of his own impotence both in confronting the mother's calculated demolition of the new marriage and in not being open to death in the arena, by not revealing his shadow.

When the father says to Effy 'you have married no ordinary man' he is not talking about his son, but about his own persona projected onto the son.

The complete opposite is portrayed in the film by Sir Charles and Lady Eastlake (James Fox & Emma Thompson); who are openly affectionate and able to share their feelings; sensitive, not obsessed with ego and persona, and above all, they are kind to themselves and to each other.

## **The Solace of Fantasy**

There is one aspect of the consequences of this measured parental abuse on the potential fatherhood of John Ruskin that I feel is worth considering. At the Royal Academy meeting early on in the film, Ruskin waxes lyrical about the nature of beauty and its reflection of God; he expresses the Victorian religious beliefs of the time. But he also describes a spiritual response which fulfils a need within himself to transform something.

In 'The Idea of the Holy' by Rudolph Otto first published in 1917 there is an appendix entitled: 'A numinous experience of John Ruskin'. C.G.Jung frequently referred to this work to describe the 'numinous', that is what the god-image, the image of totality within oneself feels like and how it is transcendent; how it mediates the opposites, the changes going on within oneself. Here is Ruskin talking about his youth, it was written in 1856:

"...there was a continual perception of Sanctity in the whole of nature, an instinctive awe, an indefinable thrill, it would often make me shiver with the joy and fear of it; by the shore of a mountain river, where the brown water circled among the pebbles, the swell of distant land against the sunset, a moss covered wall (*remember those scenes in the film from Scotland*); the joy in nature seemed to me to come to a sort of heart-hunger satisfied with the presence of a Great and Holy Spirit. I cannot in the least describe the feeling, for I am afraid no feeling is describable. They remained in their full intensity till I was 18 or 20"<sup>6</sup>.

Now what was going on in Ruskin at this time and how did it affect his potential of becoming a father with Effy?

True spirituality is instinctual, it makes us more human, it is transcendent, mediates the contradictions, the dilemmas, the paradox of life. What is authentically spiritual holds the conscious and unconscious together, is able to accept what we would rather not talk about, our unrealised potential, our shadow. True spirituality acknowledges and integrates the negative, not rejects it. What is truly spiritual enables us to grow and develop.

Spiritualisation on the other hand, which is what I think that John Ruskin got caught in early on in life, splits us off from reality, invites us into a benign, romantic, rose-tinted sheltered world, a flight into safety from fear of disintegration and inferiority. Interestingly, by the time we meet Ruskin in the film he says that God includes the negative; his own spirituality has begun to change. Many of us talk about the fear of growing up, making a commitment, getting a job, of being ordinary. The parental expectation of Ruskin was that he had to be 'extraordinary' for their benefit. This he did but at what cost.

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<sup>6</sup> 'The Idea of the Holy' by Rudolph Otto, 1923, OUP, p221

I return to that original quote from Nietzsche

‘What was silent in the father is spoken through the son’.

For me the sobering message of this film is that our own shadow is more than enough to bear without taking on someone else’s, and to shoulder your father’s and your mother’s shadow is disabling and dysfunctional in the extreme. It will mess up your life, and as Effy found, it will mess up your wife.

I have called this paper not ‘Afraid to be a father’, but ‘Afraid to be father’. It is about being-ness, the ontological reality of being father; not just about what we do or have, or who we are in society, but knowing about ourselves, being aware of self. Being the father to ourselves.

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