Shamanic Beginnings: Shadow and Soul Loss in Malraux’s *The Temptation of the Occident*

Traditionally, the call to the shamanic vocation comes in many guises: through spontaneous election, via a powerful vision or dream in which the gods or spirits of a given culture remove the initiate from the world of “status quo” in order to refashion him/her into a receptacle worthy of the sacred; through election by the tribe or clan; through self-election.¹ Regardless of the mode of selection or geographical locus, the standard morphology of initiation consists of two types of instruction before the initiate can be recognized as a full-fledged shaman. First, the initiate must demonstrate a marked proficiency for the trance experience. This means that the initiate is able to leave his body and journey to a space that has been called the “Dreamtime.” Second, the initiate is placed under the tutelage of a master shaman who imparts to the initiate the “shamanic techniques, names and functions of the spirits, mythology and genealogy of the clan, secret language, etc” (*Shamanism*, 13). A variation of this two-fold paradigm is that it may take place exclusively in the dreams or visions of the initiate (13).

During the initiatory process, the initiate descends into the underworld and submits to a symbolic psychic and physical dismemberment. Underlying literal cultural variations, the archetypal syllabus of initiation remains constant: a passage from a profane, unenlightened existence through a symbolic death, to a rebirth and regenerated life (101-02). His/her
frame of reference shifts from the parochial concerns of the tribe to the universe and to an acceptance of a more encompassing humanity, not in its trivial human pursuits, but in the transcendent aspect that unites it. He/she becomes a comprehensive individual who can command a trance at will and uses the acquired powers for the good of the community. The breakdown of reified values can open the door to a whole new set of possibilities. This was André Malraux’s response to Kommen Becirov who asked the then famous author about the ubiquitous presence of Asia in his work: “In my youth, I was fascinated with what was possible for the human being outside of his own civilization.”  

The upheaval of World War I had shattered all values, putting the cultural and spiritual heritage of the Occident on trial. Young Malraux, profoundly affected by this emptying out of the Western soul, and influenced by the Nietzschean concept of an heroic life and of a humanism in which man owes nothing to the gods, set out on a quest to find a new Reality for himself and, by extension, for Occidental man. The result of a combined intellectual foray into Oriental texts and a physical encounter with Oriental culture in Indochina is *The Temptation of the Occident*, an epistolary work in which Malraux constructs a dialogue between the Westerner, A.D., and the Chinaman, Ling, and in which two poles of thought and sensibility are delineated. Critics have long recognized that A.D. and Ling represent the Yin/Yang sides of Malraux’s own psyche. They are baffled, however, by the fact that the letters do not fully respond to one another. In my opinion, if we shift our focus from *The Temptation* as being solely a compendium of East-West differences, another possibility emerges. The epistolary form of the work reveals the beginning of an implicit shamanic vocation, galvanized by the disappearance of an
ordering spiritual principle. Eliade tells us that “wherever the immediate fate of the soul is … at issue, wherever there is . . . [a] question of sickness (= a loss of the soul) . . . the shaman is . . . indispensable” (Shamanism, 8). In addition, a seamless connection to the Jungian notion of the archetype of the shadow fleshes out the psychological import of the philosophical commentary and makes it possible to see Ling as an awakened element of the Western psyche.

Jung defines the shadow as being composed of the dark elements of the personality, those elements that have been repressed and have slipped into the unconscious. The “shadow” or the “Eastern” side of the personality has also been variously referred to as the Yin of Yang, “being” as opposed to “doing,” introversion versus extroversion. Contact with the East made Malraux/A.D. keenly aware that an almost exclusive concentration on the individual in the West had resulted in a loss of universal consciousness or the ability “to be.” This repressed psychic possibility for “being” became accessible to him because it was mirrored by his polar opposite, Ling. Ling’s assessment of this psychic division is equally applicable to A.D.: “How will I know myself” he says “except by looking at you?” The debacle of World War I and the demise of the Christian myth constellated Oriental patterns of thought that eroded the notion of Western hegemony. Jung would call this the reconfiguration of an “organizing archetype.” In other words, the emergence of Oriental concepts “altered the conscious situation” of the Western psyche and required “a new form of compensation” (Vol. 11, 151). For the brilliant young Malraux, the constellation of the archetype, which presented itself as the Orient, organized his conscious behavior not only within the spirit of the times, but more importantly, within the
demands of his own personal exigencies. Deprived of a sustaining tribal myth, I would suggest that the double-edged intellectual/lived encounter with the Orient represents a highly personalized vision quest or initiatory journey into the Dreamtime. I would further suggest that this initiation process brought down the psychic wall of a unique world-view and forged an inner tutelary spirit called Ling who writes twelve of the eighteen letters that comprise *The Temptation of the Occident*. Jung explains that:

The more clearly the archetype is constellated, the more powerful will be its fascination, and the resultant . . . statements will formulate it accordingly. . . . The ideas underlying them are necessarily anthropomorphic . . . and are therefore distinguished from the organizing archetype which in itself is irrepresentable because unconscious” (Vol. 11, 151).

Ling’s function as a tutelary spirit, is *not*, as in traditional shamanic lore, to instruct A.D. on the sacred myths of Occidental culture. Ling is an anthropomorphic representation of the organizing archetype of the Yin side of Yang, which has created a totally “Other” image of man and, by extension, a culture. In fact, at one point, Ling tells A.D. that “the brain can serve different functions” (*Temptation*, 85). Ling, then, serves as a newly awakened shadow-voice who establishes major lines of demarcation between East and West. Though Ling is a part of Malraux/A.D., it would be inaccurate to say that Ling represents an emotionally assimilated part of his psyche. In this initial stage of the quest,
the tutor, Ling/Malraux, presents an objective overview of how the Oriental and the Occidental view the world in the domain of metaphysics, time, human relationships and art. The “shadow-spirit” speaks.

Ling teaches A. D. that the major qualitative difference between Orient and Occident is that the Oriental wants “to be” and the Occidental wants “to do.” The Oriental strives to find in the rhythms of the universe those ideas that permit him to transcend human ties: “The action of our mind,” says Ling, “is to lucidly experience ourselves as a fragment and to draw from this experience the awareness of being a part of the universe . . .” (84). “Being” is that mode of existence that minimizes the ego, the transitory part of the personality and gives priority to the Self, the non-transitory factor in man. Moreover, Oriental man can become one with the rhythms of the universe through sustained meditation, for example: “. . . contemplation leads out of [ego] consciousness to communion with the Source . . .” (97). This metaphysical orientation contrasts with the Occidental concept of the supremacy of the individual in the cosmic order. This is the attitude that Ling defines when he says that the Occident seeks to exercise control over the universe and when he labels the Occident as the land in which “the idea of civilization and that of order are each day confused.” (64-5). In short, Occidental civilization has organized itself around the tenet of action, a civilization that seeks to impose order on the chaotic multiplicity of the world, a civilization that wants to systematize all planes of reality and to synthesize them. A.D. concurs: “There is in the Occidental an attempt to conquer time, and to make of it the prisoner of form” (90).
In the realm of relationships, Ling exposes the problem of alienation in the domain of love. In the Orient there is no conflict. All that exists in a predestined order has its own intrinsic function. The role of woman, explains Ling, is “to be always passive” (78). She has no personal attributes and the affective boundaries of the sentiments of the partners never cross because “man and woman belong to a different species” (78). Ling sees in Occidental love the residue of the Christian heritage: Conquest and Unity. Although separated from God, the Occidental, haunted by the spectre of his individualism, refuses to be conquered. He defies destiny and seeks to attribute a permanent value to his passion as an alternative method to transcend his finite condition. Conquest and Unity, however, are antithetical in nature and Occidental love remains imprisoned in subjectivity. His sense of relatedness remains on the level of the subjection of the Other: “To be himself and the other, to experience his feelings and those of the partner” (82). Ling understands the problem and explains to A.D.: “Occidental love draws its strength and its complexity from the necessity of becoming assimilated to the woman that you love and the union that she implies . . . (79).

Ling carries these antinomic attitudes into the domain of art. The real artist, he says, is not the one who “creates,” as in the Occident, but the one who “feels.” Oriental painting “does not imitate, does not represent, it signifies” (90). For example, the Oriental artist does not try to draw the contours of a cat. He thinks of the cat in terms of supple and silent movements that are peculiar to the cat (Malraux, (87). What Ling is trying to explain is that the all-embracing underlying continuum is the artist’s point of reference.

The artist immerses himself and becomes one with nature or, at least, that part of nature,
the essence of which he is trying to portray. Although he knows that there is a difference between his aesthetic self and the aesthetic object, he also knows that they are but differentiations of an all-embracing continuum. The Oriental artist, in aesthetic contemplation, transcends his local personality, recaptures, if only momentarily, the unity of the undivided All and, from this vantage point externalizes or communicates his aesthetic intuition.  

Malraux/A.D responded to the Nietzschean cry that “God is dead” by passing over to the Orient to study how that culture participated in Being. As mentor, Ling brought into focus that, for the Oriental, destiny unravels in the supra-human domain and is divorced from human contingency. Being expresses itself through the Oriental and he is only a witness of the cosmic unfolding. Destiny for the Occidental is relegated to the sphere of human activity (“to do”) something to be mastered and contained. Was the solution for Western man, then, to be found in an imitation of Oriental myths as outlined by Ling? It is at this point that the novice, A.D., begins to exercise intellectual discernment concerning the teachings of his “shadow-mentor,” Ling.

The word *shaman* has been variously defined as one who “knows,” one who “sees” in the dark. It has even been suggested that it has its roots in the Vedic word “sram,” which means “heating the roots.” On one level, Ling and A.D. can be seen as complementary doubles. To wit: A.D.’s memory bank contains the affective “knowing” of the Occidental culture and an acquired “knowing” of the Oriental culture. Ling’s memory bank, on the other hand, contains the affective “knowing” of the Oriental culture and an intellectual
“knowing” of the Occidental culture. However, as mentioned above, the call to the shamanic vocation can be entirely choreographed intra-psychically. In shamanic terminology, the tutelary spirit at first possesses the initiate during the learning stage and is, in turn, possessed by him/her. Here, it is A.D. who intra-psychically hosts the tutelary spirit, Ling, and it is A.D. who ultimately determines the worth of the teaching. He agrees with Ling that after the death of God, the European faces his own mortality, but he rejects Oriental solutions: “The best proposition against death is only a solution of weakness” (Temptation, 98). In the last letter, A.D. bodies forth a lucid lament:

Living image of myself, I am without love for you. Like a gaping wound, you are my dead glory and my living sufferance. I have given all to you; and yet, I know that I will never love you. Without yielding, I will each day bring you my peace offering. Voracious lucidity, I still burn before you like an upright, solitary flame, in this opaque night in which the Oriental wind cries out, as in all these nights in foreign lands where the wind of the open sea echoes the arrogant clamor of the sterile sea around me (111).

In the context of the shamanic cosmology, A.D.’s poetic outburst speaks to the initiatory “crisis” that destabilizes the novice and causes what Eliade calls a form of the ecstatic “madness” that usually heralds a period of profound transformation. It speaks to the painful wound caused by a perceived “loss of soul.” The epistolary form reflects the
psychic fragmentation caused by A.D.’s journey into the Dreamtime. It was a necessary 
fragmentation for in this preparatory quest, the curtain of a closed off part of the psyche 
was raised and the kaleidoscopic energies that form a cultural entity *shapeshifted* into a 
visual form, Ling. Jung would say that the “organizing archetype” personified in order to 
edify the host, A.D. In listening to the teaching and becoming sensitized to new forms of 
thought, his gifts of clairvoyance, clairaudience and clairsentience were honed, all 
esential tools for the future shaman. However, neither culture predicated on the value of 
“to do” nor the Occidental assimilation of the values of a culture predicated on the value 
of “to be” could, in itself, provide a solution. Ling, as the awakened representative of an 
entire culture, nourishes A.D. but cannot pass on to him the experience that the Oriental 
achieves in an ecstatic union with the Divine during meditation, for example. Elsewhere, 
Malraux, the ultimate referee of these two lobes of his brain, makes it clear: “Translate 
into myths the thought of men essentially different from us: form an experience of these 
myths? . . . No. . .” He advocates not a vicarious experience of Eastern spirituality, “rather 
an experience of [the] possibilities [of the Western psyche], of [the] still embryonic 
tendencies . . . that can take form in . . . and participate in the depths of [its] inner being.”7 
A possible solution is embedded in Malraux’s intra-psychic figures, A.D. and Ling. It is 
the visitant-teacher, Ling who elucidates it via the Yin/Yang tenet of Taoist philosophy: 
“The world,” he says, “is the result of the opposition of two rhythms which penetrate all 
things. Their absolute equilibrium would be the void; all creation comes from its eruption 
and can only manifest as multiplicity” (*Temptation*, 97).

In the shamanic cosmology, A.D.’s neykia into the “Dreamtime” has created a bridge of
communication between the two worlds from which may arise a new mythical biography for the West. Bringing the “shadow” to light in *The Temptation of the Occident* amounts to “forming the self-image, an initial expression of the self, or else, the representation of the self to be realized.” This means that Oriental concepts incarnated by Ling will be metamorphosed into an appropriate form for the Westerner. In *The Temptation of the Occident*, the spiritual quest has just begun.

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1 Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism, Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1974), 13. All further references to this work will be included in the text.


3 C. G. Jung, *Aion*, in the Collected Works, vol. 9ii (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 8-10. All further references to the Collected Works will be indicated in the text.

4 André Malraux, *La Tentation de L’Occident* in Oeuvres Complètes (Paris: Editions Gallimard, 1989), 75. All further references to this work will be indicated in the text.

