

Exile and *Dépouillement* as Narrative Motif:
Transformation in the Life of Swami Abhishiktananda

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Exile, as narrative motif, is a key element in the hero myth, that moment when the protagonist finds him or herself in alien circumstances—in a geographical, social or psychological space that is thoroughly foreign and unfamiliar. I shall present and analyse exile as an archetype, gauge its role in the spiritual journey and then briefly relate it to Abhishiktananda's life and teaching.

Exile, as I am using it here, is familiar to all of us. It is that precipitous moment in our lives when we find ourselves at a crossroad, straddling two worlds, as it were, the one we are leaving behind and the one we seem to be entering, a foot in each—the one in front seemingly unable to gain a firm purchase and the one behind apprehensive of letting go. What makes such a transition terrifying is that it often presents itself as a one-way movement precluding any return to the former way of living. Our familiar inner voices, our own deepest anxieties, often conspire with those of family, friends, and community to shout out their protests. Thus we invariably hesitate, our spirit calling us forward while our fears—masquerading as common sense—bidding us reconsider. In myth and parable this sequence is always climactic, central to the protagonist's psychological and spiritual development, and invariably includes an intimate coming to terms with the hero's deepest doubts.

In his presentation on Abhishiktananda's spiritual journey, Fabrice Blée refers to Abhishiktananda's use of the term *dépouillement*, translating it variably as “vulnerability,” “surrender,” and “destitution.” In addition to these meanings, *dépouillement* accesses a semantic field that also includes “asceticism,” “sobriety,” “going through,” “falling away,” “being stripped of,” “shriving,” etc. Considering this variety of shades of meaning, what expression could better suit the present reflection? *Dépouillement*, as I would like to apply it here, is a spiritual and psychological no-man's land, a bardo realm that hinge two separate worlds where the hero sheds former identifications and finds him or herself stripped clean, naked as it were, compelled by vulnerability itself to pass over into altogether unknown realms of experience. *Dépouillement*, as interpreted here, is the moment of truthful self-assessment when the hero must look within to find the bare courage to take the next step, the critical next step, that will not only resolve the

situational tensions and conflicts that have emerged in the story but simultaneously consummate the hero's own personal journey to selfhood.

So what would *dépouillement*, if understood this way, look like with flesh and bones?

One compelling image from classical literature is the scene from the eighth-century Old English epic poem, *Beowulf*, where the warrior is setting about to enter a deep, dark lake in order to vanquish his enemy, the mother of the water-monster Grendel.¹ This poignant picture contains all the elements of *dépouillement* as we are defining it: vulnerability, surrender, sloughing off, deep doubt, and facing the unknown. Beowulf stands under the moonless sky of a cold, black night, removes his armor, and contemplates in silence a battle that must be fought in the icy depths, where he will be blinded by water and the shadow of night, without the company of his brave comrades, without the implements of ordinary combat, even without—as the white stag² that remains behind at the lake's edge above symbolises—his warrior bravery. Instead a new kind of courage must take over as he makes his descent, utterly naked.

The keen reader recognises here that the *Beowulf* account is in fact a parable of the spiritual journey and conquering the self. It is not irrelevant that Beowulf's enemy is a mother, the one who breeds monsters, the one who must be destroyed lest new monsters appear. (The dark force's stupendous power for regeneration is a common theme in hero legends and represents the persistent nature of narcissistic identification.³) If we do a symbolic reading, we can safely say that the monster's mother is Beowulf's *own* mother, and his submersion a symbolic return to the womb to sever the umbilical cord, as it were, and free himself from his

¹ Beowulf is a young warrior-king called to the aid of an ally whose kingdom is being ravaged by a giant water-monster. Beowulf and his brave soldiers have just been victorious in battle and, on their journey home, learn of the plight of their friend and come to his rescue. They hide themselves in the king's banquet hall, the site of the attacks of the previous nights, and by virtue of their bravery and the element of surprise, succeed in mortally wounding the water-monster, Grendel. The following day there is rejoicing and the king hosts a banquet in Beowulf's honor. After the celebrations, however, while the kings' brave soldiers are sleeping, there is yet another rampage, this time from the dead monster's mother who comes seeking revenge for the murder of her son. Beowulf and his ally suffer severe losses. Beowulf then knows that peace will only come if he alone descends the ancient lake where Grendel's mother lives, seeks her out and slays her.

² This interpretation of the symbology of the white stag was presented by David Whyte in public talks in the United States in the 1990s.

³ A vivid instance is Devi's battlefield opponent in the *Devi Mahatmyam*, the invincible demon Raktabhij (blood-seed), who cannot be vanquished because when even the least drop of his blood touches the earth, a new, full-grown Raktabhij is born.

ever-present, ever-recurring narcissism. This the young Beowulf must do if he is ever to grow beyond mere warriorhood and become the true king he was born to be.⁴

Developmental psychology reminds us that the narcissistic phase in early personality development blinds the infant to its actual vulnerabilities, engendering the notion, if only a delusional one, that he or she is all-powerful and all-knowing. As the theory goes, such delusion is essential to assure the psychological cohesion with which to negotiate the precarious stages of personality development. As adults in times of crisis, (for example, a young warrior on the battlefield), we may also occasionally find ourselves relying on similar delusions, (the warrior's imaginings of being immune to the enemy's sword blows, for example). But there comes a point along the path to full integration when we must go beyond ordinary (warrior) courage and attain adult maturity (kingship) by virtue of humility, equanimity and the capacity to accurately assess our true strengths and weaknesses in any given situation.⁵

The spiritual journey in its essence entails moving beyond the safety of our narcissism and taking stock of ourselves as we really are. All the world's myths, epics, and religious parables repeat this theme over and over again: one day we must leave the "mother," stand on our own two feet, engage the world on its own terms and give ourselves over to a reality larger than ourselves. Selfish concerns must be sublimated and supplanted by those of the collective so that we see our belonging in a greater, more meaningful whole that includes God. That Beowulf is completely alone and receives no assurance from his comrades in the moments prior to entering the lake is very telling and hints at the deeply personal, existential nature of *dépouillement*. *Dépouillement*, by necessity, is a forbidding place where one is not given any clear indication as to how to proceed. And so because of the thorny and deceptive nature of this segment of the journey, the story-telling traditions are replete with clues about how to traverse it.

⁴ Exile narratives, experts tell us (e.g., Mircea Eliade, Ed Pollome, Joseph Campbell, Carl Jung), have three components: going out, fulfilment and return. The actual moment of fulfilment is always preceded by some form of exposure and susceptibility where no manner of outward protection proves any use whatsoever. The protagonist must traverse physical and psychological boundaries in order to reach undiscovered realms where he will face off against the source of the world's problems—which are simultaneously the hero's own—in order to slay the demon, which is, symbolically, his former narcissistic identity.

⁵ Freud tells us that it was our mother who comforted us in our youth, told us we were the center of the universe, the most beautiful, wonderful child on earth, thus fortifying the yet unformed personality and preparing it to face the challenges of life in the world. Mythologically, the warrior's is a contingent courage: the fighter goes into battle with magical thinking, namely, that he is invincible. But he cannot continue to rely on such illusions indefinitely and will eventually be called to perform even greater feats, exhibiting feminine courage and mastery of the self.

Recently I encountered a poem from a Native American tribe of the Pacific Northwest that advises the hero in just such precarious circumstances. The poem is presented this way: a little girl asks the tribal elder what to do when she is lost in the forest. Of course, *the lost little girl* is the personification of estrangement, which, if given a full voice could also sound like this: “When I am lost and no longer know where I belong, when every corner of my world looks foreign and inhospitable, when I am struck with the terror of life in a world I no longer understand or know how to navigate, when I have become a stranger to myself, find I do not belong even to myself, then what do I do?”

The elder gives this advice:

Stand still!

The trees ahead and bushes beside you are not lost.

Wherever you are is called “here.”

And you, you must treat it as a powerful stranger,

Must ask permission to know it,

And be known.

Listen, listen!

The forest breathes,

It whispers, “I have made this place around you,

If you leave it,

You may come back again, saying ‘here’.”

No two trees are the same to raven.

No two branches are the same to wren.

If what a tree or branch does is lost on you, then you are surely lost.

Stand still!

The forest knows where you are.

You must let it find you.⁶

⁶ This poem of David Waggoner is presented by David Whyte in session one, “Our Home is So Close to Us”, of an audio recording entitled, *Clear Mind, Wild Heart: Finding Courage and Clarity through Poetry*, published by Sounds True, Boulder, Colorado <www.soundstrue.com>.

We can infer from the elder's words that being lost is not a state of external affairs but is a subjective condition, a psychological orientation that positions us "outside" the environment in which we find ourselves. Ultimately, being lost is connected with the insecure and tenuous nature of narcissistic identification, perceiving oneself as *separate from the world* and thus *in opposition to it*. But the elder tells us that the world around us is neither foreign nor hostile: "wherever you are is called here," wherever one finds oneself, is *home*. The elder adds, "No two trees are the same to raven and no two branches the same to wren." Why? Because raven and wren do not distinguish between familiar and strange, self and other, home or being lost, so every tree is experienced as it is without any reference to our belonging or estrangement. "If what a tree or branch does is lost on you, then you are surely lost." If you banish any part of your world, interiorly or exteriorly, you are divided against yourself, fragmented and ill at ease in the psychological state of separation.

So now, how do exile and *dépouillement* relate to the life of Swami Abhishiktananda?

Two things that strike us about Abhishiktananda are how unconventional his life was and how uncompromisingly he lived it. Swamiji's story is compelling; it is, perhaps, one of the most potent aspects of his teaching. Without doubt, his is a story of exile and heroic triumph. His radical encounter at the depths of his being models for us—inspires in us—the courage to overcome our own self-definitions and self-limitations. Being reduced, he tells us, is the only hope for a fully authentic existence: "The call to the complete vulnerability (*dépouillement*) is the call to complete liberation because one is only free when one has nothing, absolutely nothing that he can call his own".

Dépouillement and exile thus become for Abhishiktananda a spiritual practice: the core practice for progress in the religious life. Monastic renunciation itself was *dépouillement* for him.⁷ But if advaitic awakening serves as a catalyst for exiting narcissistic encapsulation, it is striking that it was Swamiji's meeting with Sri Ramana Maharshi and his personal advaitic experience that set in motion a series of breakthroughs which ultimately led to a cataclysmic antagonism between, on the one hand, his pre-Vatican II Catholic faith and, on the other, this core encounter with the divine which found its articulation in a language that seemed to be, initially at least, incompatible with the language he had known and called his own. He found

⁷ Although Benedictine stability may seem to be at odds with sannyassin itinerancy, we might note that they are functionally identical with respect to a spirituality of "stripping down."

himself unable to let go of the experience and yet worried at times that it was at odds with—even a refutation of—his Christian faith. At one point, Swami Abhishiktananda found himself in an uncomfortable dialogue of opposites between two religions, two cultures, two theologies and most dramatically, two deep personal experiences of faith. It was this interior ambivalence that led him at one point to long for an early death as there seemed no answer to the dilemma in which he found himself.⁸

Perhaps the problem was, in part, one of semantics: he had not yet found a way to situate his advaitic experience in a linguistic framework that resonated with his Christian vocabulary. Perhaps he feared he had betrayed his priestly vows, and also the Church, by immersing himself in a foreign spirituality. Perhaps this fear was exacerbated by his honest appraisal of a Church that had lost its mystical edge, was in danger of being irrelevant in a rapidly changing post-war modern world. Or he worried that he had taken a wrong turn and was in fact after all self-deceived, a fallen-away Christian. And yet to whatever extent such doubts were operative in his consciousness, they were countervailed by a profound wisdom welling up within him, sanctioning his radical commitment to search with an urgency and purpose that could not afford the luxury of time. And so, answering to social, psychological and theological pressures was not primary⁹. As he was first and foremost a monk and a *sadhak*, his uncompromising fidelity to the monastic imperative, to the spiritual journey, was carried out even at the risk of marginalisation, and this in part accounted for his suffering during these years. His psychological exile would have felt very real and signalled a vital process at work within him¹⁰. But by virtue of being stripped clean, he was able to forge a new identity based on faith and the relentless pursuit of God. His *dépouillement*, in short, was a call to truth where any other option would have simply been unthinkable. However, a struggle that may have once looked like death itself turned out to be the very thing that would heal and transform him. Thus Abhishiktananda's great theological insights and bridge-building across a vast chasm that separated two fundamental and apparently divergent theological realities were the by-products of his own basic struggle to unite the two disparate segments of his own soul.

⁸ "As long as I feel two, this is exile."

⁹ Though, of course, his writings seem to be intended to do just that.

¹⁰ From the early 1950s, and for the next ten years. Whereas in myth, *dépouillement* is a decisive moment that resolves itself in a single heroic act, in Abhishiktananda's life (and in the lives of saints in general), we see *dépouillement* spanning long years, as can be seen in his diary, *Ascent to the Depth of the Heart*.

Some have conjectured that Abhishiktananda ceased to be Christian, that, having cut the umbilical cord, so to say, he quit the Church once and for all. This seems like a drastic conclusion. Just as *King Beowulf* would still be his mother's son, his father's son, Abhishiktananda's "going beyond" could not possibly be a repudiation or denial of his religious heritage but rather, the *fulfilment* of it. Can there any doubt of this? Consider this: if Swami Abhshiktananda did indeed reach the final goal—as the photo of him taken shortly before he died and the latter journal entries would suggest—then what need would there have been to reject his Christianity or for that matter anything at all? Undoubtedly there are voices in the Church that deny out of hand the experiment that Abhishiktananda's life represents, just as there are mothers who feel wounded by—even to the point of disowning—the son who has fought and won his independence. But ultimately the Church is the life-giving ground and her affection is not so easily withdrawn; in the course of time Abhishiktananda's witness and life work are sure to gain the acceptance and respect they deserve.

As a way of closing, I have an exile story. I tried to find a story that is not well-known, one that neither draws from the Greco-Roman tradition nor from the vast reservoir of Hindu myth and legend. I tried to find a story that offers latitude for imagining how the hero's transformation might occur.

Otto Rank, the early student of Freud, once said that all human beings have had to undergo the hero journey—simply by being born.¹¹ Thus the exile archetype expresses our remembrance of being thrust alone into a cold, alien world at the time of birth. And so the earthly journey itself is one of exile. But in narrating our own story, we often neglect to admire the beauty in its fault lines. The details of the pivotal moments of our lives often get left out of the biography or go unrecognized as in any way heroic.

By extension I wanted to find a story that might serve as an apologia for Abhishiktananda's life, that might tenderly and subtly underscore the hidden gems in its storyline, that might in some way vindicate and put in a favourable light a journey that was unconventional by the standards of a pre-Vatican II Church; and this as a way of safeguarding a corner within our own hearts from which we might give ourselves and others permission to be in exile, even to *honor* exile as the real stuff of spirituality, and thus foster a willingness to allow God's wisdom to unfold within our lives in ways we might not have otherwise envisaged, in

¹¹ Otto Rank is, indeed, perhaps best known for his *The Trauma of Birth* published in the early twentieth century.

ways that might not necessarily conform to the accepted standards and expectations of our community, work or family settings. If *dépouillement* entails, in part, negotiating the messiness of that which leads us beyond a former, lesser existence, then acknowledging the ostensive fissures in Abhishiktananda's biography will be indispensable if we are to encounter him authentically. So, like Abhishiktananda's story, the following is not heroic in a traditional idealized sense but looks more like life itself.

This story takes place in Southern China in the middle ages.

The year of the flute recital was at hand. It was only every ten or fifteen years that the three-day event took place, so flute players from around the land journeyed great distances to be a part of it and be able to demonstrate their mastery of the ancient bamboo flute. They came walking, in some cases long weeks of walking, in order to have a chance to play before the esteemed audience. Musicians, government officials, music lovers and wise elders came to listen.

As the concerts began, one by one performers ascended the podium, took out their flutes and played a piece. As each played, the audience sat quietly, listened, and at the end of the performance, while the performer bowed, they clapped politely. Towards the end of the program on the third day, an old fellow, shoeless and disheveled, stood by as the last would-be performer, not sure that he would be invited up onto the dais. Signals were given and he was escorted to the stage. Like the other performers he made the customary introduction but as he began to play, a pin-drop silence enveloped the hall: it was as though all present had stopped breathing. Nor did any make the slightest movement. At the end of his performance the crowd sat transfixed and no one clapped or made even the slightest sound or movement until, at the back of the hall, the eldest of the elders rose to his feet and whispered in a soft voice, "Like a God!"

All present knew that this was the verdict and that the humble individual who stood shyly on the platform in front of them was the chosen Master of the land.

In the days that followed, it was decided among the community of players and instructors that their most promising young student should be sent to train with the Master. The youngster they selected had all the qualities that a teacher could ever want in a student: he was diligent, obedient, alert, enthusiastic, and relentless in the pursuit of excellence. He seemed to have no other interest or goal but the flute. Funds were raised for his tuition in an apprenticeship that might last many long years. Letters of introduction were written, clothes were provided, and the boy's parents gave their consent. When all the necessary preparations had been made and he

was bidding farewell to family and friends, the town elder approached and presented him with a flute that had been passed down through the generations of the region's flute players.

After a four-week journey, the youngster arrived at the Master's village. The Master readily accepted him as a student. In his characteristic way, the boy set about practicing diligently. He found himself at home and had no needs beyond that of playing his flute. After some months of training, he played the piece the teacher had given him. The teacher sat quietly and listened intently but afterward he uttered only two words in response: "Something lacking."

The boy was crestfallen but took it as a spur to work harder, practice longer hours, and apply himself to the utmost. But with his next performance the following year, the reply was the same, only these two familiar words: "Something lacking."

Another year passed, but no matter how much he exerted himself, he only heard the same two words. He became desperate. He tried everything he knew, was relentless in pushing himself far beyond what he ever imagined he could do, sleeping very little, taking very little food, and focusing solely on his instrument. But each time he met the Master, the reply was the same.

One day he could not bear it any longer and in desperation, he packed his bag and slipped out in the night. He walked a long dark road for five or six days until he found himself in a large city. In despair he took to drinking and within a year or so, he squandered all the money that had been given him for his tuition and living expenses. Soon enough he found himself living in the streets, homeless, a beggar. Years passed until one day he got word that his Master had passed away. This was the final blow. Now he knew his life was over. He could not return to his native country because he had not completed his mission. And he could not complete his study because his teacher was no more. His anguish intensified beyond what could be tolerated, and he made up his mind to go to sleep that night never to wake again. So he prayed to be delivered from the burden of living on this his last night on earth.

But the morning sun rose in its usual way and he heard the familiar sounds of the merchants going to market. So he roused himself and spoke to himself this way: "My master is dead, but if I am going to be a beggar, I may as well go and beg near my Master's village and at least honor his memory by visiting his grave."

So he packed his few things and went back to the Master's village. He found a small site on a hilltop above the main road where he constructed a small grass hut not too far from the

teacher's gravesite. Each day he went down to the road and solicited passersby for coins to pay for his food. In the evening he returned to his hut to sleep.

One day while he sat by the roadside begging, one of the Master's pupils, a fellow student and former friend from his youth, passed by with his son and, recognizing him, stopped and said, "It's you! Where have you been all these years?" Then the friend noticing his begging bowl said, "Rather than sit here by the roadside begging, why don't you make a living by teaching and let my son be your first pupil!" He reluctantly agreed and in time other former students brought their children. Soon he earned enough to pay for his basic needs without having to resort to begging.

Years passed this way and in the course of time his students grew up, got married and had children of their own. They came bringing their children to study under him. One day two students came with their granddad, his friend from the early days with the Master. They told him, "Tonight is the last night of the great recital. All the flute players of the land have assembled and are performing. Bring your flute and come. You must play tonight!" Acceptingly, without giving it a second thought, he clutched one of his flute bags and went along with them.

At the recital, as was the custom, performers ascended the platform one by one, took out their instruments and played a single piece of music. As each played the audience sat quietly and listened. At the end, while the performer made his bows, the audience clapped politely. Then the next performer ascended the dais. Finally, toward the end of the program, it came time for him to play, though he was not sure what he was supposed to do. His friend came and escorted him to steps of the platform. When he had ascended the dais, he took out his flute and remembered that it was the flute the elders of his native village had presented him as a young boy. So he decided to play the song the Master had given him so many years before. He made the customary introduction, and when he began to play, a pin-drop silence enveloped the hall: it was as though all present had stopped breathing. Nor did any make the slightest movement. He played slowly and naturally and in between his sweet notes one could only sense a deafening stillness in the hall. When he concluded the crowd sat transfixed; no one clapped or made even the slightest sound or movement until, at the back of the hall, the eldest of the elders rose to his feet and whispered in a soft voice, "Like a God!"¹²

¹² This story circulated in Zen circles in the US in late 90s and was told in various ways. It has its origin in *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* by Stephen Nachmanovitch (New York: Penguin Putnam, 1990).