



Samson (III)

Mircea A Tamas

In the “minor cycle,” Samson challenges thirty young Philistines (Judges 14:11-16) to solve a riddle, the answer being the honey inside the lion – the *Sphinx*. The answer represents the “initiatory secret” of the spiritual realization and cosmic government; it is the Arcanum of Samson’s existence and function. It is not a singular episode. During his initiation, Oedipus, too, solved a riddle of the *Sphinx*, in the Center of the World, Thebes; the riddle was about the cosmic cycles.¹ In one of Grimm’s fairy tales, “The Riddle,” the solution to the riddle is a carcass of a horse and a raven.² The Princess has challenged her suitors to propound an unsolvable riddle and the King’s son is the “elected” one; his riddle is exactly Samson’s riddle.

We have to deal with a combined symbolism. In the initiatory process, the neophyte has to solve the dragon’s riddle or to find the location of the dragon’s “powers.” The riddle is an important initiatory trial, a way to unveil the sacred kernel; untying the enigma means to untie the knot of ignorance. That is the case of Oedipus and of Prince Charming in some fairy tales. Ulysses’ last trial represents something similar, even if both, Ulysses and Penelope, know the solution. On the other hand, the hero himself sometimes propounds the riddle. Whoever solves it, the process itself liberates the hero. It is the case of Samson and the King’s son. In the cosmic process, solving the riddle illustrates the “erosion” of the “positive” by the “negative” and the development of the cycle from one end to the other when the hero takes the dragon’s place. Some fairy tales describe only the end of the cycle. The dragon is the holder of the powers and only he knows how to solve the riddle. The “captive virgin” helps the hero to defeat the dragon and start a new cycle. All are related to a sacred wedding (the “Supreme Identity”).³

¹ Oedipus is an “elected” one, with a “biography” similar to Moses, Perseus, Sargon, and many other “heroes.” For a long time his parents were sterile. At last, the Delphic Oracle announces the birth, with the gods’ help, of a boy, but this child will kill his father and take his place. Oedipus (as newborn) is condemned to death by his father, but he escapes, of course, and eventually kills his parent (the king-dragon of the old cycle), solves the *Sphinx*’s riddle (proving that he reached the “initiatory secret”), and as reward marries the queen, his own mother. Obviously, the queen is the Virgin, the absolute Knowledge, and the wedding illustrates the “Supreme Identity.” The moral issue (the so-called “incest”) never applies to sacred stories where the “one thousand feet” are just masks of the “one foot.” “The spouse of the Emperor is not the spouse only, but sister and daughter best beloved!” explains Dante (The Banquet, Anma Libri, 1989, III.12.14). Just for the record we note that Oedipus’ name means the “swollen-footed.”

² Grimm’s Complete Fairy Tales, Barnes & Nobles Books, 1993, p. 625. The raven, like the honey, is an emblem of celestial wisdom and sacerdotal power. Thus, it is Odin and Apollo’s bird (Guerber 17 and Ovid, Metamorphoses, Indiana Univ. Press, 1955, II.539 ff.).

³ Oedipus’s initiation ends with the spiritual wedding, which is his “reward” for solving the riddle. This wedding is the stake in Grimm’s tale. In the same way, Jason marries Medea, the virgin who helped him to

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Samson is the hero and the dragon. The riddle is a “knot” which has to be untied. Untying it has two consequences: first, Samson, the owner of the riddle, acquires liberation and spiritual perfection; secondly, the world is dissolved and a new cycle begins. Samson, as dragon, loses his powers. In both cases, the process is a sacrifice and has the duration of a cycle.⁴

The “minor cycle” lasts seven days, analogue with the seven biblical days of Genesis and corresponding to the seven rays of the Sun. It is described as a continuous feast. The banquet represents the world, which declines to its end. Samson’s wife “wept on his neck for the seven days their feast lasted.” On the seventh day, she convinces her husband to tell her the answer to the riddle. She will betray Samson by telling the solution to the thirty young Philistines. That will finish the feast and the old world. The riddle is untied. The cosmic mesh is untied. On the other hand, Samson as a spiritual peregrine accomplishes an initiation grade and a first liberation. When the riddle is untied, Samson too cuts his mundane bondage. The Philistines “bound him with two new ropes and brought him up from the Rock” (Judges 15:13), and Samson, with God’s help, gets loose.⁵

The “major cycle” repeats the scenario, unveiling a higher level of the spiritual journey. The story also tells us that a new cycle, a new world, is ready to be produced. The similarity, either for the macrocosm or for the microcosm, is stressing the symbolism of the analogy between the spires of the universal manifestation and between the grades of the initiation. Samson, after the liberation, is very thirsty. God opens a spring for him and Samson “drank; his vigour returned and he revived” (Judges 15:19). The thirst illustrates the ignorance and the “lack of waters” at the end of time (the exhaustion of the “powers” spread into the World). It symbolizes also Samson’s “ritual death,” and the dragon’s complete impotence. The divine spring is the *fons vitae* that resurrects the hero and pushes him on to a superior spiritual station. It announces also the birth of a new cycle after the dragon regained his “powers.”⁶

Delilah is Samson’s new wife for the “major cycle,” yet she is just another mask of the same essential female character. Delilah, a Philistine too, a “forbidden” love, has, like the previous wife, an important twofold role. As the “negative” and the infernal pole, she makes the world or the cycle decay. That is Eve’s function when she takes the apple, being the serpent’s associate. Samson’s wife is in this case the Dragon’s exponent, trying to suppress the “positive,” the supernal pole, and the celestial “male” presence, which actually happens at the end of the world. From the initiatory point of view, she is the Virgin, the spiritual

obtain the Golden Fleece, and Theseus marries Ariadne, who helped him to kill the dragon. In fairy tales, this scenario is also present: the “captive virgin” helps the hero to solve the riddle and kill the dragon, or to seize the dragon’s “powers” (sometimes the virgin is the king’s abducted daughter and also the dragon’s wife, sometimes she is the dragon’s daughter).

⁴ Samson is at the same time hero and dragon because “to sacrifice and to be sacrificed are essentially the same”; the victim is the sacrificer himself. Prajâpati (the “lord of creatures”) gives himself up (poured or emptied out), accepting to be sacrificed (Coomaraswamy, *Metaphysics*, p. 108-9). Samson also gives himself up: he voluntarily tells the answer of his riddle, and so does the King’s son in Grimm’s tale.

⁵ Note the importance of the binding symbolism. We should recall that “religion” comes from Latin *religo*, “to bind,” meaning the bondage of the religious community and also the ties with God.

⁶ The Sacrifice means death and rebirth, dispersion as multiplicity and reunification as One, beheading and restoration of the head (Coomaraswamy, *Metaphysics*, p. 120-1; La doctrine, pp. 114-7).

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bride who guides the hero to realize the Liberation. She is the Initiatrix. In both cases she is the activity of the Principle. The two meanings, spiritual and cosmological, are presented in the “major cycle” in more details. The riddle is more direct, concerning the location of Samson’s “powers.” The process develops in four degrees, in accordance with other traditions where the cosmic cycle is considered composed of four secondary cycles. The four Ages are the pearls of the string (Hindu *sûtrâṁsa*), each one similar, yet not identical, with the others. The end of each secondary cycle makes the world fall deeper toward its dissolution, and passing from one cycle to another means cutting the old knots and knotting others. On the other hand, the four degrees are the steps of a celestial ladder, each one symbolizing a liberation.

Delilah asks Samson: “Please tell me where your great strength comes from, and what would be needed to bind you and tame you” (Judges 16:6 ff.). The binding symbolism is again very active. Samson answers, “If I were bound with seven new bowstrings,” and Delilah binds him; yet Samson snaps the bowstrings and gets loose. That is the first stage. Samson cuts the corporeal bondage. Also, the world is now older and less spiritual. Delilah asks a second time and Samson gives her almost the same answer. He is again bound with new ropes, yet Samson gets loose. The soul bondage is now cut; Samson is liberated from the *ego* cage. The third time Samson answers: “If you wove the seven locks of my hair into the warp of a web and fixed the peg firmly, I should lose my strength.” The cosmic meaning is obvious. The hair weaves the universal texture of the Cosmos, Penelope’s texture. The seven rivers or solar rays are producing the World. Yet Samson gets loose again, dissolving the web, ending the third cycle and also liberating himself from the angelic order. The last statement could be strange but the spiritual doctrines will help us. The “elected” one has to surpass the Cosmos, the “Three Worlds” (*Tribhuvana* of Hindu tradition), i. e., the three levels *Corpus, Anima, Spiritus*, to realize the supreme and absolute Liberation and to obtain the perfect Knowledge. Meister Eckhart speaks even of cutting the ties of God and escaping from God in order to reach the Godhead. It is not enough to tame the *ego*; the angelic bondage is angelic, yet is still bondage.⁷

“The Fourth” (*Turiya*) is in Hindu tradition the supreme order of Reality, the house of the Principle. The fourth time Delilah will get the right answer. Samson’s “powers” are located in his seven locks. The hair is the supreme bondage. Cutting those locks symbolizes, as we already mentioned it, the supreme Liberation of Samson.⁸ On the other hand, it indicates the

⁷ “So far as the Self is concerned it has really no bondage in any of the four states.... The delusion of bondage fabricated by ignorance from time immemorial can be removed only by knowledge, and for this purpose the term ‘liberation’ (*mukti*) has been usually accepted.... The firm conviction that there is neither bondage nor liberation is the supreme purpose of all efforts.” See *The Spiritual Teaching of Ramana Maharshi*, Shambhala, 1972, pp. 41-2. The supreme stage is the Taoist Void or Nothingness (Alan Watts, *Tao*, Pantheon Books, 1957, p. 23), which, paradoxically, is identical with the complete Plenitude. This Nothingness is Meister Eckhart’s Godhead (the abyss without end, the simple origin, the silent desert, in contrast with God as Creator), and corresponds to the Hindu Dragon without eyes and feet, emptied and impotent. The initiate, emptying his heart of all creatures (mundane bonds), and of God (divine bondage as Being and Creator), obtains the Nothingness and Emptiness, which is also the “plenitude and abundance of Godhead,” beyond day (manifestation) and night (non-manifestation) (Eckhart, *Sermons*, I, p. 240, II, p. 146-8, *Traité*, p. 111-2).

⁸ The sacrificer’s “death” is at the same time his salvation, and the Self is the reward. In Hindu tradition, the sacrifice means cutting off the “vital knots” (hair, skin, blood, flesh, bones, marrow), crowned with the cutting of the “topknot” hair, which speeds up the liberation (Coomaraswamy, *Metaphysics*, p. 126). In

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liberation of the solar rays and celestial waters, causing the complete manifestation of the Cosmos as an independent texture, which will activate its final dissolution. Delilah's cosmogonical deed (cutting Samson's locks) is similar with Judith's heroic deed (beheading Holofernes), stressing the equivalence between cutting the hair and beheading.⁹ Nonetheless, if this capital act is viewed not by itself, but as the conclusion of a series of ritual acts, as it happens in Samson's story, then the whole process is not only the cosmogony but also the decaying and ending of the Cosmos. Even the final act, the cutting of the seven locks, is a sign illustrating the evolvement of the cycle to its end. Samson becomes weaker and weaker with each lock cut (Judges 16:20). It is an obvious process of "erosion," and at the end the Philistines "put out his eyes." Samson becomes blind, his blindness illustrating the infernal ignorance of the dying Cosmos and the dragon "without eyes," but also Samson's spiritual transformation. The hero abandons the mundane sight for the divine vision, now seeing with the Eye of the Heart.

Eventually, a last bondage is presented. The Philistines "fettered him with a double chain of bronze, and he spent his time turning the mill in prison." Samson, blind and hairless, turning a mockery of the Wheel of the World, is a precise image of the Dragon at the end of time. Then, "he was put to stand between the pillars.... And Samson put his arms round the two middle pillars supporting the building, and threw all his weight against them ... and the building fell on the chiefs and on all the people there" (Judges 16:26-29). The *Ragnarok* is depicted as a total destruction. The building is the symbol of the whole Cosmos and the two pillars correspond to the "Pillars of Hercules" representing the essential duality of the World.¹⁰ The dragon-Samson absorbs the duality and the universal manifestation, ending the Existence.

The four stages are not identical, even though all are connected with binding. The first two, dealing with the individual and formal world, with the corporeal and subtle (*psyche*) orders, are described as cords and ropes of bondage. The last two, referring to the informal world and to the supreme one, are symbolized by Samson's hair. The same distinction is present in Grimm's fairy tale, "The Riddle." The Princess must solve the riddle; otherwise, she has to marry the King's son. Two nights she orders, first her maid, secondly her lady-in-waiting, to steal into the Prince's bedroom and listen; maybe he will talk aloud in his dreams and betray the secret of the riddle. They fail. The third night the Princess herself comes into the bedroom, and the King's son, wide-awake, gives her the correct answer. The first two trials regard the body-soul aggregate. The third one, involving the Virgin, regards the spiritual order.

Christian tradition, St. Paul explains the difference between the unveiled head (the glory of Christ, the Self) and the veiled head (the glory of man, the *ego*) as the difference between the short hair (or cut off hair) and long hair (1 Corinthians 11).

⁹ Holofernes is the dragon. He confiscated the waters, and the children of Israel were exposed to die of thirst. Judith beheads Holofernes and releases the waters, which means the birth of a new world. See *The Missing Books of the Bible*, Halo Press, 1996, vol. I, p. 157 ff. and Coomaraswamy, *La doctrine*, p. 105.

¹⁰ The pillars are the two "capstones," the two extreme and fundamental stations of the sun, the solstices, related to the two Saints John and the two pillars of Solomon's Temple. The columns are also connected to the motto *non plus ultra*. It means that the whole Universe is contained between them. See Guénon, *Symboles*, p. 257.

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There are two other Grimm's fairy tales closely connected with Samson's story. The first one is "The Devil's Three Gold Hairs" (Grimm 190). The tale starts by presenting a miraculous birth of a boy. He was born with a caul enveloping his head, as a divine mark. The king tries to kill the newborn, being afraid the boy will replace him. He places the newborn in a box and throws the box into a river. The box is the "Ark" and the "World Egg," and the newborn is the seed of the new cycle. The child of fortune escapes and marries the king's daughter, but the king, still trying to kill him, sends the boy to bring the Devil's three gold hairs. The king is not only the evil aspect of the Dragon; he is also the Initiator, the spiritual teacher who challenges the neophyte to pass the initiatory trials. During his journey to the Devil's home, the boy will be asked three questions, all symbolic and regarding the spiritual realization. The answers are known only by the Devil. Those questions compose the riddle. In this fairy tale, the Delilah is the Devil's mother; she will find out the answers and will pull out the three gold hairs. The Devil is the dragon, and the three gold hairs correspond to Samson's seven locks and symbolize the double process, cosmological and spiritual, as deciphered previously. The second fairy tale is called "The Griffin." Here the Griffin is also betrayed by his wife and will give her the answers for the riddle.¹¹

In a Romanian fairy tale, "A Peasant's Tale,"¹² the dragon takes Samson's place; also, the dragon's wife is the "captive virgin." Prince Charming comes to rescue the girl, and in order to kill the dragon, Prince Charming asks the young woman to find out where his strength comes from. Eventually, impressed by the girl's tears, the dragon gives the answer: "My power is located in a sow living in a marsh full of sweet milk. In the sow lives a hare, in the hare a quail and in the quail there are three worms. They constitute my power." We can translate. The dragon is the king of the old, dying cycle. The three worms are the three gold hairs and could symbolize the "Three Worlds"; the "power" is also the sacred kernel covered by many skins, representing the spiritual seed of the new cycle, hiding in the "World Egg." Prince Charming obtains the "power," kills the dragon, and marries the virgin. He becomes the new king of the new world and the future dragon.¹³

Regardless of their names, masks or forms, Samson and Delilah are universally present. The fairy tales offer a striking similitude with the biblical story and we have to assume that, instead of considering them as "children's literature," they are timeless sacred writings. The only question is, are we capable of fully proving it?

¹¹ The Fairy Tales of the Brothers Grimm were published in 1812 and 1815. In 1819, E. T. A. Hoffmann writes a pseudo-fairy tale called *Klein Zaches genannt Zinnober*, in which Cinnabar, the dwarf, similar to Grimm's Devil, has three fire-like red hairs representing his bewitched "powers." Hoffmann is one of the first famous writers who discredited the fairy tales and degraded the spirituality, promoting the tenebrous and "Gothic" stories.

¹² Petre Ispirescu, *Legende sau basmele românilor*, Facla, 1984, p. 200.

¹³ In Celtic tradition, we find something similar. In Peredur's story, a black man tells about the Black Worm of the Barrow: "There is a mound that is called the Dolorous Mound, and in the mound there is a barrow, and in the barrow there is a Worm, and in the Worm's tail there is a stone ... and fighting against that Worm I lost my eye." See *The Mabinogion*, Everyman, 1994, p. 173.