

The Mysteries of the Letter Nūn

by

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The *nūn* (ن) is the 14th letter of both the Arabic and the Hebrew alphabets, its numerical value being 50; it occupies, however, a more especially significant place in the Arabic alphabet, of which it ends the first half, the total number of letters being 28 as against the 22 of the Hebrew alphabet. As for its symbolic correspondences, this letter, in the Islamic tradition, is considered principally as representing *al-Hūt*, the whale; and this accords with the original meaning of the word *nūn* itself, from which the letter takes its name and which also signifies “fish”; it is by reason of this meaning that *Sayyidnā Yūnus* (the prophet Jonah) is called *Dhū-n-Nūn*. This naturally refers to the traditional symbolism of the fish and more especially to certain aspects of this symbolism that we have mentioned in a previous essay,¹ notably that of the “Fish-Savior,” represented by the *Matsya-avatāra* of the Hindu tradition and the *Ichthus* of the early Christians. Moreover, in this respect, the whale fulfils a similar role to that allotted by other traditions to the dolphin, and like the latter corresponds to the zodiacal sign of Capricorn insofar as it represents the solstitial gateway giving access to the “ascending way”; but the similarity to the *Matsya-Avatāra* is perhaps the most striking, as is shown by certain considerations deriving from the geometrical form of the letter *nūn* itself, particularly if they are related to the biblical story of the prophet Jonah.

To understand the question properly it should be remembered that *Vishnu*, manifesting himself in the form of a fish (*matsya*), commands *Satyavrata*, the future *Manu Vaivasvata*, to construct the Ark in which the seeds of the future world are to be enclosed, and that, in this same form, he then guides the Ark over the waters during the cataclysm which marks the separation of two successive *Manvantaras*. The role of *Satyavrata* is here similar to that of *Sayyidnā Nūḥ* (Noah), whose Ark also contains all those elements which are destined to survive until the restoration of the world after the deluge; it makes no matter that the application may be different, owing to the fact that the biblical deluge, in its more immediate significance, appears to mark the beginning of a more limited cycle than the *Manvantara*; if not the same event, they are at least analogous to one another, since in each case the former state of the world is destroyed in order to

¹ See « Quelques aspects du symbolisme du poisson », *Études Traditionnelles*, February, 1936.

make place for a new state. If we now compare what has just been said with the story of Jonah, we shall see that the whale, instead of simply playing the part of the fish which conducts the Ark, is in reality identified with the Ark itself; thus Jonah remains enclosed in the body of the whale, like *Satyavrata* and Noah in the Ark, during a period which is for him also, if not for the exterior world, a period of “obscuration”, corresponding to the interval between two states or two modalities of existence; here again the difference is only secondary, as the same symbolic figures are always susceptible of a double application, macrocosmic and microcosmic. Moreover, the emergence of Jonah from the belly of the whale has always been regarded as a symbol of resurrection, and thus of the passage of the being to a new state; and this in turn may be related to the idea of “birth” attaching to the letter *nūn*, particularly in the Hebrew *Kabbalah*, to be understood spiritually as a “new birth”, that is to say as a regeneration of the being, individual or cosmic.

The same thing is moreover clearly indicated by the actual form of the Arabic letter *nūn*, which is made up of the lower half of a circumference and a point representing the center of this circumference. Now the lower half of a circumference is also a figure of the Ark floating on the waters, and the point at its center represents the seed enclosed within the Ark; the central position of this point shows in addition that this seed is the “seed of immortality”, the indestructible “core” which escapes all exterior dissolutions. It may also be remarked that the half-circumference in question is a schematic equivalent of the cup; thus, like the latter, it has in some respects the signification of a “matrix” in which the as yet undeveloped seed is contained, and which, as we shall see later on, is identical with the inferior or “terrestrial” half of the “World Egg”.² Considered in this aspect, as the “passive” element of spiritual transmutation, *al-Ḥūt* also represents in a certain sense every individuality insofar as it contains the “seed of immortality” at its center, represented symbolically as the heart; and in this connection we will recall the strict relationship which exists between the symbolism of the heart and that of the cup and the “World Egg”. The development of the spiritual seed implies that the being emerges from his individual state and from the cosmic environment to which it belongs, just as Jonah’s restoration to life coincides with his emergence from the belly of the whale; and we may mention in passing that this emergence is equivalent to the issuing forth of the being from the initiatic cavern, the concavity of which is similarly represented by the half-circumference of the letter *nūn*.

The new birth necessarily implies a death in relation to the former state, whether in the case of an individual or a world; death and birth or resurrection are in reality inseparable from one another, being simply the two opposite faces of the same change of state. In the alphabet the letter *nūn* immediately follows the letter *mīm* (م), one of the principal significations of which is death (*al-mawt*). The form of this letter depicts the being in a completely contracted or merely

² By a curious concordance, the sense of “matrix” (in Sanskrit *yonī*) is also contained in the Greek word *delphus*, which is at the same time the name of the dolphin.

virtual state, to which the attitude of prostration corresponds ritually; but this virtuality, which in appearance is an extinction, becomes at the same time, by virtue of the concentration of all the being's possibilities in one unique and indestructible point, the seed from which all development in the higher states will proceed.

It should be added that the symbolism of the whale possesses not only a beneficent but also a "malefic" aspect, which, apart from general considerations relating to the double meaning of symbols, is justified in a more special way by its connection with the two forms of death and resurrection under which every change of state appears, according to whether it is regarded in relation to the earlier or the subsequent state. The cavern is a place of burial at the same time that it is a place of "rebirth", and the whale fulfils precisely this double role in the story of Jonah; furthermore, might it not be said that the *Matsya-Avatāra* itself is first presented in the sinister guise of announcer of the cataclysm, before assuming the role of Savior? In its malefic aspect, the whale is clearly allied to the Hebrew Leviathan;³ but in the Arab tradition this aspect is represented primarily by the "daughters of the whale" (*banāt al-Ḥūt*), who are equivalent from the astrological standpoint to *Rahu* and *Ketu* in the Hindu tradition, notably in their relation to the eclipses, and who, it is said, "will drink the ocean" on the last day of the cycle, on that day when "the stars will rise in the west and set in the east". We cannot pursue this subject further without digressing from our main theme; but we may remark in passing that here once again we find a direct allusion to the end of the cycle and the change of state which follows; this in itself is significant and brings added confirmation to what we have been saying.

Returning to the form of the letter *nūn*, a further observation may be made which is of considerable interest from the point of view of the relations existing between the alphabets of the different traditional languages: in the Sanskrit alphabet, the corresponding letter *na*, reduced to its fundamental geometrical elements, is likewise composed of a half-circumference and a point; but here, the convexity being turned upwards, it is formed by the upper half of the circumference, and not by the lower half as in the Arabic *nūn*. We thus have the same figure placed the other way up, or more exactly two figures that are strictly complementary to each other. If they are joined together, the two central point's naturally merge into one another, and this gives a circle with a point at its center, a figure which represents the complete cycle and which is also the sign of the Sun in astrology and of gold in alchemy.⁴ Just as the lower half-circumference is a figure of the Ark, so the upper half-circumference represents the rainbow, which is analogous to the Ark in the strictest meaning of the word, all true analogy being "in-

³ The Hindu *Makara* (which is also a sea monster), although above all possessing the "beneficent" meaning attached to the sign of Capricorn, whose place it occupies in the Zodiac, has nonetheless in many of its representations certain characteristics which recall the "typhonian" symbolism of the crocodile.

⁴ One will recall here the symbolism of the "Spiritual Sun" and the "Embryo of gold" (*Hiranyagarbha*) in the Hindu tradition; moreover, according to certain correspondences, *nūn* is the planetary letter of the Sun.

verse". These two half-circumferences are also the two halves of the "World Egg", the one "terrestrial", in the "Lower Waters", the other "celestial", in the "Upper Waters"; and the circular figure, which was complete at the beginning of the cycle before the separation of the two halves, must be reconstituted at the end of the cycle. We may say, therefore, that the reunion of the two figures in question represents the accomplishment of the cycle, by the junction of its beginning and its end; and this appears particularly clearly if we refer to the "solar" symbolism, since the figure of the Sanskrit *na* corresponds to the sun rising and that of the Arabic *nūn* to the sun setting. On the other hand the complete circular figure is commonly the symbol of the number 10, the center being 1 and the circumference 9; but here, being obtained by the union of the two *nūn*, it has the value of $2 \times 50 = 10^2$, which indicates that it is in the "intermediary world" that the junction must be brought about; this junction is in fact impossible in the "inferior world", which is the domain of division and "separativity", and on the other hand it is always accomplished in the "upper" world, where it is realized principally in a permanent and unchangeable manner in the "eternal present".

To these already lengthy remarks we will add but one thing further: it follows from what we have just been saying that the accomplishment of the cycle, as we have envisaged it, should have a certain correlation, in the historical order, with the meeting of the two traditional forms which correspond to its beginning and its end, and which have Sanskrit and Arabic respectively for their sacred languages: the Hindu tradition, on the one hand, inasmuch as it represents the most direct heritage of the Primordial Tradition, and, on the other hand, the Islamic tradition which, as the "Seal of Prophecy", represents the ultimate form of traditional orthodoxy for the present cycle.

(Original editorial inclusion that followed the essay:)

You may try thousands of times but nothing can be achieved without God's grace. One cannot see God without His grace. Is it an easy thing to receive the grace of God? One must altogether renounce egotism; one cannot see God as long as one feels, 'I am the doer.'...God doesn't easily appear in the heart of a man who feels himself to be his own master. But God can be seen the moment His grace descends.

Sri Ramakrishna.