

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF LEE HARVEY OSWALD:
A JUNGIAN APPROACH

IRA PROGOFF

New York, N. Y.

When an extraordinary event like the assassination of a president occurs, there is great stimulation to enlarge the dimensions of our psychological understanding. We must ask ourselves more than the analytical questions of why the event occurred. We must ask in various contexts what its meaning is, and whether there are any larger implications of life that we may infer from the event.

A psychiatric approach by itself can make relatively small contribution to answering these questions. It can describe a few diagnostic concepts and relate these to the assassination, implying, but by no means proving, a causal connection. The larger questions remain, and can be comprehended only when the event of the assassination has been viewed from more than one direction. From the psychological side the most promising line of approach would seem to be to reconstruct the life of the killer as far as possible, and to look there for clues to the meaning of the event.

Attempts have been made to understand the psychology of Lee Oswald from a general psychiatric point of view (11), from a specifically psychoanalytical point of view (4), and from an Adlerian point of view (1). Without wishing to contradict these authorities, I should like to describe the development of Oswald's life, as it seems to me, as a preparation for an inquiry into the meaning and the implications of the event. What follows, then, is an interpretation of the life and personality of Lee Harvey Oswald as it led to the act of the assassination. Since I have no other source of information, I am accepting the current consensus of opinion as stated in *The Warren Report* that Oswald alone and without accomplices carried out the murder of President Kennedy. If that assumption is eventually found to be incorrect, some, but not all, of my interpretations would have to be altered.

ABSENCE OF FATHER FIGURE

Oswald's life began under a cloud because of the fact that his father had died before he was born. He had no affirmative relation-

ship with a father figure of any kind, for when his mother remarried, that also ended in failure. The time he spent at the age of three in a Lutheran children's home must also have increased the psychological gap left by the lack of family identification.

We can only speculate as to the psychological effect of the absence of a father figure. In principle, the only safe approach is to assume that the psychological role of the father figure is different for each individual since it varies with each situation. In Oswald's case, since he never knew his physical father as a person there was a gap in his experience of his own origin. In a patrilineal culture like Western civilization the primary role of the father is as a connection to the generations that have gone before. In these terms, the specific personal traits of the father are not primary. They may be important, but only with respect to the specific social situation. The father is the link with history, with a specific national or racial group. He is the young man's biological link to the continuity of life.

This transpersonal aspect of the father, the archetypal father, sets the basis for the young man's first feelings of his own identity and of his own value. He may eventually reject this and substitute a new conception of his identity and value, carrying through the so-called "killing of the father." The active presence of a father image is essential, however, to provide the young man with a sense of himself in order that the growth process can get under way. Then it can proceed through the early years of life and into that time in late adolescence when it can legitimately be overthrown and a new sense of identity achieved.

What is the psychological effect of having no father image at all? In such a situation a vacuum is set up at the very point where it is most essential for a clear and strongly felt image to be present. With no father image, all that has been said about the necessity of a transpersonal father image is then thrown into reverse. There is no feeling of connection to the continuity of the human species, or to a specific nation or race, and there is no larger sense of belonging. Without it in the essential early years, there is nothing to provide a sense of identity or a feeling of personal worth as may be derived from the awareness of one's ancestry. The feeling of this racial resource in some degree is essential. Without it, the young man's attempt to form himself as an individual is at a great disadvantage. Lee Oswald began his life with this lack, and he sought in nonconscious ways to overcome and balance it.

MOTHER IMAGE

The mother image played a quite different role in Oswald's life. Because of the nature of the family structure in modern American society, it has become common for the mother to have the greater personal effect upon the growing boy. In most situations, this is because the greater portion of the boy's time is spent with the mother while the father is away at work, and because the mother controls the day-to-day patterns of living. In Oswald's case, the effect of the mother was exaggerated because she was the only parent with whom he had a direct personal connection.

In such a circumstance the quality of the mother becomes of primary importance. Her traits are bound to seep into the personality of the young man, to be absorbed by him at the nonconscious levels of his psyche, and to form the main lines of his style of life. This, however, is a *derivative* style of life. It is not his own. It is rather taken over *as though* it were his own. The young man enacts the ideas and values of his mother, mistaking them for his own goals of life. I have elsewhere described this as the *environmental self*, indicating that this image of one's identity which is derived from the social environs of the person is in contrast to the seed self from which authentic growth proceeds (6, pp. 170-181; see also 9).

In such a social situation where the young man absorbs the traits of his mother, the personality of the mother is naturally of great importance. It appears that Oswald's growth as a person was greatly hindered in this respect as well. To say this is not to imply a judgment of Mrs. Oswald. Her life, widowed as she was at a relatively early age, was filled with hardships that were beyond her control. The journalistic accounts of her which include one paperback book (10) describe her however as the possessor of several difficult traits.

Like many women who feel the pressures of economic insecurity, she developed an artificial hardness, a false facade of masculinity, with which to shield herself from society. She was a hard worker and a rigid organizer. Her home has been described as being not only spotlessly clean but meticulously arranged. "A place for everything and everything in its place." She was full of opinions, but she stated them as though they were facts. If something went wrong, it was not she who was the cause of the difficulty. Some one else had brought it about. There is considerable indication that she was, especially in the earlier years of Oswald's life, a very difficult person

with whom to live. But he seems to have adapted himself to his situation of being her son with an attitude that was remarkably philosophic and loyal. A probation officer who interviewed Oswald when he was thirteen years of age quotes him as saying in answer to a question about his mother, "Well, I've got to live with her. I guess I love her" (11, p. 358).

ADOLESCENT REBIRTH

The young Oswald endured many hardships as a consequence of being the child of this erratic widow. Mrs. Oswald married a third time (Lee had been the son of her second husband) and this marriage ended in divorce. The family never remained at any abode for a long period of time. Changes in school increased the boy's tendency toward isolation so that he tended to be without friends, a loner. All these misfortunes of his situation built in Oswald, as might be expected, a marked feeling of inferiority; and as might equally be expected, these feelings of inferiority and misfortune were compensated by fanciful wishes of achieving power in the world. A psychiatrist who examined him at age thirteen reported that he had a vivid fantasy life with daydreams that tended toward omnipotence.

There is indication that in his early teens Oswald entered a period of social withdrawal. On the one hand, this is an aspect of the enforced loneliness that resulted from the nonsocial background of his family. It must also be seen, however, as a stage in a psychological process by which the adolescent was reaching out toward a context of meaning that would make his life livable. The characteristic of his life with his mother was its inadequacy and persistent frustration. It was this from which he withdrew into a world of television and personal fantasy.

Seen in retrospect, this withdrawal may seem to be an expression of Oswald's neurotic isolationism. It is, however, also a normal and valid part of the adolescent period during which the young person is reaching toward a new meaning for his life. Where shall he find it? In order for a new meaning to be found, the old context of life must be rejected and overcome. When the old view of life dies, a new view can be established and a new style of personality brought to birth. This is the psychological pattern of death and rebirth that is the prototype of initiation to maturity as it occurs throughout

human society. In modern times, if an adolescent has a favorable childhood it is necessary for him to live through a period during which he rejects it and finally destroys it. Only when he has killed it off can he start to build a life that is truly his own. This new life will be based upon a new truth, not one that he has taken over from his parents, but one that he himself has discovered and experienced.

For all adolescents this cycle of rejection and discovery is necessary. For Oswald because of the emotional poverty of his environment it was especially urgent. For him it meant a period of great psychological turbulence. Although the tests he was given at this time indicated a strong intelligence, he was recurrently in trouble with the authorities during this time. His withdrawal from outer reality was part of this. It increased the confusion of his existence, but it was inherent in the growth process of personality by which the individual spontaneously reaches toward a meaning larger than that which his old life has provided.

A natural cycle must be lived through in this phase of development. The energies of the psyche retreat. They go back, away from outer reality; and they go down beneath consciousness where they activate non-rational types of perception. This is the withdrawal phase. Its psychological purpose is to draw from the depth of the psyche the materials and insights that will make possible a new integration of personality based upon a new context of meaning. Everything depends upon whether this new context of meaning is actually found. If it is, it rounds off the cycle of initiation, and the individual can take his next step in life and emerge into a larger, more satisfying phase of experience. If not, the painful period of withdrawal must be continued, entered into again and again and deepened with increasing psychological turmoil, until, if ever, it is resolved.

MARX AND RUSSIA

For a person in Oswald's situation, an easy resolution of this constant condition of inner tension was not possible. The closest he came to finding a means of resolving it was at age sixteen when he had his first taste of the writings of Karl Marx. This experience, Oswald said, was like, "a very religious man opening the bible for the first time." At first sight it may seem that he was attracted to Marxism because of his resentment of the economic poverty of his life. The indication, however, is that Oswald was seeking to com-

pensate for the meagerness of his personal existence by finding a truly encompassing utopian view of the world. There even seems to have been a time when he tried to take a step beyond Marxism in a spiritual direction. He enrolled in the college at Churwalden, Switzerland where the course of study was based upon the writings of Albert Schweitzer. Oswald was actually accepted by this institution when he was twenty years of age, but for some reason he never attended it. Instead he went to Russia and applied for Russian citizenship.

This gesture on Oswald's part must be interpreted symbolically. Often an act in one's waking life is the equivalent of a dream in that it expresses in symbolic form something that is required to fill a deep need of the personality. Oswald had not yet found the new meaning which would complete his initiation to life. He therefore needed to carry through the cycle of destroying his old environmental values in order to make possible the establishment of a new, more satisfying structure of belief. This first step is implicit in his desire to renounce his American citizenship. And the second step, the rebirth to a new self embodied in a new social identity was contained in his desire to embrace Sovietism and become a Russian citizen.

Here the sad fate of Oswald becomes poignant and ironic. He failed in his attempt at initiation, for the Russians rejected him. Nonetheless, he persisted in seeking to make his new perception of truth a reality. He remained in Russia even though he retained the status of an alien. He supported himself by working in a factory. It was during this period that Oswald married.

MARRIAGE AND REJECTION

His marriage to Marina, a young pharmacist, must also be understood as an aspect of his search for meaning. The marriage seems indeed to have been based upon a significant misconception. Oswald thought of Marina idealistically as a dedicated Communist. Later when he returned to America with her and discovered that she had a normal love of material pleasures he was disillusioned. The disenchantment and confusion which he experienced is a clear indication that something more than banal sexuality was involved in the marriage. In Oswald's choice of Marina we see another instance of the psychological fact that a man's idealistic love for woman is a projection of an inner image which he senses in his depths, but has

not yet been able to live in the actuality of his existence. Not being able to embody it in himself, he projects his still un-lived image upon the woman. She thus embodies his ideal and he idealizes her, often in the most illusionary manner. Everyone else can see the woman as she is in actuality, but to the man involved she is the embodiment of his image of a new self. Love of this kind must be blind, for only in this blindness, or unconsciousness, can it carry out the psychologically necessary step of projecting the image of the new self, the self not yet lived, on to the idealized woman.

Oswald saw in Marina a person who embodied the new truth which he had not yet been able to make real in his life since the Russian government would not accept him. She was for him, in the language of C. G. Jung, a "soul image" an "anima figure," a person who represented in the outer world a still un-lived intimation of reality drawn from the depth of the psyche (3, p. 11ff.). When his projection was checked out against the actualities and pressures of married life, Oswald discovered that Marina was not all the dedicated utopian he had envisioned. She was what anyone could have seen and told him, a flesh and blood woman with materialist desires and a will of her own.

It is significant that on the night before the assassination Oswald went to Marina with an offer to give her the washing machine which she had wanted him to buy. But now she rejected it. She was living with a friend and no longer needed the household appliance since she did not intend to return to him. This rejection was an event of multiple frustration for Oswald. It was a frustration on the personal and sexual levels which he experienced as a husband in a marriage that was breaking. But if we remember that to Oswald Marina was a symbol of his quest for new meaning in a Marxian society, we will perceive its larger overtones. Not only had he been rejected by the Russian Government, thus being prevented from achieving a new social identity; but he had also been rejected by the one individual who embodied for him a personal relation to his ideal. The feeling of frustration must have been intense, and the pain and passion of the anger that accompanied it must have been equally strong.

VIOLENCE

We come then to the question of violence as an outcome of the intense frustration of the individual's quest for meaning and personal identity. What had been frustrated in Oswald was his attempt to

be reborn, to become a new person, to carry through the initiation that would bring a new self to birth. But this is no ordinary frustration. It is of a totally different dimension than the type of frustration in which a person is prevented from achieving or receiving something he has desired. This is a stoppage of the life process itself. At such a point in an individual's existence the possibilities of psychological growth have come to a dead end. One has come to an unbridgeable impasse, or at least so it seems while the passion and the anger are still high. At that moment the person feels that he is consigned by destiny forever to remain encumbered by his old self, that he will never be freed from it. In Oswald's case it meant that he would never be able to fulfill the visions of utopian meaning and personal power with which he had compensated for the low feelings of inferiority he had carried since his early years.

What kind of act is vast enough to give expression and release to so fundamental a frustration? An act of great, destructive violence. But such an act must come in a particular form because it has a symbolic role to enact. It must fulfill that phase of the initiation cycle in which the death of the old environmental self is brought about.

An act of killing is necessary, but the killing may come in various forms. If it is turned outward as overt violence, it will take the form of the murder of a person who represents the old self. If it is turned inward, it will become the murder of oneself, either an actual suicide or as a slow gnawing self-destruction. It may also, if it is turned outward but does not reach an intensity of overt violence, vent itself gradually and insidiously as the daily psychological destruction of another person quietly performed.

It may well be that the impasse of frustration to which Oswald had been brought that night could have released itself in any of these forms. Perhaps the physical act of violence need not have happened. The moment might have passed without the cup of death having to be drunk. But then an intangible factor of chance, or meaning, entered the scene. "It was," as Ansbacher et al. point out, "an incredible coincidence that the route of the President led past Oswald's new job location" (1, p. 64). The constellation of events could not possibly have been planned by the conscious mind. Public information of the President's route was given only a few days before the event, and Oswald happened by the purest coincidence to work there.

SYNCHRONICITY

Now we must note a peculiar fact that cannot easily be explained. Two disparate lines of events suddenly met and become congruent with one another, thus bringing about a new event of world-shaking impact. On the outer level, unrelated to the life of Oswald, President Kennedy in Washington was making decisions which would lead him to be in Dallas passing beneath the window where Oswald worked, just in the midst of Oswald's lunch hour. On the inner level, Oswald had reached a state of frustration in his psychological quest for meaning that could only be released in an act of violence strong enough to bring death either to his old environmental self *or to some symbolic representation of it*. Ever since his reading of Marx, America, his mother country, had been the symbol of his old self to Oswald. He had sought to get rid of it when he went to Russia, and now the highest symbol of that country was passing beneath his window. The inner events of his life had come together with a line of outer events, and the synchronicity of the two—to use Jung's phrase (2)—had an uncanny correspondence.

Who can say what was actually in Oswald's mind at the fateful moment? In retrospect it seems clear that ever since the previous evening, he must have been in the grip of something that seized him and lifted him with an intensity even greater than that generated by his personal frustrations. It drew him out of himself and held him taut in mid air, finally to fling him as a sword pointed at the world. In that single strange, crazed moment it was as though he was not Lee Harvey Oswald but Sir Modred, the ill-fated bastard born of incest, the outcast of society consigned by destiny to kill the hero, King Arthur, and to be killed in return (5).

How strange an event that was! It was indeed unthinkable by the rational mind. It seemed when it happened to be unfathomable; and this vast, dark, abyssmal quality still covers the event whenever the intellect attempts to understand what took place there. No description of the factors involved quite accounts for the enormity of what transpired. Something in its aura gives it a strange quality, as though it were not altogether a natural event. Yet it can hardly be classified as supernatural. Perhaps subnatural. No, not that either.

Now we are reaching toward something that is hard to say. There is a dimension of human existence in which it seems that the individual who acts is not the true agent directing his action. He

acts, he is the one who presses the trigger, but it is as though something beyond him is doing it. This is the dimension of myth, when the mythic makes itself real in the actuality of life, and fills itself out with specific persons and places, flesh and blood. The events of personal life lead up to the mythic event, and provide the contents and circumstances out of which it comes to pass. But they themselves are not the event. Something that is more than personal, causes the event to happen. Thus the continuity of events within the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, his questing and his repeated frustration, all the inner continuity of his life which is what comprises the *psychology* of the person, drew him to the time and place at which the shooting occurred. But the psychology of Lee Harvey Oswald was not all that was required to make the dreadful event come to pass. It was necessary also that a parallel chain of events bring John F. Kennedy to the spot in Dallas at the time when the shooting would be possible.

THE MYTHIC EVENT

That these two chains of events which had no causal relationship to each other should meet so conveniently may well be considered to be chance. But the impulse to action at the given moment was clearly more than chance. Nonetheless, it cannot be understood merely as an act of arbitrary personal decision; nor can it be understood as an event that was psychologically determined. Some additional factor was present, and it was this factor that crystallized the situation, giving shape and form to its component events.

What is this formative factor? It is mercurial, too intangible to be analytically described; but it is real and its effects are visible. A myth is not only an outwardly false belief about something. It may also be the quintessence of truth, at once the core and the context of meaning, providing both the formative factor that crystallizes a situation and also its significance, its meaning in the larger continuity of life.

From the study of history we can discern definite patterns in which such mythic events tend to appear. One of these patterns is the situation in which the highest, most beloved, most noble, heroic figure in a society is brought low through a foul blow dealt by an ignoble, despised member of the community who dies as a result of his act. An instance of such a mythic event in the history of Western civilization is the killing of King Arthur by Sir Modred. This seems indeed to be a prototype of the double death of Kennedy and Oswald.

It is as though they were both caught up and victimized by a transpersonal patterning of events, an active principle which uncannily crossed the boundaries of time and causality, and brought a mythic event into the actuality of history. This should enable us to realize that myths are enacted not only in the dark past of primordial history but also in the midst of us in the modern world, even on our television screens.

Myths of this active, formative type break into the world from time to time for reasons that are not yet clear to us. It seems, however, that mythic events tend to occur at critical points in human history when the directions and styles of life are being reformed. Thus mythic events lie at the heart of the founding of the great religions. They have occurred also with major consequences at those crucial moments when the great civilizations were being reshaped and given their historic thrust. If mythic events are beginning to transpire in modern times, that may well be the sign that we are arriving at a new turning point in history, and that the course of human events is about to be reshaped in fundamental ways (7, chap. 6; see also 8).

REFERENCES

1. ANSBACHER, H. L., ANSBACHER, ROWENA R., SHIVERICK, D., & SHIVERICK, KATHLEEN. Lee Harvey Oswald: an Adlerian interpretation. *Psychoanal. Rev.*, 1966, 53(3), 55-66. Also in *J. Indiv. Psychol.*, 1967, 23, 24-34.
2. JUNG, C. G. Synchronicity: an acausal connecting principle. In C. G. Jung & W. Pauli. *The interpretation of nature and the psyche*. Bollingen Series 51. New York: Pantheon Books, 1955.
3. JUNG, C. G. *Aion*. Bollingen Series 20. New York: Pantheon Books, 1959.
4. KATZ, J. President Kennedy's assassination. *Psychoanal. Rev.*, 1964, 51(4), 121-124. Also in *J. Indiv. Psychol.*, 1967, 23, 20-23.
5. MALORY, T. *Le morte d'Arthur*. New York: Mentor Books, 1962.
6. PROGOFF, I. *Depth psychology and modern man*. New York: Julian Press, 1959.
7. PROGOFF, I. *The symbolic and the real*. New York: Julian Press, 1963.
8. PROGOFF, I. The integrity of life and death. In *Erano's Jahrbuch 1964*. Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1965. Pp. 201-243.
9. PROGOFF, I. Form, time and opus: the dialectic of the creative psyche. In *Erano's Jahrbuch 1965*. Zurich: Rhein-Verlag, 1966.
10. STAFFORD, JEAN. *A mother in history*. New York: Bantam Books, 1966.
11. *The Warren Report*. New York: Bantam Books, 1964.