

**Ali Baba and the Entrance Problem:  
Prolemegolenon for a Future Paper on the Entrance Problem in PDI**

Greg Mogenson

Samina Salahuddin has asked me to write a little article for the ISPDI newsletter. Though I have no time to do anything of the sort, I readily agree to do so. But what shall I write about? What shall my topic be? Well, there is the theme of our society's upcoming workshop in Toronto, "The Entrance Problem." I could write about that. Some years ago I presented on that theme in a seminar I gave. I could just find those old notes and pull something together from out of them. But, no, that would be shirking the task! Samina asked me today. I should accept the challenge of writing from where I am at now.

Perhaps, there is some fairytale or myth I could attempt to interpret, some story that the topic of the entrance problem brings to mind.

"Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves," might that be the one? Though I've never read that story from *The Arabian Nights* and also the *Brothers Grim* collection, I know something of it from allusions and borrowings that have been made in popular culture of its central motif. Standing before a rock face, the tale's protagonist, Ali Baba, having earlier overheard the chieftain of a robber band call out a magic word which opens the rock that the band hide their plunder in, pronounces it himself and gains passage into the rock. "Open Seseme," he says, and presto, the rock opens and he walks right inside into the cavernous hold within.

"O p e n S e s e m e !"

"O p e n S e s e m e !"

I mutter the words as I type them on this page, wondering as I do so if they will again have the power to open that they had had in the tale.

"Open Seseme!"

I say it a third time and then, presto, *I am in psychology ...*

Call me Ali Baba. At the beginning of his tale, a character of that name observes an ominous dust cloud in the distance coming his way even as I observe in my spirit a similarly ominous cloud that has been raised there at the prospect of having to produce an article for the newsletter in the next few days. Why, that's barely enough time to think about it!

But turning to the tale, I learn that Ali Baba had only little time as well. The dust cloud, as he was able quickly to discern, signalled that a marauding gang of robbers, the band of forty thieves, were in the area!

Realizing that they were heading his way, Ali Baba quickly shinned up a large tree that grew atop of a nearby rock. It was from there, hidden high up in its branches, that he presently observed the scene below, that famous one in which the Robber Chieftain says to the rock face, “Open Seseme,” and the rock face opens allowing entrance for his whole band into the treasure-trove within ...

But where does this leave me? Rock, band of thieves, magic word, and the listening Ali Baba perched in a tree: I know nothing about any of these figures in their abstract singularity. Nothing of the rock or its history, of the thieves and their back-story; nothing about the magic word, except that it is “Open Seseme,” or of Ali Baba except that, as the tale says at the outset, that he is a simple woodcutter married to a poor woman, this in contrast to his brother who is well-to-do on account of his having married into a wealthy family. It occurs to me, however, that my situation with respect to the tale is not unlike the one described in the tale. For I stand before the interpretative challenge in presents in much the same fashion as the protagonist in its pages stood before the rock face. With only the few details that I have mentioned to draw upon, I am challenged to get into psychology, or to be more specific, into the Entrance Problem of our psychology, PDI.

But wait now! Am I not already in psychology? Is the task before me not straightforwardly a matter of interpreting our tale from a psychological perspective? There is a whole discipline called “applied psychoanalysis” which is about the application of psychoanalytic theory to literature. Isn’t this what we’re engaged in when we turn to such a tale--providing a Jungian, or pushing off from that, a PDI interpretation of “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves”?

It is important to emphasize that although a tale such this one could readily be taken up as a subject matter for literary or folklore studies, and though these fields might even welcome interpretations which draw upon psychological perspectives, our engagement is of an entirely different order. We are psychologists and in keeping with this the tale for us is not a literary text, but a psychological one, a document of the soul.

“In myths and fairytales, as in dreams,” writes Jung, “the soul speaks about itself, and the archetypes reveal themselves in their natural interplay, as ‘formation, transformation / eternal Mind’s eternal recreation.’”<sup>1</sup> Leaving the reference to the theory of archetypes aside, the crucial phrase in this citation is the one referring to the soul as *speaking about itself*. Jung repeatedly stressed that for psychology there is no Archimedean point outside of its subject matter, the psyche. He held that everything that is stated about the psyche, or for that matter, whatever is taken up as a possible subject matter for psychology, is an expression of the psyche, a part of its on-going phenomenology. Making this point with reference to our present subject matter, translating it even into the terms of our story’s main motif, we can say of psychology, say of the soul, that it, too, has “Open Seseme” character. Standing before the obdurate rock face of whatever the phenomenon before it may be (a dream, a tale, a life situation, psychic state or experience) it enters—into its other, into itself--via its magic word, its notion, “Soul.”

But wait a minute! How did that happen?! How did the word “soul” become the tale-opening, rock-opening, interpretation-producing word?

Two answers come immediately to mind. In our tale a band of forty thieves is observed to gain entrance into the rock with the uttering of a secret word or saying. I called this word a “magic word” because with its utterance the rock face magically opens. How fantastic that such a thing could happen! The charm and delight of the tale resides

in this motif. Hearing tell of it, we are children again. I suspect, however, that the tale is actually about the opposite of this, about a men's society perhaps, a secret initiatory cult, for such is the "picture that looms up" when, in the twinkling of an eye, the unity of the unity and difference of the little we have to start with—the forty thieves, the rock, and the secret word that opens into it as into a cave—is *thought*.

So there we have it. The magic word is also a secret word, the moniker, perhaps, of a shared value or communal truth. From ancient times down to our own day, such societies have been known to have such a secret word or shibboleth—a shibboleth, moreover, that sometimes stands, *pars pro toto*, for the true word, myth, or seminal teaching. In our psychoanalytic tradition, we need only think of Freud. While early in his career Freud complained to a close colleague that a watchword had been put out against him, later, as robber chieftain of his own band (and with the specific intent of barring Jung from the cave) he declared—Open Seseme!—that "the Oedipus complex has become ... the shibboleth that distinguishes the adherents of psychoanalysis from its opponents."<sup>2</sup>

Briefly told the story that followed upon this is that Jung, like the Ali Baba of our tale, learned to pronounce the Freudian word, at least passably enough to enter that cave which Freud had dubbed "The Unconscious," and finding this cave to be far deeper than his forebear had imagined, made off with its treasure, if only under the sign of other watchwords, other names—"Archetype," "Collective Unconscious," "Psychic Energy," "Self." But there is a still more basic form of the Jungian word. As overheard a generation later by Hillman and Giegerich, this word, of course, was "*Seele*"—"Soul." Carrying on from Jung's insight about the soul's speaking about itself (which is only to again state this forbearer's insight into psychology's lack of an Archimedean position) they concentrated its "Open Seseme!" character by saying or applying the word to itself such that entrance into the more subtle levels of its concept, as much as into some rock or cave, was gained.

Now, as with all such guild-defining words, insiders and outsiders can be distinguished from one another by the inflection that they give to it. And this is true across the schools of analysis. There is a Freudian, a Jungian, a Hillmanian, and a Giegerichian (or as we now say, a PDIian) way of saying and thinking "soul."

Speaking the word with precisely the inflection that makes it the shibboleth of PDI (members who are planning to attend the Toronto workshop may want to listen up!), Giegerich intones:

Psychology is the only discipline in which the life-giving *soul* of the theory happens to be the Notion *of soul* and where what it is the notion *of* is itself nothing other than *Notion*. For Soul is Notion. It is not the notion of an empirical "factor" or "fact" called "soul." The soul does not exist (out there in "reality"), it is not an entity, nothing ontological. It is only (only?) *logical*, "just" a Notion, a thought, a word (but word not merely as *flatus vocis*). The word soul is not a significant having a signified. It refers to nothing outside of itself, only to the notion or thought that it means *within* itself or posits in and through itself.<sup>3</sup>

Just a notion, just a thought, just a word--and yet, in this its negativity resides its “Open Sesame!” character. But what does it open? Like Ali Baba we want to get into the rock—into the rock of psychology or better, into the rock *as* psychology. How is this achieved?

Well, as I said it is a matter of inflection. In one of his poems Rilke declares that “the projecting spirit, which masters the earthly, loves in the swing of the figure nothing so much as the point of inflection.”<sup>4</sup> And so it is with our word “soul.” Having no Archimedean position outside of itself, and no signified in front of it, not even the ones it seems to have (such as the rock in our tale or the tale itself), all that it has is the inflection-point of its returning, headlong from these, into itself. As Giegerich put it in the passage cited, “... Soul is Notion ... It refers to nothing outside of itself, only to the notion or thought that it means *within* itself or posits in and through itself.”

Pronounced with this inflection our word “soul” imparts a spirit of notionality to the world, if only by being the familiar of itself in everything that it is *not* (or putting this another way, in everything that it *posits itself as*). And herein resides its interiorizing power. In contrast to the more positivistically conceived terms of ordinary speech, which seem to be have been fixed to or peeled from the things they externally name, the word soul in its negativity addresses those same things, not as signifieds in their own right, *but as aliases of itself*. And the upshot of this is that its “Open Sesame!” character resides in the fact that *what* it addresses, as for instance when the Robber Chieftain calls out to the rock or as analysts we address this tale or any other psychic phenomenon, *is itself a second time*.

The Entrance Problem, it follows, is a matter of plunging into an echo. We enter the rock by plunging into the particular resonances and reverberations which our word “soul” resounds with when the first sense of its meaning is negated, and a second sense mediated, by the obdurate just-so-ness of the phenomenon that is being addressed. And here I am put in mind of Hegel’s description of the speculative sentence. If the soul, as we heard from Jung, is speaking of itself when in our tale the words “Open Sesame!” are addressed to the rock, it is because, as Hegel explains, “Thinking ... loses the firm objective [*gegenständlich*] basis it had in the subject when, in the predicate, it is thrown back on to the subject, and when, in the predicate, it does not return into itself, but into the subject of the content.”<sup>5</sup> Though it is only one word (and even less than that, being nothing by itself), “soul” in our sense is already a sentence in the speculative sense. And the same can be said for the two words of our tale, “Open Seseme.”

---

I said that two answers came to my mind with respect to the question of how the word “soul” can have the tale-opening, rock-opening, and yes, psychology-constituting power that it has. The first of these had to do with what I called its shibboleth character. Read in relation to one another, the band of thieves, the rock, and the secret password, “Open Seseme,” present the picture of a society which can only be entered by the avowal of that communal value or shared truth which is, as it were, the cornerstone of its temple, the rock of its faith. Turning now to my second answer, this, as we shall see, carries on from what I just stated at the end of the previous paragraph when I claimed the words “soul” and “Open Seseme” to be one and two word versions of the speculative sentence.

Whether it be a robber chieftain or an Ali Baba saying “Open Seseme!” to a rock or a Jung, Freud, Hillman, or Giegerich saying “Soul!” to some other kind of psychological phenomenon, the point to be grasped is that the relation in each case is a *self-relation*.

Apropos of Hegel's account of the speculative sentence, our interpretative stance proceeds from the insight that what had seemed at first sight to be a subject *here* encountering a predicate or object apart from itself over *there* may be read instead as a seconding or doubling of the incumbent subject. The predicate, that is to say, is not to be regarded as a mere quality of the subject or as an objectified thing in front of it, but as the out-picturing of its very essence, itself a second time. And it is this, moreover, in a manner that is both analogous enough and different enough to require that what can now be recognized as the doubled subject redefine itself in such a way that its universality takes on a more mediated and concrete form.

Why, it is just like that famous sequence in Hegel's *Encyclopaedia Logic*. "Being," the most basic of all possible conceptual terms, gives way of its own accord to the idea "non-Being," and, then, pushing off from these, its cancelled precursors, there follows "Becoming" and all the rest—"Quality," "Quantum," "Degree," "Measure," etc., etc, on and on, right up to "I," and "You," "Here" and "Now." It is a matter of what might be called (were we to add further to this list!) an "implicitness/explicitness dialectic." A word is spoken to ALL THAT IS, only to be thrown back upon itself like an echo from a rock face. But "tarrying with the negative,"<sup>6</sup> it gains access into this its other in the changed up way that that very word re-definitionally comes home to itself via this other.

"Are we, perhaps, here just for saying: House,/ Bridge, Fountain, Gate, Jug, Olive Tree, Window,--/ possibly: Pillar, Tower?", asks Rilke. And in saying these names are we not each time saying "Open Sesame!" to a rock? No wonder the alchemists could say of their Philosopher's Stone that it is "known by a thousand names." "Being," "non-Being," "Becoming," "House," "Bridge," "Fountain," "Gate," etc: incredible the treasure trove of distinctions and categories that is there to be found when what consciousness meets as its other is recognized to be itself all over again.

---

I said that in approaching a tale such as "Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves" we cannot simply apply psychological theories as we might if it were only a matter contributing a psychoanalytic interpretation of the tale to the field of folklore studies. Nor can it be for us a matter of colonizing a story in the name of some anthropological constant such as the Oedipus-complex. Our challenge, rather, is to realize, again and again and on each interpretative occasion, that *psychology only becomes psychology in the first place through the cognitive venture of applying a document of the soul to itself* in the speculative manner that I described above.

We need to read Jung's insight about psychology's lack of an Archimedean position, mine concerning the importance of speculative sentence type thinking for PDI, and Giegerich's insistence that "for psychology there is no Other" (save the one that, in its becoming psychology, it grapples with as its own interior other)<sup>7</sup> as of a piece with one another. And the same goes for Jung's statement about how in myths, fairytales and dreams the soul speaks about itself. If we are to read this adage aright we must add "psychology" to the list. For like Ali Baba standing before the rock face uttering the magic word, Psychology stands before whatever its subject matter may be, stating and restating its concept, soul.

---

A final reflection. In an essay that is very pertinent to our discussion here—“The Leap into the Solid Stone”—Giegerich avers,

The soul, it seems, when it wants to imagine the idea of its own interiority, presents us with the image of a solid rock or a stone wall. From our everyday point of view this is absurd. But this absurdity is the purpose, or I should rather not speak of absurdity, but of the total *self-contradiction* that we find in these stories. The impenetrable rock, in and with its very impenetrability, is nevertheless open and clear. The stone half the size of a man contains a gallery in which a full-grown man can walk upright and even a large hall. We have here images of the impossible.<sup>8</sup>

Though he has quite other tales in mind, Giegerich in this passage could be discussing the opening scene of our story. We have only to think again of Ali Baba passing into the solid rock as into a cavernous gallery or hall. But what about psychology? How does it arrive at the idea of itself as interiority? What is the stone that it comes into itself or home to itself though?

Well, we already mentioned the alchemical idea of the *lapis* or Philosopher’s Stone which is known by a thousand names. Apropos of this, I submit that *any phenomenon* can be this stone if, “sticking to the image” and plunging headlong into it (not as an external other, mind you, but as the subject a second time), we let its obdurate, idiosyncratic, and self-contradictory features think themselves out through our notion, soul.

A crucial point, this. Psychology must start with particular phenomena--a myth, a story, a dream, or life situation. Renouncing theories of what “the soul” is it must start with these as with the substance of its own implicitness. The reason for this, as Giegerich has explained, is that the soul cannot be approached directly. Having no Archimedean vantage-point outside of its own inherent soulfulness, “psychological investigation has to take the form of commentaries on given ‘documents of the soul.’” And from this, it follows that,

The psychological question is not, cannot be, what and how the soul is, but how the soul is reflected in its manifestations. We are not as naive as to want to take on the soul directly. We have understood that psychology is the study of the reflection in some mirror and not the study of what the mirror is the reflection of. The turn to the already reflected is not a trick to get to the otherwise invisible soul after all, and not a second-best substitute for the “real thing.” On the contrary, we know that the already reflected [which is also to say, the speculatively identified—GM] is psychology’s “real thing.”<sup>9</sup>

Let us linger with this a moment.

“Psychology is the study of the reflection in some mirror.” We could also say: the study of the echo from that rock or stone, etc., as which each phenomenon or “name” must initially appear to the psychologist, the study of the resonances within some myth or

story. Not, however, with the aim of getting at what these are the reflections of, but as the study of reflection *per se*, psychology *as such*, of psychology a *second time*.

So, “say it again, as best you can”:

### **Open Seseme!**

#### **Let the commentaries begin!**

I stated in my subtitle that this little article would only be a Prolegomenon to a future interpretation of “Ali Baba and the Forty Thieves.”

Well, maybe that interpretation, that thousand and second tale, can be written by our membership.

Maybe Ali Baba’s calling out to the rock will have the form of to a discussion thread in the Discussion Forum of our society’s website.

Or, again, maybe those attending the workshop in Toronto will take up the challenge of contributing their thoughts about it on that occasion.

### **There will be prizes!**

Nothing external, of course, but prizes nonetheless (the soul, as we know, having everything it needs within itself, even its own rewards).

Here is a link to the tale: <http://www.bartleby.com/16/905.html>

---

### **References**

- <sup>1</sup> C.G. Jung, *GW 9/1 ¶ 400*, Giegerich’s transl.; cf., *CW 9, i ¶ 400*. For Giegerich’s discussion of this passage from Jung see *The Soul’s Logical Life*, p. 123.
- <sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud, *Three Essays on Sexuality*, in *The Freud Pelican Library*, vol. 7, p. 149-150n.
- <sup>3</sup> Wolfgang Giegerich, *The Soul’s Logical Life: Towards a Rigorous Notion of Psychology* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang GmbH, 1998), p. 90.
- <sup>4</sup> R. M. Rilke, *Sonnets to Orpheus*, Sonnet 12 .
- <sup>5</sup> G. W. F. Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, A.V. Miller, trans. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), § 62, p, 39.
- <sup>6</sup> Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, § 32, p, 19.
- <sup>7</sup> “But for psychology there is no Other. Or the other that there is is ‘the soul’s’ own other, its internal other, itself *as other*. ‘The soul’ is self-relation. It has nothing outside itself. And conversely, if we think in terms of an other truly outside and vis-à-vis, of a

---

relation literally between two ...we have left psychology. We then are in the physical world, in external reality, in the social world of real people, but no longer in the world of the soul." Wolfgang Giegerich, David L. Miller, Greg Mogenson, *Dialectics & Analytical Psychology: The El Capitan Canyon Seminar* (New Orleans: Spring Journal Book, 2005), p. 26.

<sup>8</sup> Wolfgang Giegerich, "The Leap into the Solid Stone," *C.E.P.* vol. IV, chapter 7, p. 167.

<sup>9</sup> Wolfgang Giegerich, "Is the Soul 'Deep'?--Entering and Following the Logical Movement of Heraclitus' 'Fragment 45'," *C.E.P.* vol. IV, chapter 6, pp, 131-132