RICHARD WILHELM: IN MEMORIAM

C.G. Jung

It is no easy task for me to speak of Richard Wilhelm and his work, because, starting very far away from one another, our paths crossed in cometic fashion. His life-work has a range that lies outside my compass. I have never seen the China that first moulded his thought and later continued to engross him, nor am I familiar with its language, the living expression of the Chinese East. I stand indeed as a stranger outside that vast realm of knowledge and experience in which Wilhelm worked as a master of his profession. He as a sinologist and I as a doctor would probably never have come into contact had we remained specialists. But we met in a field of humanity which begins beyond the academic boundary posts. There lay our point of contact; there the spark leapt across and kindled a light that was to become for me one of the most significant events of my life. Because of this I may perhaps speak of Wilhelm and his work, thinking with grateful respect of this mind which created a bridge between East and West and gave to the Occident the precious heritage of a culture thousands of years old, a culture perhaps destined to disappear forever.

Wilhelm possessed the kind of mastery which is won only by a man who goes beyond his speciality, and so his striving for knowledge became a concern touching all mankind. Or rather, it had been that from the beginning and remained so always. What else could have liberated him so completely from the narrow horizon of the European— and indeed, of the missionary—that no sooner had he delved into the secrets of the Chinese mind than he perceived the treasure hidden there for us, and sacrificed his European prejudices for the sake of this rare pearl? Only an all-embracing humanity, a greatness of heart that glimpses the whole, could have enabled him to open himself without reserve to a profoundly alien spirit, and to further its influence by putting his manifold gifts and capacities at its service. The understanding with which he devoted himself to this task, with no trace of Christian resentment or European arrogance, bears witness to a truly great mind; for all mediocre minds in contact with a foreign culture either perish in the blind attempt to deracinate themselves or else they perish in an uncomprehending and presumptuous passion for criticism. Toying only with the surface and externals of the foreign culture, they never eat its bread or drink its wine, and so never enter into a real communion of minds, that most intimate transfusion and interpenetration which generates a new birth.

As a rule, the specialist’s is a purely masculine mind, an intellect to which fecundity is an alien and unnatural process; it is therefore an especially ill-adapted tool for giving rebirth to a foreign spirit. But a larger mind bears the stamp of the feminine; it is endowed with a receptive and fruitful womb which can reshape what is strange and give it a familiar form. Wilhelm possessed the rare gift of a maternal intellect. To it he owed his unequalled ability to feel his way into the spirit of the East and to make his incomparable translations. ...

Faced with the alien culture of the East, Wilhelm showed a degree of modesty highly unusual in a European. He approached it freely, without prejudice, without the assumption of knowing better; he opened his heart and mind to it. He let himself be gripped and shaped by it, so that when he came back to Europe he brought us, not only in his spirit but in his whole being, a true image of the East. This deep transformation was certainly not won without great sacrifice, for our historical premises are so entirely different. The keenness of Western consciousness and its harsh problems had to soften before the more universal, more equable nature of the East; Western rationalism and one-sided differentiation had to yield to Eastern breadth and simplicity. For Wilhelm this change meant not only a shifting of the intellectual standpoint but a radical rearrangement of the components of his personality. The picture of the East he has given us, free of ulterior motive and all trace of tendentiousness, could never have been painted in such perfection had he not been able to let the European in him slip into the background. If he had allowed East and West to clash together with unyielding harshness, he could not have fulfilled his mission of conveying to us a true picture of China. The sacrifice of the European was unavoidable and necessary for the fulfilment of the task fate laid upon him. ...

As you see, I have not withheld my personal views, for if I had not told you what Wilhelm meant to me, how would it have been possible for me to speak of him? Wilhelm’s life-work is of such immense importance to me because it clarified and confirmed so much that I had been seeking, striving for, thinking, and doing in my efforts to alleviate the psychic sufferings of Europeans. It was a tremendous experience for me to hear through him, in clear language, things I had dimly divined in the confusion of our European unconscious. Indeed, I feel myself so very much enriched by him that it seems to me as if I had received more from him than from any other man. That is also the reason why I do not feel it a presumption if I am the one to offer on the altar of his memory the gratitude and respect of all of us.