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Poetry and the Dimension of Myth

by

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POETRY AND THE DIMENSION OF MYTH

‘Ask, and it shall be given you,
Seek, and ye shall find,
Knock, and it shall be opened unto you.’

(*Matthew, 7:7*)

When we hear these words from the *Gospel According to St. Matthew*, we hear Jesus speaking in his Sermon on the Mount. But we have these words, rendered in this particular way, from the Englishman, William Tyndale, who translated the New Testament from the Greek in 1526, revised it in 1534, and much of it, including these lines, was taken unchanged into the *King James Authorized Version* of 1611. So we might wonder, strictly, whether we are listening to William Tyndale as well as to Matthew’s ‘Jesus of Nazareth,’ except that as soon as we are caught by the poetry we forget who is who, and the distinction between them becomes irrelevant - academic or theological.

Among other things, we are offered here a vision of how the world is open to us at an unapprehended depth of our experience and, in the same moment, we are moved to be open to that world. Openness of self and world arise together through the Imagination. The words implicate us personally, not just because we are included in the vision, even invited to initiate it - the emphasis falling on the short, simple Saxon verbs: ‘ask,’ ‘seek,’ ‘knock’ – but primarily because the language, rhythm, mood and image of the poetry - its music and silence - *act upon* us, create that openness within us as we read or listen - let us in through the door.

The two as one, the unifying of subject and object, inner and outer, is also given by Rilke, who turns the relation round and knocks to keep God company:

You neighbour God, if sometimes in the night
I rouse you with loud knocking, I do so
only because I seldom hear you breathe
and know: you are alone.
And should you need a drink, no-one is there
to reach it you, groping in the dark.
Always I hearken. Give but a small sign.
I am quite near.

Between us there is but a narrow wall,
and by sheer chance; for it would take

merely a call from your lips or from mine
to break it down,
and that without a sound.
The wall is builded of your images.

They stand before you hiding you like names,
And when the light within me blazes high
that in my inmost soul I know you by,
the radiance is squandered on their frames.

And then my senses, which too soon grow lame,
exiled from you, must go their homeless ways. ¹

The poem brings intimacy and exile so tenderly and perilously close together that we are compelled to live through the presence and the absence as our own. By showing us what gets in the way - images, names, ideas about God - the poet shows us what openness and presence is - an embodiment in the 'inmost soul' of the Imagination which involves the participation of the whole being in what is known.

We might wonder whether, in these two instances at least, the distinction between myth and poetry is a useful one at all. If we start by describing the first - the words from the Sermon on the Mount - as myth with a poetic dimension, and the second - the Rilke poem - as poetry with a mythic dimension, we might well end up asking what distinction we were holding on to, except perhaps to honour a religious sensitivity to the divinity of Jesus.

But, already, to use the ubiquitous term 'myth' of the religion in which some of us were brought up, is unwittingly to suggest that this religion has lost its power to command our exclusive faith and belief. No true believer now calls their own religion a myth. From that perspective, 'myth' typically means 'other people's religion,' usually set in the past - as in Egyptian myth, Greek mythology - and carrying with it a pejorative undertone. Though it is not as bad as 'cult' or 'idol' - terms which implicitly deny sacredness to any religious practice but our own. The supposed inferiority of 'myth' in this sense may have given us the colloquial use of the term as an untruth, a fantasy or an illusion - 'it's just a myth,' that is, myth as illusion or a lie. The term has many confusing, and often incompatible, meanings, and a return to the origins of the word may clarify some of these.

Mythos

Originally, the word ‘myth’ came from the Greek *muthos*, meaning, firstly, something spoken by word of mouth, and, secondly, a story - deriving ultimately from the Indo-European root of the verb *mud* meaning ‘to think’ and ‘to imagine.’ The two meanings together put us in touch with the oral tradition of the bards who for centuries told stories of goddesses and gods to their enchanted communities, rather in the manner of priests handing down a timeless tradition which unites their listeners in a shared universe of wonder. These were the sacred stories of the tribe, exploring the mystery of the universe and the role of humankind within it.

Sing, Muses, with your sweet voices,
Sing, daughters of Zeus, Son of Kronos,
Sing us the story of the long-winged Moon. ²

In ancient Greece, *Muthos* was still magically resonant of origins. The *Iliad*, the *Odyssey* and the *Homeric Hymns* were the earliest of the Greek stories to be written down - in the 8th century BC - telling stories of goddesses and gods, their relations with each other and with human beings. Whereas writing itself – or rather the writing we can read – reaches back as far as 3000 BC – to the hieroglyphs of the Egyptians and the cuneiform script of the Sumerians. And, happily ever after, story-tellers all over the world have begun with ‘Once upon a time.’

Yet the words ‘myth’ and ‘story’ in our culture do not always reflect the depth and complexity contained in the original term *Mythos*. Not least because we are asking our largely secular minds to enter a sacred universe, structured on different principles, where shamans and story-tellers told their tales, handed down for centuries, through rituals, drama, dancing, song and images, and their truths were experienced in the heart, long before there was a separation between heart and mind. This separation was fostered in part, perhaps, by the replacing of pictographic images with linear alphabetical writing in words. The Egyptian hieroglyph of a heart, for instance – drawn in the shape of a heart - embodied the whole being: heart, mind, understanding, intelligence, will, desire, mood, wish, and ultimately the Soul. When the Soul of a person was weighed against the feather of Truth, the symbol of the goddess Maat, it was the heart that was placed upon the scales to be granted life in eternity. In the *Aitereya Upanishad* of 500 BC, where the various divinities find a new place to live within human beings, heart and mind are still united: ‘The Moon became mind and entered the heart.’ ³

It may sometimes seem as though the ancient idea of Story as offering a unique access to

the Sacred has almost reversed its original meaning. Western culture tends to treat stories as tales for children, and often dismisses them in adult life as offering only ‘anecdotal evidence,’ something ‘subjective’ - so only personal and arbitrary - not ‘objective,’ empirically verifiable, where they could be taken seriously. Yet in the beginning – *in illo tempore*, as the philosopher Mircea Eliade more archetypally puts it ⁴ - every religion arises from a story. It may be a story of a goddess, a god, an animal, or earth, sky, heaven, moon, sun, star, wind, fire, earth and water, and indeed anything - whether or not it is later recalled as a vision, a manifestation, or a presence – with or without an image. Is there not always a story of the universe - implicit or explicit, secret or shared - even if we do not know, or cannot always agree, on where it ‘came from’ and ‘what it means’?

Whoever we are and whatever we believe, are we not all born into a Story? We enter the story of our family, which changes as we enter it, just as our story grows with us as we grow. It opens out into our community, our tribe, our race, our country, our species, other species, our Earth and the age in which we live, which is the story of our time. But no story is complete without the ultimate story of the Universe, which is the primary story: the story of origin of every family of the Universe – human and non-human alike. From this Universe Story all the other stories implicitly take their reference and meaning.

Stories of Origin, or Myths of Creation as they may also be called, belong to every culture in every age. Calling them mythic images means that they have a universal dimension common to all human beings, which is why they are recognizable to all of us, even if they are not ‘our own.’ All myths also have a local, ethnic dimension, specific to each person, tribe, race and place. The different kinds of answers to these questions all over the world are then central as to how the people within their own unique cultures are going to live and what they will value. This is *Mythos* – the primary story shaping the way we see life and live, whether we are aware of it or not.

Logos

In early Greek thought *Mythos* came first and *Logos* arose out of *Mythos*. Originally, *Logos* simply meant speaking *about Mythos*, deriving from the verb *Legein*, ‘to say,’ to ‘speak,’ coming from the Proto-Indo-European (*PIE*) root *leg*, to ‘collect,’ and so to ‘pick out’ words

(as in 'lecture' and 'election'). It was 'the thing said,' the discussion when the story had ended, originally a conversation *about* the goddesses, gods, animals and plants in the stories, and their interactions with human beings. *Logos* later accrued many other meanings, such as word, speech, statement, account, thought and reason - from which all our 'ologies' come: 'mythology' - the logos of myth; 'psychology' - the logos of the psyche; 'anthropology' - the logos of human beings; 'etymology,' from '*etumos*,' 'true,' as a study of the true meaning of words.

This 'speaking about,' which gradually became 'thinking through the story rationally,' begins outside or beyond the story. It was contrasted to *Mythos* as a different kind of consciousness but, initially at least, it was a consciousness which did not leave the original story too far behind. Heraclitus (c. 535-475 BC) was the first to extend the meaning of *Logos* from rational discourse *by* humans to a rational structure inherent *in* the world itself: 'It is wise, listening not to me but to the Logos, to agree that all things are one.'⁵

In earlier times the universe was experienced as a whole because all creation came symbolically from the 'body' of the Mother Goddess, all of whom were then immanent in Earth as her 'children.' Significantly, though, the introduction of 'The Logos' brought with it a new kind of premise for imagining the world as one whole. Both, of course, are symbols of the unknowable, but they point in different directions: the Mother, to the sacredness of Earth, and the later Logos, the Father, to the sacredness of the Invisible World. So it is easy to see how *Logos* can gradually detach itself from *Mythos* and come to stand alone, and even become primary, as, for instance, in the opening of St. John's Gospel: '*Ev Arχη ην ο λογος*,' - 'In the beginning was the Word.'

Yet it has to be said that this crucial term *Logos*, in its essential relation to *Mythos*, lost its vitality and universality when it was translated into Latin, and entered the vastly different culture of Roman thought. Then *Logos* became *Ratio* in Latin, which was interpreted simply as 'Reason' alone, and, as with so many Greek ideas, was filtered first through the Roman mind, and then through Church Latin - diminishing and changing its original dynamic complexity. (The Greek *schole*, σχολη, to take one wry example, becomes in English 'scholar' - but once meant 'leisure').

However, in ancient Greece, it was always held to be essential to find a balance between these two kinds of consciousness, accepting that each had their own unique virtue, and that both were necessary to each other and to the whole which they manifest. They came to embody two different but complementary ways of knowing the world, and so vital was this distinction that it gave rise to two different words for ‘knowledge’: *Gnosis* and *Episteme*. To gain a perspective on our contemporary assumption of the superiority of *Logos* and Epistemological Knowing over *Mythos* and Gnostic Knowing, it may be instructive to pursue the distinctions of the original language when both were valued in their own right.

To relate these terms very broadly, and inevitably to over-simplify, we might say that *Mythos* is a story which comes from Imagination and is primarily known through *Gnosis* – gnostic knowledge - while *Logos* is an account of a story answerable to Reason, primarily known through *Episteme* - epistemological knowledge. In practice, there is usually a dynamic interchange of both modes of knowing, often in quick succession, as we ‘weigh up’ the truth and value of what we trying to know. But the crucial role of ‘gnostic’ knowing in this process is often overlooked and undervalued, as it is now rarely given a category to itself, being mostly subsumed under the general term ‘Knowledge,’ which in our time has become ‘Epistemological Knowledge.’

Gnosis

Gnosis – Gnostic knowledge - is knowledge coming from the whole of a person: through participation and relationship with whom, or what, would be known - involving feeling, empathy, intuition and Imagination. This is knowledge which changes us or which we have to change to know: the way we know a person, an animal, a tree and a garden, and how we come to know a poem, painting, music, story or myth, and in earlier times, also the events and meanings of the natural world, many of whom carried a numinous intensity. *Gnosis* engages the individual’s whole personality and invites a commitment: there is always some kind of mutuality in *Gnosis*. If we now (apparently reasonably) ask – ‘but how do we know whether what comes to us through Imagination is true?’ - we have to realize that *we* are the ones who have finally to authenticate it by relating to it with our whole being. If we even ask that question, it probably *isn’t* true; when it is, we don’t ask it. If we relate partially, we will receive at best partial knowledge, which may limit a future possibility of a complete knowledge. Not

least because the Imagination sees the world as a whole and seeks always to unify. The impartiality, depth and intensity of the relationship, then, has a crucial bearing upon what can be known. We have to weigh it up, like Thoth and Maat, in the best scales we have; we cannot simply point from afar and say it is, or should be, or always used to be, so.

This mode of knowing is called ‘Gnostic’ knowing and, for all the Romantic poets – Blake, Coleridge, Wordsworth, Keats, Shelley, Byron, and, later, Yeats, Eliot, and Hughes, and perhaps most, if not all, poets and artists ever since – Imagination alone can ‘know’ the world.

Episteme

By contrast, *Episteme* – Epistemological knowledge - is knowledge *about* something, and does not require participation between the knowing subject and what it calls the ‘object’ – person, animal, poem or plant, theorem or meaning – whatever would be known. Indeed, epistemological knowledge typically insists on the separation of the knower from the known, on the assumption that so-called subjective and objective points of view need to be distinguished so that the knowledge can be empirically tested and rationally verified by anyone. Essential as this became later in the western tradition to wrest freedom of thought from the overweening control of the Christian Church – Galileo’s ‘*E pur si muove,*’ for example, ‘Yet it moves’ - this hard-won option of the separation of the knower from the ‘known’ turned out to be not infallible either. It has now to reckon with the findings of psychoanalysis that such distinctions are not necessarily absolute, and so not always reliable, such that ‘Reason’ itself is not always as ‘clear cut’ as it sounds. So-called ‘impartiality’ can, on occasion, turn out to be ‘rationalisations’ of unconscious desires, complicated further by Heisenberg’s general principle that any observer is implicated in the observed. The quantum physicist David Bohm warns that consciousness itself is ‘biased’ towards fragmenting the world - a fragmentation which it reifies in grammar by reaching for nouns rather than verbs to select and relate to discrete single things, predisposing us to see subjects and objects - ourselves as subjects within and the world as objects without. ⁶ Whereas when verbs are primary, we are focused on, and related to, the flowing of life between all things: ‘*Panta rhei,*’ as Heraclitus said, ‘Everything flows.’ ‘You can’t step in the same river twice.’⁷

The Universality of Myth

No culture has been without its story of the universe and its people's place in it, however early or late - can we even imagine having no story at all? It is now generally agreed that 'the sacred'- and so myth as stories of the sacred - is not a *stage* in the evolution of consciousness but part of the structure of the human psyche. ⁸ It is not something early cultures have, which older cultures grow out of as they become more sophisticated. Jung writes that Mythology is the expression of the Collective Unconscious, again belonging to the human race as a whole and so part of the definition of being human. ⁹ Perhaps we could say that myth is a universal and necessary mode of apprehending reality as human beings, endowed with minds and the power to behold and question, but denied the absolute conviction that the answers we receive are the final truth? This is why we have to tell a story, rather than discover a fact, the missing link. Wallace Stevens expresses this in his poem: 'It Must be Abstract':

The clouds preceded us.
There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.
From this the poem springs: that we live in a place
That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves,
And hard it is in spite of blazoned days. ¹⁰

We live, Rilke says, in an 'interpreted world':

Ah, who can we ever turn to in our need?
Not angels, not humans, and already
the knowing animals are aware
that we are not really at home in our interpreted world. ¹¹

And what is there to turn to in our need but the myth - as story, image, art, and pre-eminently poem - which celebrates what is, and restores what is felt to be lost by creating a place for that loss within a greater harmony. As the great mythologist, Joseph Campbell, proclaims:

Throughout the inhabited world, in all times and under every circumstance, the myths of man have flourished; and they have been the living inspiration of whatever else may have appeared out of the activities of the human body and mind. It would not be too much to say that myth is the secret opening through which the inexhaustible energies of the cosmos pour into human cultural manifestation. Religions, philosophies, arts, the social forms of primitive and historic man, prime discoveries in science and technology, the very dreams that blister sleep, boil up from the basic, magic ring of myth. ¹²

This is the dimension of myth that is valid for every age. In earlier times, in the infancy of the race, the primary mode of myth was expressive - the poetic instinct of wonder, delight, awe and sometimes terror, which peopled the universe, visible and invisible, with goddesses and gods. Yet, no myth stands alone for long, and its accompanying modes, which were descriptive and explanatory, could also become *prescriptive* because all aspects of life and living were related to that one initial fundamental vision. Originally, myth extended into all areas of life: into cosmology, giving a picture of the universe; into society, providing guidance as to how the tribe was to live in the world so revealed; and into personal life, guiding individuals on their journey through the archetypal stages of human life, in such a way that the different phases of transformation from birth to death were placed in harmony with an order beyond time.

We might wonder if only a poetic symbol could hold myth to all these functions at the same time without violation. In practice, they have very frequently split apart, and then the energies of the original act of homage to life have been abused by being forced to underwrite the prerogatives of the tribe - where the local ethnic expression may fall out of relation with its universal human core. Over the centuries the cosmological and social functions of myth have been inevitably superseded by empirical science and changing criteria of custom and morality. So the challenge now is to distinguish these earlier time-bound functions of myth from what we might call the poetic and archetypal reality of myth – which is timeless - so that the essence of mythic thought may reappear, undiminished by earlier association with ignorance, duty or belief.

The Sumerian Myth of Inanna

Nonetheless, at the time, it was as though the whole of reality was comprehended in the symbol. In Sumeria, the Myth of Inanna shows the way the Sumerians related to the events of the cosmos, specifically to the changeless changes of the Moon. The Sumerian poem ‘The Descent of Inanna,’ was written down about 1750 BC, but probably recited or sung for at least a thousand years before that. It can perhaps serve as a model for the lyrical feeling of the early consciousness. Inanna, whose name means Queen Moon, was the Goddess of Heaven, Earth and Underworld: ‘Clothed with the heavens and crowned with the stars,’ she wore the rainbow as her necklace and the zodiac as her girdle; the horns of the crescent Moon lay upon her head. We read:

She made the night come forth like moonlight,
She made the morning come forth like the bright daylight.
She was the rain and the power that made the plants grow.
Inanna says:
'I step onto the heavens, and the rain rains down;
I step onto the earth, and grass and herbs sprout up.' ¹³



Fig. 1. Inanna as Queen of Heaven and Earth, wearing the lunar crescent within her horned crown, holding a cluster of grapes, with thick rays flashing from her back as stalks of corn. Fragment of a basalt relief vessel inscribed to Entemena of Lagash, Mesopotamia. Early Dynastic period. Vorderasiatisches Museum, Staatliche Museum, Berlin. c. 2400 BC.

Standing upon the dragon of storms, a staff of intertwining serpents in her hands, and thick rays of light flashing from her back like wings, she gives light, life and fertility as the Waxing of the Moon and the Year, and she withdraws these gifts back into herself for renewal as the Waning Moon and Winter, so she holds the *Me*, the Tablets of the Law, embodying the cosmic order: 'Begetting Mother am I, within the Spirit I abide, and none see me.'

Inanna had a sister, Ereshkigal, Goddess of the Underworld, and a brother, Utu, God of the Sun. On the day that the 'Bull of Heaven' dies - he who was husband to her sister Ereshkigal -

Inanna, Queen of the 'Great Above,' goes down to the 'Great Below' where her dark sister is Queen:

From the Great Above Inanna opened her ear to the Great Below...
My lady abandoned heaven and earth to descend to the underworld.
With the seven laws in her possession, she prepared herself... ¹⁴

First she clothed herself in the seven shining 'jewels' of Heaven - her crown, lapis beads, double beads, breastplate, gold ring, lapis measuring rod and line, and the royal robe. Then she took care that she would return. She asked her companion, Ninshubur, 'Queen of the East,' to lament at the houses of the gods if she did not come back. Inanna arrives at the outer gates of the Underworld and knocks loudly. Neti, the gatekeeper, asks her who she is. Inanna answers: 'I am Inanna, Queen of Heaven, on my way to the East.' Neti brings the news to Ereshkigal:

When Ereshkigal heard this,
She slapped her thigh and bit her lip.
Then she spoke:
Bolt the seven gates of the underworld.
Then, one by one, open each gate a crack.
Let Inanna enter.
As she enters, remove her royal garments.

In the image of the Waning Moon slowly losing its light to the dark, Inanna is successively stripped of her seven jewels of light, one at each gate, until she enters the throne room of the dark underworld, naked.

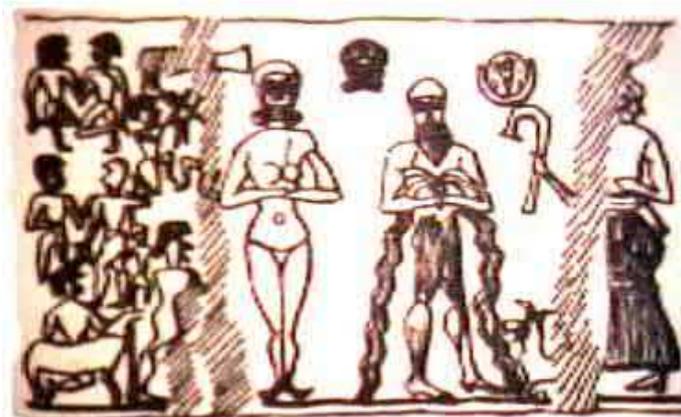


Fig. 2. Inanna naked in the Underworld, with Enki, god of Sweet Waters, beside her. Metropolitan Museum of Art. New York.

Then Ereshkigal fastened on Inanna the eye of death...
She struck her.
Inanna was turned into a corpse,
A piece of rotting meat,
And was hung from a hook on the wall.

When, after three days and three nights - the time of darkness when the Moon is gone - Inanna has not returned, Ninshubur goes to Enlil, god of Air, then to Nanna, Inanna's father (neither of whom will help), and finally to Enki, the wise god of the Sweet Waters, who makes from the dirt beneath his fingernails two creatures. They were called the *galatur*. To one he gives the water of life and to the other the food of life. Enki tells them:

‘Go to the underworld, Enter the door like flies,
Ereshkigal, the Queen of the Underworld, is moaning
With the cries of a woman about to give birth...
When she cries, ‘Oh! Oh! My inside!’
Cry also, ‘Oh! Oh! Your inside’...
The Queen will be pleased.
She will offer you a gift.
Ask her only for the corpse that hangs from the hook on the wall.
One of you will sprinkle the food of life on it.
The other will sprinkle the water of life.
Inanna will arise.’

It happens as Enki had foreseen. Ereshkigal gives them the corpse of Inanna and they sprinkle the water and food of life over it: Inanna arose.’ But as she is about to leave, the judges of the underworld seize her:

‘No one ascends from the underworld unmarked.
If Inanna wishes to return from the underworld,
She must provide someone in her place.’

As Inanna ascended from the underworld,
The Galla, the demons of the underworld, clung to her side.
They know no food, know no drink,
accept no gifts, enjoy no lovemaking.
They have no sweet children to kiss.
They tear the wife from the husband's arms,
They tear the child from the father's knees,
They steal the bride from her marriage home.

The underworld demons first cast their eye on Ninshubur; but Inanna refuses. They see her son; but Inanna refuses. Then they see Dumuzi, her husband. He was sitting by the apple tree, ‘dressed in his shining *Me* garments.’ But this time she does not refuse:

The Galla seized him by his thighs.
They poured milk out of his seven churns.
They broke the reed pipe which the shepherd was playing.
Inanna fastened on Dumuzi the eye of death.

The *Galla* drag Dumuzi down to the Great Below. But Dumuzi has a sister, Geshtinanna, and she offers to share with him his time below, so that each year – in the tradition of year-gods everywhere - he may rise again to Earth and be with Inanna, his love.

When Inanna mourns the loss of her husband - he who was called both the ‘Bright-eyed Moon’ and the ‘Green One,’ Lord of Vegetation - the land is barren after the harvesting of the crops. When the new grain began to sprout, and the vine and date and apple tree showed their buds, it was Dumuzi who had at last returned, and life was renewed.



Fig. 3. Goddess and God united, seated beside the Tree of Life with the serpents of regeneration rising behind them. Cylinder Seal. British Museum. c. 2500 BC.

We could say that Inanna is the Moon in its whole cycle, and Dumuzi is the Moon in its phases: she is his mother, bride and sister, just as he is her son in the crescent, her consort in the full, and the one who dies for her in the waning, so that she, as the source, can live for ever. He returns as the new crescent of the Moon and the springtime of the year. Or we could say that the Moon is itself an image of the eternal entering time, in its endless cyclical rhythm of life and death informing creation – ‘time as a moving image of eternity,’ as Plato says in the *Timaeus*.¹⁵ The Goddess may then be understood as the eternal cycle of the whole: the unity of life and death as a single process. The young god or goddess is her mortal form in time which, as manifested life - whether plant, animal, or human being - is subject to a cyclical process of birth, flowering, decay, death and rebirth in a greater whole.¹⁶

The pattern of this myth is found in many tales of the mother goddess and her son-lover - Isis and Osiris, Ishtar-Tammuz, Cybele and Attis, Aphrodite and Adonis, and, with Demeter and Persephone, as mother and daughter. Even the Christian story falls into a similar pattern of image - though not interpretation - when Jesus, son of the Virgin Mother Mary, descends into hell for the same three lunar days of darkness. His mother Mary searches for him, Mary Magdalene recognizes him (the first to see him in the garden), and his resurrection, like that of the others, coincides with the date of the Earth's regeneration in spring - still commemorated, two thousand years later, on the first Full Moon after the Spring Equinox. ¹⁷

To return to the question of how to relate to myth. This poem, 'The Descent of Inanna,' cannot obviously be separated into its expressive and descriptive functions, and it would be laughable to point out that science can disprove it as a theory of the Moon. Yet this is what happens whenever myth is dismissed as primitive or required to be factually as well as poetically true. There is still more confusion when evidence of a fact is required to be true to the dominant paradigm, which is itself a myth, as in Galileo's denial to the Inquisition of the evidence of his telescope. A hundred years earlier Tyndale himself was strangled and burned for translating the Bible into English - till then only available in priestly Latin - with the aim, as he put it to a learned friend, that 'I will cause a boy that driveth the plough shall know more of the Scripture than thou dost.' ¹⁸

Campbell makes this clear:

Whenever the poetry of myth is interpreted as biography, history or science, it is killed. The living images become only a remote fact of a distant time or sky; furthermore, it is never difficult to demonstrate that as science and history mythology is absurd...When a civilization begins to reinterpret its mythology in this way, the life goes out of it. ¹⁹

We have always to remember that myths are ultimately forms of the human Imagination. They are metaphors of potentialities or states of being within us, and one of the ways in which we learn to know ourselves is to make these values visible in the images of our goddesses and gods. We reflect upon them in the story and the poetry: there, they are true to the Imagination, but, once literalized and concretized, they are true to neither Imagination or fact.

Myth as Symbol

What is striking is that once the myth is co-opted by the tribe, the state, the church, or any kind of institutional thinking - when the things that are God's are rendered unto Caesar - the original symbol loses its profound and baffling complexity, and degenerates into allegory. And then, inevitably, it ceases to move and inspire, and is open to misinterpretation. That happens when the precise and particular drama of the symbol - its unique event - is dissected for so-called 'truths,' which become restatable in other language, typically generalized, conceptual and abstract language - becoming thereby false - and so leading the way for rule to replace impulse, and discipline to banish joy and delight. William Blake insists on our knowing the difference between Memory and Imagination, and Allegory and Symbol - or Vision, as he also calls it: 'Vision or Imagination is a Representation of what Eternally Exists, Really and Unchangeably. Fable or Allegory is form'd by the daughters of Memory. Imagination is surrounded by the daughters of Inspiration.'²⁰

In *The Marriage of Heaven and Hell*, Blake charts the process whereby Imagination, Symbol or Vision gets caught into a system which, removed thereby from the minutely embodied particulars of life, becomes an abstraction, and then dictates to the instincts how they should love - as though, in terms he uses elsewhere, Reason could tell Energy what to do:

The ancient poets animated all sensible objects with Gods or Geniuses, calling them by the names and adorning them with the properties of woods, rivers, mountains, lakes, cities, nations and whatever their enlarged & numerous senses could perceive. And particularly they studied the genius of each city and country, placing it under its mental deity; Till a system was form'd, which some took advantage of, & enslav'd the vulgar by attempting to realize or abstract the mental deities from their objects: thus began Priesthood. Choosing forms of worship from poetic tales. And at length they pronounced that the Gods had order'd such things. Thus men forgot that All deities reside in the human breast.²¹

We might ask, at what point does the Imagination falter or become weary, and the myth lose its poetry? Is it, as Blake's introduction of the passive voice would imply, a *system* being formed, or the subsequent attempt at abstraction, which divides the double vision of a symbol into single sight? Or is it even earlier - studying and classifying - placing the genius of each city and country *under its mental deity* - and then only a matter of time - 'Till'... a '*system is form'd*'? Is it *then* that the spontaneity goes? But what attitude forms the system, and calls us away from the spontaneous acts of animating, adorning and studying, into the controlled safety

of the rational mind? Perhaps we are back to the *quality* of engagement, the closing of the heart, when seeking is too impatient to find and asking becomes demanding - 'binding a joy' to ourselves and 'destroying the winged life'? He also shows how the initial imaginative world of creators and creatures falls back into the world of perceivers and perceived. But once the symbol has slipped back, unregistered, into allegory, the only way to restore numinosity to the world is a return to the language of poetry: 'Exuberance is beauty,' he said.²²

Shelley, in his *Defence of Poetry*, describes a parallel process of decline in poetic language which begins as living and vital metaphor and deteriorates in time to:

signs for portions or classes of thought, instead of pictures of integral thoughts; and then, if no new poets should arise to create afresh the associations which have been thus disorganized, language will be dead to all the nobler purposes of human intercourse.²³

For Shelley the original language of the world is poetry, and he brings it to life in images that evoke the ancient celebratory rituals of myth:

In the youth of the world, men dance and sing and imitate natural objects, observing in these actions, as in all others, a certain rhythm or order... In the infancy of society, every author is necessarily a poet, because language itself is poetry... Every original language near to its source is in itself the chaos of a cyclic poem.²⁴

Only in a later age do the distinctions of lexicography and grammar arise, and these are merely catalogues of the creations of Poetry. The ancient poets perceived the world as a unity, and Shelley believed it was the task of modern poets to re-create this original unity in their poetry through symbol and metaphor: 'Poetry lifts the veil from the hidden beauty of the world.' The philosopher Owen Barfield makes it clear, in his *History in English Words*, that 'the further back language as a whole is traced, the more poetical and animated do its sources appear, until it seems at last to dissolve into a kind of mist of myth.'²⁵

In both myth and poetry, then, it seems that the original lyrical sympathy which brings them alive is vulnerable to the process of moving away from the source into a more dissociated consciousness, in which the mind detaches itself from the fullness of experience and comments upon it - 'frames' it, in Rilke's term - and so ultimately kills it. This process may even at some point be inevitable and may be why myths live and die, or at least die to the old form and become reclothed, with fresh poetic insight, in new form. The myth of the Mother Goddess and

her Son-Lover or Daughter, for instance, has travelled in the west through many cultures for thousands of years, gathering new faces and names, different genealogies, altered emphases of feeling, while remaining in its basic pattern recognizably the same in the lineaments of its human drama of loss and finding, and its translucence to the universal rhythm in Nature of life, death and rebirth. ²⁶

But we may ask whether this means that myth is to be consigned to the infancy and early youth of consciousness, such that later ages, like our own, can only recall it as elegy, but not reinform it with adult, perplexed, tormented, even ironic, insight?

The German novelist Thomas Mann, in his address on the occasion of Freud's 80th birthday in 1936, makes the interesting proposal that:

while in the life of the human race the mythical is an early and primitive stage, in the life of the individual it is a late and mature one. What is gained is an insight into the higher truth depicted in the actual, a smiling knowledge of the eternal, the ever-being and authentic; a knowledge of the schema in which and according to which the supposed individual lives...His character is a mythical role which (he)... plays ...with a dignity and security of which his supposed unique individuality in time and space is not the source, but rather which he creates out of his deeper consciousness in order that something which was once founded and legitimized shall again be represented and shall, once more for good or ill, whether nobly or basely, in any case after its own kind, conduct itself according to pattern. ²⁷

His own Joseph, in his novel *Joseph and His Brothers*, he sees as enacting in his person the Dumuzi-Tammuz, Osiris myth:

bringing to pass anew the story of the mangled buried and arisen god, playing his festival game with that which mysteriously and secretly shapes life out of its own depths - the unconscious. ²⁸

The first line of the novel sets this up: 'Very deep is the well of the past. Should we not call it bottomless?'

This mythic re-enactment is not for Mann a diminution of individual life but a deepening of it, revealing, as an act of conscious awareness, its roots in the past of humankind, in the instinctive life of play, spontaneity, rhythm and order:

For the myth is the foundation of life; it is the timeless schema, the pious formula into which life flows when it reproduces its traits out of the unconscious. Certainly when a writer has acquired the habit of regarding life as mythical...there comes a curious heightening of his artist temper, a new refreshment to his perceiving and shaping powers which otherwise occurs much later in life. ²⁹

Or, as a line from an ancient Egyptian poem puts it:

The finger of the scribe is the beak of the ibis,
Beware of brushing it aside. ³⁰

Thoth, the ibis-headed god of eternity and time also took the form of a baboon who chatters with delight when the sun comes up, and so embodies the spontaneous impulse of Imagination which brings about a new vision. Thoth was the particular god of scribes, poets, and artists who, as the poem suggests, understood their inspiration as being sent by the god, and also - through the god's own relation to Maat - understood Imagination as being in partnership with Truth.



Fig. 4. Thoth in his baboon form and the Scribe Nebmeroutef. Statuette. Height, 19.5 cm. Length, 20.5 cm. The Louvre. 18th Dynasty. 1301-1353.

If there was ever an image of a writer in touch with a mythic consciousness it is this black schist sculpture of the scribe Nebmeroutef, seated cross-legged and holding his scroll across his knees, while on his left, apparently unnoticed - for the scribe has eyes only for his manuscript - there sits on a dais above him the god Thoth, gazing over his head into the forms of eternity. The inscription round the dais reads: 'Thoth brings Maat into being every day' - Imagination brings Truth into being continually - it could be Keats speaking:

I am certain of nothing but of the holiness of the Heart's affections, and the truth of Imagination. What the Imagination seizes as Beauty must be truth, whether it existed before or not...The Imagination may be compared to Adam's dream – he awoke and found it truth. ³¹

Myth and Poetry

Thoth, the ibis bird, with his great crescent-shaped beak, who sifts through the mud and flies to the great beyond, was married to Maat, goddess of Truth and the Right Ordering of the Universe - both so fundamental they are self-begotten. But we may object that these images presuppose a unified world view which is no longer available to us, and not just the universe of the ancient Egyptians, Sumerians and Greeks, or Shelley and Keats's aspirational unities, but even that of the 1930s before the war when Thomas Mann was speaking. We may even feel that myths, tending to unify, are easily distorted into 'grand narratives' which may then become totalitarian and bring about, in fact, utter dis-unity; and then, worse, sanction their narratives under the imposing names of 'Holy Wars,' Father-and-Mother-Land, Domino Effects, the Mother of all Battles, and so on, such that, necessary or not, we are better off without them. It may be in vain to reply that this is myth corrupted and politicized, for have we not reason enough to fear anything but our own small voice?

Yet this suspicion is not unique to our age, and it has always been the task of poetry to uncover the hollowness of desacralized myth and, by exposing vagueness and sentimentality and mal-intent, to point the way to begin again. There is an Ancient Egyptian poem from 2000 BC called 'The Man Who was Tired of Life,' where a man has a dialogue with his Soul on how there is no virtue left, people speak lies, 'brothers today are evil,' and his name is shunned 'more than a flock of vultures when the day is hot.' In fact he complains to his Soul with considerable post-modern sensibility! But his Soul tells him to stop grumbling – after all he could have been a crocodile killed in the egg - and enjoy life instead while he still has it: 'Cleave to life, brother: follow the happy day and forget care.' You will find me in the west when your time is due. ³²

We might say, though, at least there was a dialogue, a Soul to reply.

Kabir, a Sufi poet of the 15th century, has a poem, translated by the poet Robert Bly, which fulfills the poet's role of renewal, as Shelley conceives it:

There is nothing but water in the holy pools,
I know, I have been swimming in them.
All the gods sculpted of wood and ivory can't say a word.
I know, I have been crying out to them.
The Sacred Books of the East are nothing but words.
I looked through their covers one day sideways.
What Kabir talks of is only what he has lived through.
If you have not lived through something, it is not true.³³

Kabir does not offer an alternative to these emptied forms of the holy: he simply, in the last line, startles us by making the myth - if we had still been looking for one - irreducibly inward and personal, insisting that we begin only with what we have made our own by living through it. So, incidentally, does Wolfram Von Eschenbach's *Parzival*. In his first decisive gesture towards his own individuality, Parzival refuses to put God upon his shield, as his friend Gawain warmly advises him. He replies: 'No, I will put only what I know myself, which is the love of a woman.' So he enters the Wasteland alone in defiance of all he has been taught.³⁴ Kabir and Von Eschenbach are here fulfilling the poet's pledge, as Eliot puts it in his *Four Quartets*: 'To purify the dialect of the tribe / And urge the mind to aftersight and foresight...'³⁵

But, nonetheless - the question is not so easily disposed of - is there not a unique kind of fragmentation to our contemporary sensibility that any authentic voice would honour? Maybe we can only answer this if we make a radical distinction about what it means to 'unify?' Mythology, in the sense of a language of shared understandings which strengthens and unifies a group, has been likened by Ted Hughes to the flicking of gazelles' tails:

One of the mythologies of gazelle herds is a flicking of the tail. One gazelle flicks its tail - and the tail flick goes from gazelle to gazelle right through the herd, while they all keep their heads down nonchalantly feeding. To the individual gazelle it must feel like a communal brief prayer, meaning: while we all exist as one gazelle, I exist as full strength gazelle, immortal gazelle.³⁶

It is telling that Hughes turns to an animal image to allow us to see what a unified sensibility might still look like, and how little we need to say when meanings are common - possibly the reason why the myth of Isis and Osiris was nowhere written down in full in Egypt. Not until

Plutarch, a second century AD Greek, was the consecutive story told.³⁷ Also, no gazelle here has any quarrel with the group; indeed, the group is necessary for their mutual survival.

But, turning to humans in our multi-cultural societies, it seems clear that there is a crucial difference between myth as a story which unifies a culture through a shared vision of the world, and myth as a poetic symbol which unifies an individual experience by virtue of being a symbol. For a symbol unifies only - if 'only' were not in this context 'everything' - the person to his or her own being, however briefly, bringing into harmony the inner and the outer in that particular person's world - the mind and the heart reconciled. A renewed sense of community is not presupposed, though it may follow; for Imagination and the imaginative arts, as Yeats says in his essay on Blake, wake us up out of our various 'lethargies' through sympathy:

the sympathy with all living things, sinful and righteous alike, which the imaginative arts awaken, is that forgiveness of sins commanded by Christ. The reason, and by the reason he meant deductions from the senses, binds us to mortality because it binds us to the senses, and divides us from each other by showing us our clashing interests; but imagination divides us from mortality by the immortality of beauty, and binds us to each other by opening the secret doors of all hearts. He cried again and again that everything that lives is holy, and that nothing is unholy except things that do not live—lethargies, and cruelties, and timidities, and that denial of imagination which is the root they grew from in old times. Passions, because most living, are most holy—and this was a scandalous paradox in his time—and man shall enter eternity borne upon their wings.³⁸

This is perhaps how myth becomes poetry, taking whatever form it will - in any age - even honouring the loss of a once shared mythic experience. Geoffrey Hill's poem 'Parentalia,' in his collection *Canaan*, speaks of this:

Go your ways, as if in thanksgiving:
Daniel finally instructed of the Lord.
The book is closed for your time; it will not

open again to the slow
round of the psalms, the prophets of righteousness.
But go, as instrumental, of the Lord,

life-bound to his foreknowledge
and in his absence making your return
to the generations, the roseae,
the things of earth snagging the things of grace,
darkened hawthorn, its late flare, that stands
illustrious, and the darkening season -
Harvest Festival to Armistice Day
the other harvest.³⁹

The evocative poem by the American poet-farmer Wendell Berry, written in 1989, shows the poet reflecting on how his own dream hides the mystery of the world, and this reflection brings him back to the presence of the moment, making no claim, as he puts it, on anything more. It's from his collection *Sabbaths*:

One day I walked imagining
What work I might do here,
The place, once dark, made clear
By work and thought, my managing,
The world thus made more dear.
I walked and dreamed, the sun in clouds,
Dreamer and day at odds.

The world in its great mystery
Was hidden by my dream.
Today I make no claim;
I dream of what is here, the tree
Beside the falling stream,
The stone, the light upon the stone;
And day and dream are one.' ⁴⁰

The suggestion here is that a story takes hold of a culture's sensibility and becomes a myth, a sacred story, *just because* it is poetry - no matter what later becomes of it institutionally - so that it is poetry which keeps the myth alive long after people have ceased to believe in it as religion, or as the one and only sacred story. Similarly, in our time, it may be possible to relate to the poetic voice of Jesus - unshackled from questions of belief. Blake, pre-eminently, talks of 'Jesus... the Imagination.' ⁴¹

The Gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, which was found in an urn at Nag Hammadi only in the 1950s, was extraordinary because it had *not* been edited by the Early Roman Christian Church, who were 'unsympathetic' to some aspects of Gnostic thought, particularly those speaking of immanence rather than transcendence. Interestingly, the urn was buried just 40 kilometers from the Temple of Seti I at Abydos, where the rituals of the death and resurrection of Osiris had been celebrated every year for at least 2000 years. The *Gospel of Thomas* was made up of a number of 'Sayings' – *Logion* - probably written down around 150 AD:

They said to Him: 'Shall we then, being children, enter the Kingdom?' Jesus said to them: 'When you make the two one, and when you make the inner as the outer and the outer as the inner and the above as the below, and when you make the male and the female into a single one, so that the male will not be male and the female (not) be female...then shall you enter the Kingdom.' ⁴²

Coleridge brings Imagination to life in a similar way as reconciling opposite or discordant qualities - a unifying, synthetic and vital power, which 'brings the whole soul of man into activity' and reveals 'the eternal in and through the temporal':

it dissolves, diffuses, dissipates, in order to recreate...it reveals itself in the balance or reconciliation of opposite or discordant qualities: of sameness, with difference; of the general, with the concrete; the idea, with the image; the individual with the representative... Imagination is the soul that is everywhere, and in each; and forms all into one graceful and intelligent whole. ⁴³

Jesus said: Whoever is near to me is near to the fire, and whoever is far from me is far from the Kingdom.' ⁴⁴

Jesus said: Whoever seeks will find and whoever knocks, it will be opened to him. ⁴⁵

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