

DEVELOPING A MYTHIC SENSIBILITY

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from Sphinx



MYTH IS ONE OF THE GENRES OF EXPERIENCE, a way that imagination wraps us in fantasy even as we dream or live out a day. It accounts for the deepest level of emotion, understanding, interpretation, and valuing in experience. Because it is so deep, it is collective in tone, full of memory that goes back so far as to feel antecedent to personal life and even to human life. In it, unfamiliar plants, animals, geographies, and notable events may take their place regardless of any connection to actual experience.

Perhaps because myth is so much larger than personality, we tend to mystify it, and although we want to see daily experience in relation to myth, we may juxtapose a mythic theme with an event in life and miss the deep story that is suggested *within* the event. I once sat on a rock at the top of a New England mountain watching several young men bind themselves into brightly colored winged gliders and leap off

into the valley below. Some of them soared high above me, catching thermals, they said, that caught them and drew them up into the atmosphere. It seemed as though Icarus had come to life with little disguise in these adventurers who spent more than an hour circling high above like the hawks they admired and emulated.

In this case myth rose to the surface, pure, since what these flyers were doing had no rational or pragmatic purpose. They felt their element, air, against their faces and heard it rush through their wings, and they looked to the hawks as their teachers. To me, the mythic quality of these flights was more in the archaic and elemental nature of the play than in their echoing of the Greek Icarus. I'd rather think that both Icarus and my young neighbors were seized by the same myth.

I think it is helpful to distinguish between myth and mythology. Mythology is a certain kind of story that describes the stratum of myth in imaginal experience. It helps us see myth in ordinary life, just as lyric poetry might teach us to appreciate a lyrical moment or a novel might show us that every episode in life, for all of its immediacy, is a fiction. There are no real people, no real places—only characters and settings. We should not confuse the mythological exemplar with the immediate mythic experience.

At its best mythology can generate a sensibility that appreciates the deep fiction that is myth. It can open up a particular kind of vision, so that we see what otherwise would be hidden beneath a layer of literalism or personalistic fiction. Myth is less personal and more archaic (a word extremely close to archetypal) than the intentional stories we tell or the personal memories we use in order to imagine the present. It is more radical than the novel which uses the imagery of personal life for its fictive construction of experience. It is much closer to emotion and meaning than the reasoning interpretations we drop on experience from moment to moment.

On the other hand, mythology can be used to obfuscate imagination, especially when it is given prominence over the experienced myth. One obvious way, for example, that mythology obscures imagination is what we call fundamentalism. We enshrine the mythology, taking it literally, conceptually, and moralistically and lose imagination altogether. Fundamentalism is not only a problem in religious organizations, whereby the power of religion poetically to generate a sense of the

sacred is lost, it is also a block to imagination in our own psychologies and in personal life. If in Jungian psychology, for example, we take the mythic figure of the anima, whose mythic nature generally is preserved in Jung's personal recollections of her, and make her into a concept into which we can pour all the female images of our dreams and daily life, then we are behaving as psychological fundamentalists. If in our own lives we remain attached to a particular story that explains who we are, then we are moving dangerously close to personal fundamentalism.

I know a man, for instance, who explains to everyone that his mother told him never to say much about himself because people would only gain power over him with the information. Therefore, he says, he is a tight-lipped adult who can't be expected to express his thoughts and feelings about things. My sense is that his tale from childhood serves as a protection against the soul's desire to put itself into the world in its stories. He is a fundamentalist, with all the accompanying defensive ploys, in relation to his own unfolding life. We all fall into this kind of fundamentalism, which seems generally to be a defense against the iconoclastic nature of imagination.

Another way mythology is used against the mythic imagination is by enshrining a particular mythological tradition. Although there are good reasons why a particular mythology might be more appealing than another in a certain context, focusing on a single tradition might threaten the fluidity that imagination usually requires. For example, Western language, art and thought is profoundly indebted to Greek mythology, and that is good reason to rely on Greek imagery. Our arts are largely an elaboration of that tradition, and so we have a ready-made substantive body of reading that tradition that is extremely valuable. But Judeo-Christian literature and iconography have equal weight in Western life and thought. The problem is that we tend not to see the mythological nature of these traditions, assuming that to label something mythological is to diminish it, and therefore we get caught in literal arguments. Eastern and African mythology have the advantage of being rather fresh and unfamiliar to the Western mind. They are not loaded down with centuries of canonical readings and therefore can offer new vision.

Many people seem to think that archetypal psychology is a mythological psychology, and Greek in particular. In a discussion on the

archetypal nature of an issue, someone will likely say: "Oh, which Greek God or Goddess is involved here?" Archetypal psychology is interested in the myth, but the traditional mythology only amplifies, in the technical Jungian sense, the myth we are trying to perceive.

"Archetypal" refers to an imaginal matrix for the matter under scrutiny, but that imagining may take a number of different genres. Myth is one of the ways life is lived archetypally, but we might also imagine in the mode of fairy tale, Sufi story, Zen koan, parable, novel, and even train schedule. Given that the situation appears to be mythic, then mythology helps us glimpse the particular mythic themes at play here. But myth is never neat and fixed. Just when you think you have discovered the myth in play, then is the time to allow imagination to move on. My flying boys evoked Icarus, but their own myth was unique and could be told in a new story.

All the same, mythology tells us a great deal about myth. For example, mythology is extremely unstable and fluid. A mythological story readily decomposes, so that we find many contrasting versions, great variety in the names of characters, changes in locations, variations in plot and even contradictory outcomes. But this is the nature of experience: facts may seem to remain the same, while our stories are always changing. The campfire game in which one person in a circle tells a story to the one next to him, who tells it to the person next to him, and so on until the last person tells the story with wide variations on the original is not just about memory, it's about the fluidity of imagination. This is a game our mythology has been playing for centuries. We may prefer a different kind of game, one that is not so variable and open to chance, but it is not our part to choose the game.

Mythology also decomposes into fragmentary art forms that keep it alive. We read the myth of Phaedra in Euripides and then find it familiar but radically altered in later poets and playwrights, from Seneca to Eugene O'Neill. Freud claims to find his truth in mythology, and yet his version of Oedipus is a marked variation on Sophocles. A woman dreams of being led by a burglar down into a cellar and calls it a Persephone dream, but this isn't the precise imagery we find in the "Homeric Hymn to Demeter."

Mythology also fragments in stories that appear only in brief, suggestive form. In a sense, mythology is always in ruins, a piece

missing here and there, just like the sculptures and paintings that have been reshaped by time and fortune, perhaps in more telling form than in the original. Visit a medieval cathedral, and you will see a character in relief or in sculpture in the middle of speaking a word or making an action. Either the rest of the story is implied, or a piece of myth is all that is necessary to suggest the theme. A moment seized in marble may be a more true evocation of the myth than a story. Isn't this, too, the nature of experience? How often do you feel you are in a complete story, with beginning, middle, and end? We can try to make up stories that seem to apply, but these stories are suspicious. They force an issue or a point of view. Lived experience is more fragmentary, suggestive of themes and plots, but never definite. It may take many different stories to evoke a myth.

Mythic experience as such is not narrative in quality. It is more like a dream—incomplete, volatile, elusive. Its power lies in its images more than in its narrative elements. In literature it is usually not so effective to retell a complete ancient mythological story in modern dress. It's better to insinuate pieces of the mythology so as to suggest the mythic stratum. Myth is made of characters who don't need an author to give them a story. They do quite well walking through life with their own personalities, their stories no more obvious than the stories of any of us who bring our quirks and oddities into every life situation.

A story can be a defense against myth, because if we allow myth to live through us, we can't predict what the characters, given their histories, might do. A story is protective because it gives the illusion of wholeness and singularity. Myth is the soul's deep narrative stuff rolling along on the winds of fate. It is largely iconoclastic, forging meanings that counter the interpretations we lovingly construct and cherish.

"My" in "myth" is the Greek *mu*, which implies shutting the eyes and mouth. I understand this to mean that myth is the story we tell when our mouths are shut. It is a different kind of telling, perhaps the story we live as opposed to the story we say we are living. It is the pieces of story told when our mouths are shut in sleep. It is the story another person tells about us when our mouth is shut—different from the story we tell ourselves. The story told with a closed mouth is indirect. It sneaks out when we are saying other things. It is essentially different from what we intend to say when we open our mouths to speak. I do

not tell the myth, but rather one of its characters speaks and the myth comes to life.

Myth is also the tale we behold when we close our eyes in sleep or reverie. It is a world that doesn't operate on the laws of nature. It follows rules of imagination. If we want to perceive the myth, we have to close our eyes to all the usual interpretations of events. We think we know how things work and what they mean, but myth says otherwise. Because it is a deeper story, it is not the same as the one we tell from the surface of understanding. "Deeper" means closer to sacred. Mircea Eliade described myth as the "sudden breakthrough of the sacred that really establishes the World." Mythology speaks in the language of gods and goddesses, and so, too, does myth as it is lived. The closer we move toward a mythic sensibility, the more we appreciate the divine in the everyday. We penetrate through our rational explanations, past our technological methods, and beyond our personal motivations to behold meanings, ways, and reasons that human will and understanding cannot hold. "Myth" and "mystery" are twins, not only etymologically, but also in the nature of things. To appreciate myth is to preserve mystery.

Approaching myth in an ordinary situation, therefore, we ask not "What am I doing?" but rather "What is being done?" To ask, "What does the soul want?"—one of the important questions in the archetypal method—is to inquire about myth, because myth is the story being fashioned by the soul and its fate rather than the one being told and willed, in counterpoint, by personal consciousness. We hang onto and apply our understandings and intentions, but the proper attitude toward myth is response. The word "respond" means to pour a libation. We respond to myth by acknowledging the particular divine mystery hidden and expressed in the fragments of its revelation. The whole idea of talking and doing art mythically is to find those images that give a divine base to a particular human event or tendency. Myth provides the religion we need in order to be saved from the secularism of any particular moment in life. Every episode has its own religion, requiring its own piety, asking for special sacrifices, calling for appropriate rituals. In this sense myth serves the religious attitude—its traditional purpose and the gist of Eliade's remark.

A mythic vision opens our eyes to a world otherwise shrouded by secularism. With the grace of a mythic viewpoint, we see the way

medieval painters saw: that saints are alive among us, that our fellow human beings have halos, that miracles are performed daily, that devils peek around every corner. A poem by D. H. Lawrence makes the point gracefully:

*And a woman who had been washing clothes in the
pool of rock . . .
now turned and came slowly back, with her
back to the evening sky.
Lo! God is one God! But here in the twilight
godly and lovely comes Aphrodite
out of the sea towards me!*

Myth is not merely a kind of intellectual interpretation of events, it guides us out of the modernistic template that lives by natural law, by perception of the senses and by physical technologies toward a sacred world in which meaning is not limited to human categories and where the laws of imagination have dominance. It generates technologies that are magical rather than mechanical. Therefore, the restoration of a mythic sensibility calls for nothing less than a radically post-modern way of living. It allows a vision, not of Greek mythology once more incarnated, but of the goddess of the sensual body and the sea breaking through in an ordinary passage of time.

We are always in myth, whether or not we appreciate that fact. If we are in it piously, prepared by art and religion to deal with the sacred, then life is given immense depth and we can engage the angels and devils who are always turning up unexpectedly. But if we are convinced of the secular philosophy of the day and ignore the necessary rituals of myth and the technologies of depth, then we suffer the incursions of the divine. Their breakthrough becomes our breakdown. The word "pathos" means either to feel the pathology of the divine breaking painfully into human life or to live the passion of the divine as it arrives. Passion is merely the aura of a god who has been given a place of entry.

Myth cannot survive within the confines of modern psychology, however imagistic and spiritual. Myth urges us toward the restoration of art and religion, toward the end of psychology that has been a

temporary stand-in for these while we experimented with secularism. Myth cannot be translated into psychological categories, certainly not to passing themes of gender and personality. Myth has nothing to do with character traits of human beings of any sex. Whenever we translate myth into personal, human qualities we are making one of the most grievous reductions possible. The mystery of incarnation does not mean reducing the nature of divinity to human definitions. It has to do with the mystery by which the archaic world of myth and the supraordinate realm of divinity play their parts in the unfolding of human fate.

Our task, therefore, is to return myth to modern life and thought without reducing it to eighteenth-century notions of reasonable divinity and yet without literal archaism and mythological fundamentalism. We need art that speaks to and from the depths where myth spawns, as well as art that knows its purpose to be in the service of religious sensibility. We need less an appreciation for mythology and more a daring spirit willing to live in a mythic, animated (imagination-filled) world where everything is sacred, where angels appear unexpectedly and in many guises and where devils make it all interesting and complicated.

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