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## Question 2: Depth Psychology and Culture

The question chosen to consider is an examination of the psycho-dynamics that occur and the apparent function of myth when there is a change in consciousness. The basic depth psychological ideas of this examination are taken from the work of Erich Neumann and applied to two mythic traditions, the Odyssey and the Holy Grail. The goal is to demonstrate that there may be underlying processes involving depth psychology and mythology to explain certain aspects of some of the gender dynamics that exist in our culture today. The conclusion will involve a suggestion of how some of this might be addressed from a mythic perspective.

The initial difficulty is to portray the problem being examined adequately. There is perhaps no better articulation of the problem than Richard Tarnas expresses in *The Passion of the Western Mind*, when he writes:

Two antithetical impulses can thus be discerned in the contemporary intellectual situation, one pressing for a radical deconstruction and unmasking—of knowledge, beliefs, world views—and the other for a radical integration and reconciliation. In obvious ways, the two impulses work against each other, yet more subtly they can also be seen as working together as polarized, but complementary, tendencies. Nowhere is this dynamic tension and interplay between the deconstructive and the integrative more dramatically in evidence than in the rapidly expanding body of work produced by women informed by feminism. Carolyn Merchant, Evelyn Fox Keller, and other historians of science have analyzed the influence exerted on the modern scientific understanding by gender-based strategies and metaphors supporting a patriarchal conception of nature—as a mindless, passive feminine object, to be penetrated, controlled, dominated, and exploited. (407).

In other words, there exists today in our contemporary situation an intense feeling that there is something terribly wrong in the relationship between the masculine and

feminine aspects of our entire cultural system. While not everyone is sensitive to these dynamics, those who are may be acutely aware of at least the symptoms, if not the problems. There is perhaps an endless array of ways to explore this situation. The one developed in this paper is offered only as a possible way to look at some of the complexities involved.

From a mythic, depth psychological perspective, Erich Neumann expresses in *The Origins and History of Consciousness*, that there is a particular view we can start from. That view, he expresses in the image of the uroboros (the snake eating its tail). Neumann writes:

The uroboros, the great round, is not only the womb, but the World Parents. The World Father is joined to the World Mother in uroboric union, and they are not to be divided. They are still under the rule of primordial law: above and below, father and mother, heaven and earth, God and world, reflect one another and cannot be put apart. How could the conjunction of opposites, as the initial state of existence, ever be represented mythologically except by the symbol of the conjoined World Parents! (18)

Symbolized then, by the uroboros, is the great unity of the masculine and feminine in the primordial nature of things. If a tear has occurred psychologically in that unity, and/or a separation developed, that could explain some of the gender tensions Tarnas mentions that some people experience today. What could cause such a rending in the uroboric unity Neumann describes?

Earlier, Neumann explains that: “The first phases of man’s evolving ego consciousness are under the dominance of the uroboros.” (1954: 14) The suggestion is that the uroboros is found at an early stage of consciousness—linking consciousness and the mythic image of uroboros. Several possibilities exist within that framework. (1) A symbolic break in the unity of the uroboros might generate a shift in consciousness. (2) A

shift in consciousness might initiate a break in the uroboric unity. (3) Whichever project may be at work, affecting a repair through some mytho-symbolic means might be required. From this point onward, we will consider points two and three above to be the operative line of inquiry. While others are possible, this line of inquiry offers some seemingly worthwhile reflections.

The nature of consciousness is a fascinating subject that lies outside of the parameters of this discussion. Chalmers, Ornstein, Dennet, Pico and others discuss this phenomenon at great length. One of the mythologists that Neumann quotes concerning consciousness is Ernst Cassirer. Neumann writes of Cassirer by stating:

Ernst Cassirer has shown how, in all peoples and in all religions, creation appears as the creation of light. Thus the coming of consciousness, manifesting itself as light in contrast to the darkness of unconsciousness, is the real “object” of creation mythology. Cassirer has likewise shown that in the different stages of mythological consciousness the first thing to be discovered is subjective reality, the formation of the ego and individuality. The beginning of this development, mythologically regarded as the beginning of the world, is the coming of light without which no world process could be seen at all. (1954: 6)

Therefore, the linkage that Neumann and Cassirer seem to be constructing is the link of uroboric unity, consciousness and mythology. The suggestion being made is that a shift in consciousness may cause a disruption in the uroboric unity, and that mythology may be useful in restoring that unity or integrating the new consciousness so that restoration or reconciliation might be possible. Since the purpose of this work is about the western mind (within the framework of Tarnas), the following is one possible way of demonstrating those dynamics at work.

Julian Jaynes uses the Odyssey to demonstrate his contention that there was a shift in consciousness at the end of the second millennium BCE. Whether or not there

was a “bi-cameral mind” to break down, the way he uses the Odyssey to demonstrate a shift in consciousness is very provocative. He contends that the use of certain words is what demonstrates that shift in consciousness. Words that deal with mind and mindfulness are used much more frequently in the Odyssey than they were in the Iliad. With that in mind, we could postulate that the Odyssey was a mythology that was present at a general shift in consciousness. After the Trojan War, the period that followed was certainly reflective of an enormous upheaval in the Mediterranean world. Perhaps we should examine this more closely.

The cause of the Trojan War was the abduction or seduction of Helen of Sparta at the hands of Paris, a prince of Troy. Menelaus, the king of Sparta convinced his brother Agamemnon to mount a campaign against the Trojans to secure the release of his wife. One could construe that such events were a reflection of a rupture in the uroboric unity. Whether such events could trigger a wholesale shift in consciousness is doubtful. However, a case could be made for the notion that the story may reflect an already existing reality. The uroboric rupture may have happened and the events surrounding Helen were a symptom and not a cause. Certainly, the return of Agamemnon and the subsequent murder at the hands of his wife could also be a demonstration of the rupture in the uroboric unity. The Orestia and the Oedipus trilogy could be seen as further demonstrations of that breakdown.

From a certain perspective, the Odyssey can be seen as a chronicle of the process of healing that rupture. The Golden Age of Greece could be an indicator of that healing. Such healing would be based upon the return of Odysseus and the subsequent reunion with Penelope, his wife. One of the dynamics of that reunion is the rejection of the divine

feminine by Odysseus and the reunification with a truly human female partner. The rejection of Calypso and Circe present Odysseus with the opportunity of restoring the uroboric unity of the masculine and feminine by abandoning the Great Mother. To explain this we must return to Neumann in his work, *The Great Mother*. Neuman writes:

As symbol of the beginning, the uroboros stands between the formless, purely effective phenomenon of the “archetype *an sich*” and such already specified figures of the primordial archetype as the Archetypal Feminine or the Archetypal Masculine. Nevertheless, the transitions between the uroboros and the primordial archetype of the Feminine, and between the latter and the archetype of the Great Mother, are fluid. (1955: 19)

What Neumann is suggesting is that there is a great deal of interchangeability between the different symbols within the uroboros. Intermingled within his conceptual framework are such archetypal images as the Great Mother, the Terrible Mother, the Good Mother, the Anima, Sophia, the Gorgon, Isis, and of course the Human Female. In a sense, Odysseus is dealing with all these aspects of the feminine throughout the Odyssey. For instance, one aspect Neumann explores is with the Anima. He writes,

This means that the anima figure, despite the great danger that is bound up with it, is not terrible in the same way as the Great Mother, who is not at all concerned with the independence of the individual and the ego. Even when the anima is seemingly negative and “intends,” for example, to poison the male consciousness, to endanger it by intoxication, and so on—even then a positive reversal is possible, for the anima figure is always subject to defeat. When Circe, the enchantress who turns men into beasts, meets the superior figure of Odysseus, she does not kill herself like the Sphinx, whose riddle Oedipus has solved, but invites him to share her bed. (1955: 35)

In this quote, Neumann is relating Circe to the Anima, and Odysseus’ conquest of the feminine aspect of himself. Additionally, this paper is offering a suggestion for further development that, in the case of Calypso, Odysseus was also involved with the Great Mother. In the case of Calypso, Odysseus is fed and nurtured by the goddess or

symbolically, Great Mother. In a psycho-symbolic sense, he nursed from her abundant breasts, which supplied all his needs. However, Odysseus forsakes Calypso's prison/palace and resumes his journey home, to be reunited ultimately with the earthly feminine, in the person of Penelope. However, in a deeper psychological sense, the reunification could also have been with his own feminine nature.

The connection being made is that with the reunification of Odysseus with Penelope, uroboric unity is restored, in the myth, in the psyche and in the culture. Therefore, through a mythological process, the changes wrought in uroboric unity by a shift of consciousness are corrected.

An analogous situation exists at the birth of the legends involving the Holy Grail. While not stating explicitly that the birth of European consciousness developed at the same time, Campbell creates a picture of unmistakable change in *Creative Mythology*. As the Grail legends of Chrétien de Troyes and Wolfram Von Eschenbach developed, the Crusades unfolded and the unprecedented construction of cathedrals dedicated to the Blessed Virgin multiplied, one could suggest that such events were the demonstration of the emergence of a specifically European consciousness. With the dawning of a new consciousness, and as the uroboric unity began to fracture, tales of the Holy Grail emerged.

The Holy Grail is a symbol of the Great Mother. Neumann writes:

The magic caldron is originally a symbol of fertility belonging to the elementary character of the Feminine. As such, it yields food, it is the cornucopia, for example; and even its latest form, the Christian sublimated Grail, which has almost lost its original significance as the magical kettle of the cult priestess, retains its food-giving aspect. (1955: 289)

In one sense, the Grail Castle is performing the same function as Calypso's palace in the *Odyssey*. Therefore, the scenes of knights feasting at the table, nourished by the Holy Grail are, psychologically speaking, men feasting at the breasts of the Great Mother. In a manner of speaking, all the knights are trapped in the Grail Castle. In order for the tale to go forward, one would need to escape from the Great Mother according to the pattern established by the *Odyssey*. Seemingly, the uroboric unity cannot be restored from within the Grail Castle, any more than it could have been accomplished in the court of Calypso's palace. Mythically, how could that reunification happen?

It was Parsifal who uttered the words that healed, but also, in effect, usurped Amfortas as the Grail King. Parsifal then becomes established as the new Grail King. Since Parsifal has taken over the throne, Amfortas seems like a discarded character. The Grail could not heal the wounds of the Fisher King, only the words of a compassionate "fool" had real healing power. Obviously, the demands of uroboric healing we have been discussing, requires more healing power than the Grail can provide. The legend to this point does not say what happens to Amfortas. Perhaps, Amfortas might achieve a new and different function in the emerging myth by propelling the Grail legend forward, the same way Odysseus does in propelling the *Odyssey* forward. One possible solution is for Amfortas to escape the Grail Castle and make his way in the wide world, eventually to reconcile and be reunited with Kundry and thereby reestablish the uroboric unity.

The evolution of Kundry, from the loathsome damsel of Chrétien to the powerful figure of Wagner's Parsifal is an amazing transformation. In the creative imagination, while the knights continue to suck at the breasts of the Great Mother without change, the dynamic figure of Kundry as a powerful feminine figure continues to evolve. Perhaps

similar dynamics were at work for the character of Penelope over the centuries of the development of the Odyssey. If Amfortas can emerge from the infantile dynamics of the Grail Castle, perhaps that uroboric unification can finally be effected by the myth.

Underlying my thoughts about the Grail legends is the idea that the stories are still being created the way that all mythologies are created. The Odyssey was in development for hundreds of years before it was finally written down and attributed to Homer. Since we do not live in an age of oral transmission, obviously the development of mythic material would probably be written in nature. However, time would still be a factor in the further development of the stories. Perhaps such development might occur along the lines I have suggested. Perhaps, not just in writing but also in films.

In the meantime, one particular manifestation of the dynamics being discussed can be seen in the film, *The Natural*. Utilizing the metaphor of baseball, the film synthesizes in a transparent way the stories of the Odyssey and the Grail. The hero, Roy Hobbs, is dealt a serious blow to his aspirations as a baseball player when he is shot by a dark feminine figure. After sixteen years (of an unknown odyssey), Hobbs returns as a middle-aged rookie to the game he loves. In a sense, he has achieved his quest for the Holy Grail by becoming a major league baseball player. However, another dark feminine figure emerges to seduce and corrupt him, returning him to mediocrity. Not surprisingly, within the film, another powerful feminine figure emerges from the stands, in a halo of light to restore Hobbs' abilities. This figure of light is the sweetheart he left behind in his youth, in the period of uroboric unity—pregnant and alone. Hobbs knew nothing of her situation, and as the film unfolds, she helps him to discover/re-discover who he is. Wounded, like the Fisher King, Roy Hobbs proceeds to escape the Cyclops (the team

owner) and other devouring monsters there in the Grail Castle of the ballpark. Ultimately, his wounds force him from baseball, where he returns home with his wife and child to restore uroboric unity.

While no movie is going to correct the structural inequities that exist between men and women in our culture, there are perhaps within the mythic context some areas of mutual exploration that could mitigate some of the hostility that characterizes certain aspects of gender difference. If the suggestion of Neumann and the stories discussed are valid, the psychological aspect of reunification within the fabric of the uroboros is a necessary stage through which our culture and each one of us must pass. However, as the composition of the Odyssey demonstrates, and the evolving nature of the Grail legends suggest, this process seems to be a very slow and time-consuming one.

Incorporating concepts of depth psychology, this paper has explored some of the underlying elements that may exist within the mythologies and the realities of everyday life in our culture. Utilizing the ideas of Erich Neumann, an ancient myth (the Odyssey), and a relatively newer story (Holy Grail), we have explored some of the relationships between consciousness, myth, and depth psychology. Hopefully, the insights explored will offer some useful perspective when dealing with matters of gender sensitivity.

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