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Star Wars: Mythic Hunger In An Age Without Myth

From time to time, I read that we no longer live in a mythic age, but in scientific times, ruled by reason and rational people. While I am sure this is correct on some levels, I have some doubts regarding how far behind us the need for myth might be (see Rollo May). Perhaps the recent completion of the final episode of the Star Wars saga may have some bearing on where our present age might be in regard to the need for myth. I do not intend to analyze or review the movie *Revenge of the Sith*, but I do wish to touch upon it to illustrate some points that might have bearing upon the discussion of the times in which we live. Obviously, the film has enjoyed considerable success in the short time since its release. While the previous two installments in the recent series (Episodes I and II) have not met with the success expected, the final episode has been long awaited. My thought is that such anticipation is more for mythic reasons than rational ones. What could those mythic reasons be?

Before delving into those reasons, I would like to introduce a model I have developed for dealing with such matters. While there are no adequate definitions of myth, ritual or symbol (see Doty), I choose to think of myth, ritual and symbol as comprising a system (Mytho-Dynamic System) which we engage on a variety of levels through a number of modes of perception and experience. Among such modes of perception and experience is the INTERFACE, which almost always involves the senses and the body, as well as a variety of media and materials (including oral, written and visual). Also among those modes of perception and experience are the MIND, the SOUL, and the

contextual dimension of LIFE. (See figure 1). While there may be other such models extant, I have not encountered them. I offer this as a fairly reasonable point of departure when discussing things mythic, including the new Star Wars movie.

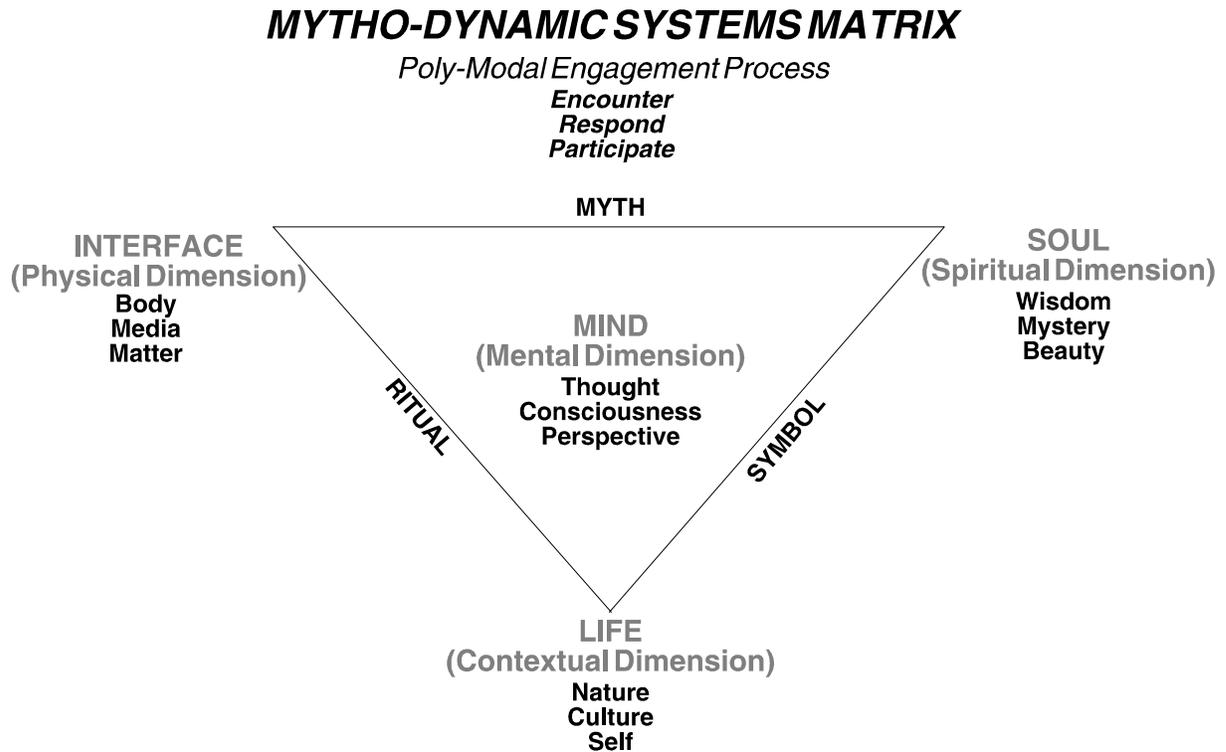


Figure 1

Aside from being a stirring adventure, the Star Wars saga has been a phenomena spanning decades, which is extremely unusual in an age of fads and transient fashions. I suspect the reasons go deeper than just good entertainment and stunning special effects. My contention is that the films, which comprise the series, touch on deeply human, deeply mythic themes that transcend the hero’s journey with which the saga began.

This final installment is about the descent into darkness of a young man (Aniken Skywalker), who is seduced by agents of the dark side of the “Force” (a mysterious

energy source comprised of all living things in the galaxy). Motivated by love, but powerless to protect his wife from the inevitability of death, his special powers are gradually twisted into violent applications that eventually destroy even the one he loves. On one level, the theme is very Faustian in the way he makes a pact with a demon, in effect selling his soul to the devil. I do not intend to explore the Faust theme as much as the notion of soul and the dynamics of descent, as Miller calls it, the (*descensus ad inferos*). After briefly discussing notions of the soul, we will explore basic elements of that descent from a literary perspective, from an alchemical/psychological perspective, as well as shamanistic and theological perspectives.

Based upon the elements of figure 1, one can see that the dimension of the soul is fundamentally important in terms of understanding the functions of mytho-dynamics. Authors, such as Jung, Hillman, Moore and Giegerich write convincingly about the workings of the soul and the intimate nature of myth. For the purposes of this discussion, we will follow primarily the line of thought established by Giegerich, which was inspired by the work of Jung.

In *The Soul's Logical Life*, Giegerich attempts to establish a rigorous conceptual framework for the notion of "soul." What one can appreciate about his discussion of the soul is the depth to which he pursues the subject, until he arrives at a fairly specific point, the point of negation. As he writes:

The conclusion to be drawn from these considerations is that the soul, or as JUNG described it, "psychological reality" is nothing ontic and therefore cannot be approached in ontological terms and from ontological presuppositions. The soul is *logical life*. It *is* not, or it is negativity. (116)

This whole notion of negativity is a difficult concept to comprehend, so he elaborates further: "As I stated before: the soul does not exist, it is not an entity, or being

or “factor,” it is logical life, logical movement. This is why the soul cannot really be imagined. It has to be thought.” (116) In other words, the categories of conventional thought do not apply in dealing with notions of the soul. In a sense, Giegerich is saying that the soul is both journey and destination, without being either. The soul encompasses all destinations and pathways, all the dreams, visions and nightmares we can conjure without being any of those things. Giegerich elaborates further by stating:

The absolute negative is in itself negative and that is to say “towards” itself negative; it is something positive that as much as its own self-negation, it *is* in itself negative throughout; it *is* its own other and therefore does not need anything else, something positively given, to disassociate itself from *by negating it* (“aurum non vulgi”). It does not need any Other to retain its negativity and to find its own identity in its own negativity, in its own inherent otherness from itself. (115)

According to Giegerich, we perhaps should not speak of the soul as if it were a thing, but if we do, we cannot take any idea we have of the soul literally, for it is a non-thing. Unfortunately, he takes us no further into that idea of no-thing. My thought is to delve a little deeper, which may lead to some worthwhile reflections about the soul. At the point of nothing, interesting things seem to be taking place.

For instance, according to the Inflationary Theory of the creation of the universe (Guth 1980), the universe began when an infinitesimally small point (called a false vacuum) popped out of “nothing” and expanded into what became the universe as we know it. According to Filippenko and Pasachoff:

What produced the energy before inflation? This is perhaps the ultimate question. As crazy as it might seem, the energy may have come out of nothing! The meaning of “nothing” is somewhat ambiguous here. It might be the vacuum in some pre-existing space and time, or it could be nothing at all – that is, all concepts of space and time were created with the universe itself. (85)

So “everything” may have come from “nothing.” Further exploration of the idea of nothing, as the source of creation is beyond the scope of our present discussion, but for further elaboration see Barrow, Cole, Kaku, and Greene. The interesting implication of this is that “nothing” is a very powerful and creative force and even to this day could be producing other universes. It is this creative capacity of “nothing” that the physicist David Bohm uses as the basis for his hypothesis about the implicate order of the universe. The conclusion to be drawn from all this is that if the soul is indeed “nothing” and “nothing” creates “everything,” the soul is powerful indeed and very important for us to understand, if we could. However, as Giegerich indicated, the nature of the soul is somewhat mysterious.

Following the flow of Giegerich’s thought, the contradictory nature of the soul leads us into the wonderful structural work of Levi-Strauss. In the nature of his exposition of binary oppositions (male/female, light/dark etc.) Levi-Strauss demonstrates how these contradictory elements exist within mythology. There are several extrapolations to be inferred from his work. 1) When we encounter elements of binary opposition we may be involved in the area of myth, and 2) in the area of myth we can probably assume the presence of a binary opposition, even if unstated. For instance, in Christianity there is the biblical reference of Luke 17:21 “? Bas ??e?a t?? ?e?? ??t?? ?μ? ? ?st??” (the Kingdom of God is within you). Within the context of discussing the soul, based on the idea of binary opposites, we could posit the idea that also implied in that statement of biblical reality is the complementary idea, “the kingdom of hell” is also within you.

This particular line of reasoning is important within the context of the journey of the soul and the *decensus ad infero*. This journey is a descent “within” (*infero*), so the imagery is the soul descends into itself—into the nothing which holds all possibilities, including heaven and hell. However, heaven is associated with ascent (which in the context of Star Wars is presented at the end of the series), so the movement of the soul for Darth Vader in the film under discussion is downward, or obviously into hell. We will explore this idea later. For the time being, our discussion is focused on the nature of the soul.

I am suggesting that the soul, as a complex, mysterious reflection of “nothing” is an extremely important aspect of the Mytho Dynamic model I have suggested. Furthermore, I am suggesting that the nature of soul is fundamentally important for the nature of being human. For those with a foundation in depth psychology, I do not think that there is anything particularly disturbing in the considerations that I have presented. However, there are those who would challenge this view.

For instance, Owen Flanagan writes in his book *The Problem of the Soul*:

It is no surprise that the images offered by perennial philosophy and science conflict, even though many of the details of the scientific image are not in place. Perennial philosophy teaches that we are spiritual beings and that everything turns on perfecting our spiritual nature. The scientific image is committed to desouling us. If there is room for human perfection within the constraints of scientific image—and I think there is—it cannot be spiritual perfection as traditionally conceived, because we do not possess spiritual components. (3)

Persons of such a viewpoint would view my suggestion of the mythic nature of the film under discussion, naïve or misguided. The project of desouling humans is a dubious enterprise in my estimation, but professor Flanagan continues:

There is no consensus yet about the details of the scientific image of persons. But there is broad agreement about how we must construct the

detailed picture. First, we will need to demythologize persons by rooting out certain unfounded ideas from the perennial philosophy. Letting go of the belief in souls is a minimal requirement. In fact, desouling is the primary operation of the scientific image. “First surgery,” we might call it. There are no such things as souls or non-physical minds. If such things did exist, as perennial philosophy conceives them, science would be unable to explain persons. But there aren’t, so it can. Second, we will need to think of persons as part of nature—as natural creatures completely obedient and responsive to natural law. (3)

Such views are probably quite common, but seem to be based upon very careful selection and omission of the scientific “data” used to arrive at their conclusions. Omitted from the discussion are the implications of the Uncertainty Principle (Heisenberg) which conclude that there are things we can never know with any degree of certainty. We live in a universe of limits and mystery, which cannot be eliminated by empty rhetoric. Other observers, such as Goswami, indicate that based upon experiments the mind affects physical phenomena in unexplainable ways. Based on the model Flannagan is proposing, there are no such thing as strange attractors and unexplained synchronous effects. However, overlooking such compelling omissions from his argument, we will allow professor Flannagan to further justify his desouling campaign for promoting the purest form of humanism and have the last word on the subject, as he writes:

There are many unknown forces in genes, mind, and culture that will affect the story we eventually tell about what it means to be a person, about why we think, feel, and behave as we do. But no scientifically minded person thinks we will need resources beyond those available to genetics, biology, psychology, neuroscience, anthropology, sociology, history, economics, political science, and naturalistic philosophy to understand the nature of persons. The beliefs in immaterial minds, and minor and major spirits, are in need of explanation. But spiritual forces will not do any explaining. Unless God and the angels are tampering with us, unless astral forces and extraterrestrials are messing with our brains and perceptions, science will one day be enough to provide a true picture of our *dasein*. (7)

The interesting thing about the Star Wars saga, is that even the man/machine/monster figure of Darth Vader is subject to the mythic reality of “the Force.” The true struggle of humanity, while reflected on a physical plane, is essentially spiritual in nature. Skywalker is not fighting against the reality of soul in the world, but takes part in the real battle of the soul within itself for its own redemption. Hence, we have the need for the descent theme.

The first perspective I would like to explore on the descent theme is a literary perspective, utilizing the *Odyssey*, the *Inferno* from the *Divine Comedy* and the play *No Exit* by Sartre. These three works, covering three millennia will demonstrate that the theme is certainly not a new one, nor is it static.

In the *Odyssey*, we encounter the descent into Hades in Book XI. Odysseus has no desire to visit the underworld, but in order to discern what divinity opposed his return to Ithica, he needed advice from the blind prophet Tiresias. In almost anyone’s story, the descent into Hell would be the climax of their life, and the act of merely returning an incredible feat. However, within the context of the *Odyssey*, the descent into Hades is just one more in a series of incredible adventures. The necessity of the trip into Hades outweighed the actual events of the endeavor. In addition to discovering the identity of his tormentor, Odysseus encountered the ghost of his mother, Agamemnon, Achilles and others. In one of the most amazing passages in the poem, Achilles, the archetype of the Greek warrior says:

Let me hear no smooth talk of death from you, Odysseus,
 Light of councils.
 Better, I say, to break sod as a farm hand for some poor country man,
 On iron rations,
 Than lord it over all the exhausted dead. (201)

Not only did Odysseus receive the information he sought, he was also given the gift of insight from one for whom renown had been the motivation for his heroic exploits. In those dark caverns, Odysseus truly encountered mystery and wisdom.

While Odysseus' descent was for purely personal reasons, the descent of Dante might be considered more as a cultural journey to the nether world. As Allums writes:

The journey through Hell, under the tutelage of l'altissimo poeta among the ancients, is the initial phase in the double enactment that will subsume the portent but partial truths of the classical vision into the wholeness of the Christian myth whose *mimesis* the poet is both creating and coming to understand he must create. At the thematic center of this phase is the figure of Ulysses, who as Giuseppe Mazzotta says, "is damned but still exerts a singular fascination on the pilgrim-poet (94)." That fascination is evident on the levels of both plot—the pilgrim's encounter with Ulysses' shade in *Inferno* 26—and the writing of the poem—the poet's subsequent references, veiled or explicit, to the infamous journey that determined the hero's fate. In fact, it is Ulysses, even more than Virgil, against whom Dante's transformative and therefore inherently ominous epic enterprise must ultimately be measured. (170-171)

In other words, the descent into Hell was really Dante's journey to the depths in order to claim his own inheritance as the greatest poet since Homer. In *Canto* 26, we see, in a sense, the passing of the poetic torch from Homer to Dante, through the vehicle of Virgil. In the *Odyssey*, the descent was to find one's way home—in the *Divine Comedy* the purpose of the descent was to find and claim one's own self.

In the Sartre play, *No Exit*, three souls find themselves locked in a parlor room with no mirrors or windows and only one locked door. The two women and a man know they are dead and in Hell and keep wondering when the torturer is going to appear. As the play unfolds they learn that they are the torturers of one another. They are locked up together for eternity in an unending dance of psycho-sexual disdain. Here, our visit to

Hell is not temporary or merely as a tourist, as were Odysseus and the Pilgrim/Poet. One can feel the sense of entrapment—for us the play ends, but the soul remains trapped.

That is the dilemma in a sense for Darth Vader. He has no exit. He must prevent the death of his wife, only the dark side can promise to save her, but in order to embrace the dark side he must abandon his friends and the life he has known to serve the dark emperor. Much like the inferno, the message is “Abandon hope, all you who enter here.” So, he surrenders himself to the dark side and begins a slide into evil that culminates in his physical breakdown. The physical breakdown and the completion of the change in his character are what take us to the next stage of discussion, the psychological/alchemical.

I think the alchemical process is salient to our discussion within the context of the film, and within the context of the soul’s journey of Skywalker and each of us. According to Giegerich:

In alchemy, the primal stuff moves through the stages of, e.g. nigredo, albedo, citrinitas, rubedo. The move through these stages is different from a journey through several co-existing countries. It is a passage through phases or states of one and the same substance. In other words, it has the character of a transformation or metamorphosis (perhaps like that of a butterfly: egg, larva, pupa, adult). In the alchemy of the (Western) soul’s history, the soul has similarly moved through a series of logical constitutions of consciousness, from a stage of shamanism (as a whole mode of being in the world) to that of mythological and ritualistic polytheism and further to Christian monotheism (with its trinity of metaphysics, science and technology), which *is* the sublation of the two previous stages. The alchemical understanding of the soul’s process helps us to see that we are psychologically “placed” (Edward Casey) also in a particular, specific moment of time. We are not in a kind of “imaginary museum” (Andre Malraux) or a supermarket of archetypes, having all the images, Gods, and forms of thinking of all ages as a temporal options or Platonic Forms available to us. This restrictedness and determinateness is what makes psychological life *real*. No choice. We cannot, according to our preferences nor according to our ideas of good and evil, correct and false, select the images and our Gods. We are stuck in with them, whatever *our* (and our time’s) *real* images and Gods happen to be. (76-77)

There are some provocative and challenging statements in the quote above. Within this perspective I am going to shift from the personal journey of Darth Vader, to the larger frame of our culture. Much like Vader, we have been transformed into a machine, or at least largely mechanistic society, seduced by power and technology and grown ever more dependent upon machines, and in many cases further alienated from our own humanity. From atom bombs, to hydrogen weapons and now the armament of space we seem to draw ever closer to the dark side. Motivated by legitimate needs, we move little by little nearer an abyss that beckons us to our own destruction. “Don’t give in” is the admonition heard over and over in the film, but if our humanism is the one advocated by professor Flanagan above, what force can we rely upon to halt our inevitable slide into doom? Change we will, ascend we might, if the gods favor us. Even now, we are undergoing the transition into a new psychological reality. Perhaps we will not be confronted with the no exit option.

Changing perspectives to the shamanistic permits us to have perhaps a more positive outlook on the nature of descent. In the chapter on *mundus imaginalis*, Ryan offers three stories of shamans from geographically distant lands, who descend into the underworld for the sake of rescuing a soul. Commenting on this world wide shamanic practice, Ryan states:

In precisely the manner described by Sherry Solman, out of symbols of introversion arise images of ascent, illumination, power and essence through the shaman’s world. Likewise, at this point in the psyche’s strange symbolic wanderings we find that frequently key symbols spontaneously convert to their opposites. As we recall, Jung noted this protean quality of the symbols in his *mundus archetypus*. (181)

The shamanic connection allows us to expand the symbols and themes of the *descensus ad infero* beyond just our western culture. The descent of Darth Vader, while

ominous, maintains a glimmer of hope for an eventual ascent, completing a shamanistic cycle—rescuing his son and ultimately redeeming himself.

The final perspective on the soul's descent is the religious or theological one. In the myth of Orpheus, Orpheus descends to Hades to unsuccessfully rescue Eurydice. Much like a shaman, in effect he descends but rescues no one. On the other hand, in shamanic fashion Jesus descends and rescues everyone, and his ascent culminates in the resurrection. Miller has a wonderful exposition of this particular descent and ascent of the soul and I recommend his book highly. The makers of the film have avoided, perhaps wisely, any material that might seem overtly theological to a Christian audience. While the redemption aspect is reserved for a later episode in the saga, the whole thing is set up with the birth of two babies, Luke and Lea in this film. While not part of the descent aspect, the secret birth of the twins is ultimately necessary for the accomplishment of the redemption.

I realize, from a post-modern perspective there are those who would question the applicability of the Mytho-Dynamic System, or any “system” for that matter. My only response is that such criticism is based upon a Popperian falsification system (all systems are unnecessary). Such critics would be caught in a self-defeating loop: how can you use a system to attack all systems?

I have demonstrated that the new Star Wars film reflects a great deal of mythic material, which may account in large part for its popularity. While it may not be mythic in the classical sense, it is indeed Mytho-Dynamic according to the model I proposed. We only briefly looked at the film from the standpoint of the soul's descent, but even within that limited context I think one can see just how rich the thematic material is. We may not

be living in a mythic age, but based on the hunger of people for material like Star Wars, I think we can positively assert that we are living in Mytho-Dynamic times.

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