

Excerpt from *The Cultic Code, The Living Books of Paul Bowles*, IV.II. 2-3.3. Cult as myth...pp.178-83.

## 2. Inter-disciplinary aspects

Myth, orality, and passage have a range of references, all of which contain relevant elements. The noumenal mode of vision sees myth as exterior and interior figure at the same time, but the phenomenological mode remains **on either the inner or the outer surface of myth**. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Western scientific empire opened its window onto the subdued world. It produced comparative human sciences, including a great number of disciplines and approaches, whereby the colonial man tries to understand the colonized, and regenerate his war-ravaged world, perhaps in an effort to re-enchant itself (in other words, to find the lost meaning of life). As we have seen, scientific objectivity is insufficient in describing noumenal phenomena, as it is incapable of being more than objective, clothing its own bad conscience and limitation of understanding in ungracefully condescending terminology (such as primitive, savage, barbarian, undeveloped, illiterate, pre-literate, archaic etc.). N.B. As seen in the case of historical (economical-political) colonization, the scientific enquirer also goes to the source of information with the unashamed arrogance of robbing, corrupting, and devaluating (consciously or unconsciously misinterpreting) cultural goods as well as their makers and keepers. The complexity of metanarrative vision cannot be expected from these schools and movements. Neither the patronization of the holistic mentality by the divided, nor the categorical separation of physical-metaphysical can be scientifically acceptable at this point. Ignoring the injustice and disrespect, I extract a few fields and works which provide partial concerns, specific angles on myth. These, configured in a mosaic, may reconstruct the mythical figure of speech, thought, time, and existence, to which my research can add its point: relevance.

### 2.1 Literary-religious considerations

Thankfully, the root connection between **myth** and literature is hard to deny.

Every human society possesses a mythology which is inherited, transmitted and diversified by literature. Comparative mythology is a fascinating subject, but it is quickly exhausted as a scholarly study if it remains simply a configuration of patterns. It is generally understood that it needs to be grounded in psychology or anthropology: it is much less understood that its central and most important extension is into the literature [...] which incarnates a mythology in a historical context.<sup>1</sup>

The consideration of myth as a culture-specific set of **stories and characters** produces the narrative, historical approach, such as demonstrated by Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. The influential basic compendium shows the organic **continuity or similarity** between Near Eastern mysteries, mythologies, and Christian heritage e.g. Tammuz or Adonis as pre-figurations of Jesus in rites of death and regeneration. Parallels and superimpositions may be found, and kinship understood as identity between figures. Myth is considered as a **return to non-narrativity** by the philosophical anthropology of Mircea Eliade in *The Myth of the Eternal Return*. Unfortunately dividing sacred from profane time, he recognises that the myth of eternal return is a cosmic-human-natural cycle enacted in rites.

A basic fault or preconception of the Western mind becomes apparent here: the splitting of time. In Frazer, this appears in nostalgia and historicity, and in Eliade a categorical distinction between temporal stasis and movement. Underlying many discursive works is the all too apparent sense of **nostalgia**: reconstructed models of past civilizational golden ages attempt on a large scale what Bowles

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<sup>1</sup> Northrop Frye, *Words with Power*, xiii.

attempts in assuming the role of the liminoid<sup>2</sup> traveller: “the traveller, belonging no more to one place than to the next,”<sup>3</sup> searches for the **ideal place**. Bowles, of course, arrives at the conclusion that the ideal place may be found inside and built outside. These Western tendencies are necessarily concluded by the radical denouncement of civilization, but the good Orientalist’s hanging on to vestiges of times gone also seems atavistic. Stenham’s concern for Fez, “the enchanted labyrinth sheltered from time”<sup>4</sup> is still the outsider’s concern: as he cannot shed his preconceptions, he cannot fully participate – therefore he can neither comprehend, nor save the treasure of the labyrinth embodied by Amar. When Kit realizes with dread that even “the whole, monstrous star-filled sky [is] turning,”<sup>5</sup> the dread comes from the linearized Western mind, to which the notion of the ever-turning wheel of the world is oppressive.

## 2.2 Myth as passage: anthropology

**Anthropology** provides several useful observations of the ritual process, confirming several points of metanarrativity, and shedding light on how myth as a rite of passage works. The discipline is concerned with the events of tribal rituals. In *The Savage Mind* (1962), Lévi-Strauss recognizes that “devices and procedures” of totemism show a “systematic nature of the relations between them.” ... “Two aspects of this system [are] its internal coherence and its practically unlimited capacity for extension.”<sup>6</sup> Totemism here is synonymous with metanarrative and myth, the specific story of which is coherent in form, and open in energy. He observes that “the structure is in all cases supported by an axis (which it is convenient to picture as vertical). This connects the general with the particular.”<sup>7</sup> The simultaneity of the general and the particular is a key feature of myth, exactly what went unrecognised by Eliade.

Anthropologists Arnold van Gennep in *Les rites de passage* (1909) and Victor Turner in *The Ritual Process – Structure and Anti-Structure* (1977) make significant observations of tribal rites of passage, identical to the process of myth. They recognise ritualism as transitional liberation from **social doctrine**, suspending the ordinary rules of engagement, and transgressing the individual-communal dichotomy. The key of their observations is not the practical function of rites, that social positions may be reversed or elevated, that society may be rejuvenation, that social stability may be preserved, or that “the **rich complexities of cultural creation**”<sup>8</sup> start flowing from a constantly dynamic source. The key, for the consideration of myth as rite, is that “transitional periods ... sometimes acquire a certain **autonomy**.”<sup>9</sup> It is this autonomy which allows for the definition of ritual as a gap between preceding and following structure. Anthropology observes “the structural invisibility of novices undergoing life-crisis rituals ... rendering them down into some kind of human *prima material*.”<sup>10</sup> Turner’s research shows that “our concreteness, our **substantiality** is with us in our reflexivity, even in the ludic play domain of certain of our liminal moments.”<sup>11</sup> What this confirms is that at the centre of transition, substance is an absolutely stable factor.

Van Gennep defines the phases of passage as “preliminal rites (rites of separation), liminal rites (rites of transition), and postliminal rites (rites of incorporation).”<sup>12</sup> This categorization is relevant for myth in the sense that these vertical steps seem to designate the origin of the phases of linear narrative. Therefore **myth is par excellence ritual form**. Ceremonies marking **initiation into adulthood** are the

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<sup>2</sup> “Liminoid” is a phrase coined by Victor Turner, meaning an incomplete potentiality for liminal experience.

<sup>3</sup> *Sheltering* 5

<sup>4</sup> *Spider’s* 168

<sup>5</sup> *Sheltering* 240

<sup>6</sup> Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Savage Mind*, 217.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>8</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, viii.

<sup>9</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 192.

<sup>10</sup> Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process*, 169-170.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>12</sup> Arnold Van Gennep, *The Rites of Passage*, 11.

most common rites of passage. They often include trials of pain and stamina, periods of introspection, **the teaching of sacred and secret stories**, and the use of symbolic representations, including dances and masks, as a means of reshaping individuals' identities. The recital and reception of stories is not sheer entertainment but explicit **initiation** ritual into **stages of maturity**.

### 2.3 Inner process of transition: psychology

While anthropology is concerned with the exterior events of passage, psychology observes interior events of the individual. **Jungian psychoanalysis** claims that the one unchanging aspect of consciousness is its transgressive character.<sup>13</sup> In other words, change as such is fixation. C.G. Jung draws the parallel between tribal rituals and the operation of the psyche: "The fact is that the whole symbolism of **initiation** rises up clear and unmistakable, **in the unconscious contents**."<sup>14</sup> This suggests that rites of passage are not simply social/cultural products but immanently rooted psychic operations relating to the human condition.

Jung's notion of **transcendent function** defines the transpersonal vertical road of metanarrativity. "What Turner's concept of social liminality does for status in a society, Jung's psychological concept of transcendent function does for the movement of the person through the life process of individuation."<sup>15</sup> **Individuation** as life **process** appears opposed to the "tremendous differentiation of the Western intellect."<sup>16</sup> While the transcendence of narrative interpretation is proven to be an innate human function, the cultic aim of integration gains particular significance as panacea for the Western world and its divided and subordinating paradigm. Piedmont's term **spiritual transcendence** is closely linked, specifying the metanarrative function as a psychic potential. He defines **spiritual transcendence** as a capacity of individuals to stand outside of their immediate sense of time and place, in order to view life from a larger, more objective perspective.<sup>17</sup>

Now it becomes clear that the passage marked by myth leads not merely to individuation, but to an existential, even ontological **integration** which is at once individual and universal. It leads **into the differentiated order of undifferentiated entities**. Undifferentiated does not mean primitive or anarchic, on the contrary, it means unified by a higher force of convergence: substance. Myth grows to re-enact a direct experience of veiled but undiluted and undeformed substance, a passage into essential reality: not into chaos (as some would perceive the *materia prima*), but into original order.

### 3. The metanarrative of myth

The **liminal space of transference** is the **common ritual circle** into which the author's and the audience's separate realities are extended. Through narratively veiled channels of metanarrative, tales seep into the listener's life slowly, gradually transforming into personal realizations. The flow, structure, seed, and transference of substance are directly observable in myth.

#### 3.1 Magical operation

As initiation belongs to the world of cult, so metamorphosis belongs to the world of magic. Therefore metanarrative transference is a magical operations. Yet the essence of magic is not its transformative potential, but integration into the *materia prima* of substance. It is the core of the cultic organism which is the object and subject of magic. Its absolute relevance for the present lies in its monadic and total aspect, in realising timelessness and full time. Myth-based culture should be seen as essentially magical.

Magic has the power of projection, but also of consolation, but its relevance for the future or the

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<sup>13</sup> Carl Gustav Jung in: *Man and His Symbols*, 38.

<sup>14</sup> C.G. Jung in: *The Gnostic Jung*, 231.

<sup>15</sup> James A. Hall, *The Watcher at the Gates of Dawn: The Transformation of Self in Liminality and by the Transcendent Function*, 34.

<sup>16</sup> C.G. Jung in: *Jung, Psychology and the East*, 9.

<sup>17</sup> Ralph L. Piedmont, "Does Spirituality Represent the Sixth Factor of Personality? Spiritual Transcendence and the Five-Factor Model," 985-1013.

past is not its basic nature. The fact that a story blesses the audience with a future of triumph, and that it absolves them from earlier confusion, is “only” its result. Magic as the West understands it, is this temporal projection. I believe that the original magic of myth is not meant to carry the personal will of the teller, and that it is not even meant to be perceived primarily as projector of events. The magic ritualism of mythical story-telling is, rather, a presencing of the metanarrative principle, which itself integrates man into his/her universal status, as part of the great cosmic-human-natural system. The instruments of magic are the same as those of myth: language, time, and ritual formulas. Magic is also based on analogy, just as the unity of metanarrative elements. “Analogical language ... came to be thought of as **sacramental language**, a verbal response to God’s own verbal revelation.”<sup>18</sup> Here mythical and magical forms are integrated into the cultic organic organism, and so these may also be seen as essentially metanarrative forms.

### 3.2 End: fulfilled time

The perception and concept of time in myth and myth-based cultures (including independent cultural products such as Bowles’s art) is that time is total. A liberating sense of timelessness is manifest, and at once a complexity of total time. Here it becomes clear that originally, in its archetypal function, **narrative** is not a base relative of substance, but the **projection of still time into dynamic time**. What makes it seem base and secondary is its handling, the half-truth of objectivity, the irrelevance and irresponsibility of gossip. On the one hand, the philosophical question of time is resolved here, reintegrating shadow into the texture of substance, as the static and dynamic manifestations of temporality. At the same time, the art of creating and perceiving myth also gains significance. Bowles’s spontaneous, vital, real myths spring from the well-head at the centre of the wheel which turns in shadows but is constant in the light of substance.

### 3.3 The monomyth we live by<sup>19</sup>

Psychology and hermeneutics recognise that the archetypal stories at the bottom of our psyche are “myths we live by.”<sup>20</sup> The direct personal **relevance of the mythical** needs to be explored further, the substance approached. Ricoeur sees that “the text is a set of **instructions** that the individual reader or the reading public executes in a passive or a creative way.”<sup>21</sup> I would say, rather, that the audience integrate their individual life into the universal form of the cultic organism either successfully or unsuccessfully. Who can say whether a cultic message has been adequately deciphered or not? I suggest that it is the later actions (direct or indirect reactions) of the audience i.e. the narrative result of metanarrative immersion, which reflect the success or its lack. The ritual story-telling by the Berber girl Marhnia affects Port’s life unconsciously but so drastically that he re-enacts it, his fate becomes the fate evoked. The parable is about three girls, connected as one soul, yearning to encounter of the Absolute in the rite of tea and death in the Sahara. The transference between story-teller and listener through the agency of the **parable** becomes a fact of connectedness. The tragic irony of Port’s story is, however, that his obsession with the mirage of infinity results in severing his tie with his one and only partner, his wife.

My suggestion is that every myth presents a scenario that is present in everyone’s life. It may be unimaginable that e.g. the tragic and bloody myth of Attis and Kybéle, or the superhuman heroism of Heracles, or the stories of the Cretan labyrinth are relevant for all audiences at all times. Or, indeed, the stories of Bowles. How is this possible, in what way? Are they not objective narratives of fictitious or real people? In my consideration, such an approach is close to gossip: entirely outside of one’s own circles. The strength and endurance of myth lies in the fact that it is relevant under all circumstances –

<sup>18</sup> Northrop Frye, *The Great Code*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> “The word *monomyth* is from James Joyce, *Finnegans Wake* (New York: Viking Press, Inc., 1939), p. 581.” (Joseph Campbell, *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, 30.)

<sup>20</sup> Northrop Frye, *Words with Power*, 140.

<sup>21</sup> Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 1:77.

in other words, its relevance is unconditioned. The figures and events of myth are not optional but archetypal, presenting **phases, aspects, functions, and parts of human existence**. While the emblem in itself presents a snapshot, concerning the stasis of life, the myth is its counterpart in the dynamism of life. Myth is by no means based on invention, but on the strict metanarrative principle, which, as I suggested, is convergent with the natural-human-cosmic law. There is **myth** at the root, and one might presume also at the crown of evolution, the stake of which is to find the tree of knowledge and the well-spring of life. These two arch-emblems are perhaps one, presenting the two aspects of substance, knowledge being static, life dynamic. The natural-human-cosmic **monomyth**, therefore, seems very likely to be **awakening**, as the disappearance of formal ontological borders, and the revelation of universal **unity in substance**. Therefore myth does not merely awaken the audience to substance, but at once awakens substance to the audience.

The problem with current interpretations of **ancient myths** is that literacy has not been able to keep their meaning. Reading these gives no sense of reality, because they remain wholly external sets of information: translated, transcribed, often manipulated and corrupted, coloured and fluffed, they provide no relevance, and mediate no order. Neither do we have the set of cosmic-natural codes to decipher them. Bowles found the folk tales of the Maghreb to be an endless source of mystery and human wisdom. The folk tales of the Karpathian basin are now known to carry heavy astro-mythical significance, and are individual human aspects of a cosmic totality: not fragments of a truth but hologramic entities. The characters in every case embody **a universal hierarchy, inevitable justice, and a structure of elemental-astronomical forces**. We may suppose that all original myths are of the same weight.

It seems evident, therefore, that all stories turn out to be based on **a single myth**, the quest for the essence of life: for substance. If the master-trope of Western philosophy and literature is “the truth of the female body” (as György Kalmár suggests<sup>22</sup>), then the **master-myth** of traditional cultures is the cosmic story of homecoming to and thus maintaining the source of life. This source has much to do with the female body. Not the physical corpse, however, but the female subtle body as being half a breath different from its male counterpart. The attention of traditional cultures is on the mystical union not of male-female, but of personality-universality. The listener to mythic tales may be perceived as the bride to be awoken by the spirit of the cultic form. The bridegroom, saviour from the beast of illusions is the same in all cults, and can also be perceived as the mother mourning her child’s death, or as the father awaiting his prodigal son. The child, the son is the reader. Synopsis allows the claim that these are figures of the same quest of time, which aims at feeling in stillness, hearing in silence, and seeing in dark.

The following passage from Joseph Campbell’s *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* is completely congruent with Bowlesian mythology:

The standard path of the mythological adventure of the hero is a magnification of the formula presented in the rites of passage: separation—initiation—return: which might be named the nuclear unit of the **monomyth**.

*A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.*<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Kalmár György, *The Truth of the Female Body (A női test igazsága)*, 259-262.

<sup>23</sup> Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* Campbell, 30.