

## **Mythopoeica Today.**

By Geoff Berry

Our ideas about myth have changed with time, and it is probably more accurate to say that such ideas indicate more about us than they do about the tales of origin, heroics and ritual that they supposedly define. The era of anthropology and psychology has furnished us with a way of interpreting myth that is comfortable when it is focussed on the other, but that seems to run aground when turned back upon itself. In contemporary Western terms, myth has come to mean the type of story that frames or structures a worldview, while it ‘places’ individuals and their groups within that wider cosmos. This advanced anthropological understanding can then be broken down into two distinct varieties – mythologies that supply a sacred dimension to their cosmos, and those that don’t. This second group is quite rare in world history, and most of us will recognise it as being a modern variety. Joseph Campbell disparages such a cultural story as ‘mere ideology’, believing that it cannot be known as myth proper without a sacred dimension.<sup>1</sup> While I agree with the criticism that my own cultural story is profane, and fundamentally ‘missing something’, my research leads me to conclude that if we proceed with an analysis of contemporary consumer culture as a mythologically informed way of life, we will inevitably realise that no style of consciousness or rationality, including ours, can escape the fundamental human instinct for the sacred that is the hallmark of the ‘truly’ mythic.

This is an important point for Western democracies today, as the conservative right threatens to reconstitute its white sky god as a protection against their new enemies. This harkening backwards to a deceased divinity, however, will not appease the drive toward the divine where it is felt by thinking people in a post-post-modern world. Although the need for shared values was never felt more keenly, a reconstitution of archaic forms simply cannot satisfy the intellectual and scientific advances that we inherit with our contemporary circumstances. Surely there is a paradigm that can cohere our material (scientific) understanding of the world, act as a vehicle for our appetite for the mythic, and offer us a vision wherein plurality, or diversity, is a matter of mutual respect within a system of relations that unites, rather than divides us? Before attempting to respond to this ideal, let’s consider a discovery from relatively recent literary critical analysis that has perhaps been too quickly turned aside.

Around a century ago a group that would become known as the Cambridge ritualists suggested that literature could hold vestiges of archaic ritual. In particular, they pointed out that mythic texts such as those concerning the Holy Grail could reveal transmuted traces of the rites surrounding an ever-living, ever-dying vegetation divinity.<sup>ii</sup> These discoveries were slowly leached of much of the richness of their potential, as the field of anthropology eschewed such generalising theoretical structures for the closer-in view of ethnography (à la Malinkowski) while the literary and wider world viewed such discoveries as an interesting vestige of a primitive past. The Cambridge ritualists themselves suffered from this pseudo-Darwinian bias of evolutionary progress, seeing in their discoveries a kind of archaeological dig into literary history.<sup>iii</sup> It strikes me that subsequent developments reveal, as well as archaic bones speaking dustily of a long deceased reality, an insistent and endlessly relevant spontaneous arising of mythic symbol that in turn reveals our incessant (if repressed) instinct for a sacred relationship with, and within, our world.

Scapegoat kings being sacrificed for the fertility of their cultural collective are certainly common across world history. Although widely divergent in form, this rite is recognisable as an undeniable archetype.<sup>iv</sup> Could it be that we constituents of contemporary consumer capitalism indulge in a similar sacrifice, in a ritual stripped of its sacred vestiges, as part of a mythology that places us as individuals in a profaned system of exchange that is perpetuated by our participation? It is perhaps too easily overlooked that we continue to trade in the flesh of 'our holy mother, the sacred earth', every time we exchange the goods upon which our global market depends. Matter, held to be sacred in any cosmology that honours the body and the earth for the gift of life in which we all share, is not simply stripped of its share of divinity by a system that treats it as inert. Western consciousness, in shifting its focus from the nature upon which we depend to the mental prowess that operates upon it for our wealth, needed its vision of the sacred to likewise shift out of the web of immanence and into the stratosphere of abstraction. When we began to operate *upon* nature, with technologies that had their origin in the technological skills of agriculture and animal husbandry, we stepped outside of an empathetic relationship within it in order to extract a greater yield. Thus we began to worship our talent *over* the material web out of which we arise, and our mental potential to benefit from a body that can now be seen to be inert and yielding.

Nature fulfils our needs wantonly, randomly, without the mathematical ordering and constant supply that we can add to it with our constructions. It is unpredictable and we can order it to our benefit. But in this process we may also lose our reverence for it. As matter is inert and can be formed into our constructions, so it becomes known to us as 'dumb'. As animals are controllable and can be bred for our profit, so our respect for them diminishes. And as the body is of the same order as the earth, and the animal, so it too becomes a thing we can fashion to our abstract ideals, worshipped for the way it can be manipulated rather than for the living and breathing mystery it is, before we mentally format it into another vehicle of our desires. This process by which we profane matter is reflected in our mythology, where the distant sky god of our history (far from unique in world affairs) was loaded with the tools upon which our developing way of life depended. He was enthroned in an Elysium field that cannot be known in this life, but must be projected into the distances of past creation or future afterlife. He did not challenge the profanity of matter, but handed us over the power to treat it as we wish; a convenient fall guy for our desires toward undiminished dominion and a logical step towards His own ultimate demise. The God (or His representative on earth) will always be sacrificed for our benefit; it's just a matter of the consciousness that accompanies this exchange.

The benefit we accrue from this sacrifice is a transformation of nature, from sacred and living to profane and inert. The shift from earth worship to sky god encodes the transformation of consciousness necessary to the project of settlement living, or 'civilization'. The imminent style of spirituality embodied in pagan or native cultural modes is subjected to the same divorce from the land that is evident in this new mode of material reality. As Marx saw, our cultural creations will reflect our physical mode of being – symbolic realities cannot be divorced from their material context, although both can be shifted away from one concept of the sacred to another.<sup>v</sup> Such a shift does not need to occur in traditional cultures that identify themselves with the land, as do the Australian indigenes. Although culturally complex and diverse, there is a common thread of wisdom coursing through Aboriginal mythologies (in this country and in others) that treat the land as a living entity. It displays intelligence, communicates with its animals, and is involved in a complex system of exchange with every part of itself that has a variable but undeniable kind of balance built in. Hunter-gatherer societies were structured such that each individual entered into this communication in a variety of intricate ways: listening for prey;

sniffing for changes in the weather; sensing a good collection of tubers beneath an otherwise nondescript example of bush daisy. Such is life in intimate relationship with nature. It is not hard to imagine the checks and balances that are built into such a system, where the destruction of one element of a habitat affects others in a spiral of causality.<sup>vi</sup> This spiral of returning effects and linear, or unchangeable, paths is an intrinsic part of our system of exchange also, but the way we operate distances us from the signals of destruction, so that we do not necessarily understand the import of our actions until nature bites back. This is a communication we are now learning to re-read, as the damage we have visited upon our habitat begins to take its toll on our quality of living and indeed on our ability to live. The conversation we need to have with nature is not hard to discern and no longer takes any special skills to hear, as it becomes more blatant with each passing year.

The distressingly violent wake-up signals we now face reflect the crude way we have engaged with our habitat, and as the world follows the same Western technological proficiency to greater surplus, so the drama becomes global. As a collective we now hear the cries of a wounded earth that we have blocked out from our privileged existence in the cities. In a sense, we are being initiated, with a wounding to the body of the earth, in a similar way that individuals in traditional society are initiated with a wounding to their personal self. At a deeply intimate level, such wounding is accepted in primal rites of initiation. There, the adolescent mind is stripped bare in order that a more mature synthesis of complexity can be imprinted upon the initiate, and this process takes place in a perennial fashion in traditional societies where the ability to converse with nature is a respected and necessary trait.<sup>vii</sup> Comparatively, we are distanced from our habitat and the way it supplies us with our needs, and fail to maintain an intimate relationship with the process by which we feed ourselves. When we are delivered nourishment in a plastic wrapper, we give thanks (by way of silent consent) to the sky god of technology who enabled us to receive the food – the abstract mental principles by which we created the plenty.<sup>viii</sup>

Since our earlier image of that sky god has deceased due to its being too far distanced from our material plane of being, we have entered a whole new version of spiritual vacuum into which new forms of the sacred pour and are stamped with an allotted shelf-life depending on their comparative utility. The images that we chase into the transcendental afterlife of consumer yearning offer ephemeral satisfaction and keep us chasing for more, just as does the heroin that

can now be picked up on any city street. Standing against this profane turnstile is an awareness within us all that we are embedded within nature, in a world that we cannot escape, and in a way that is both tortuous and liberating at once. The voice of nature, when heard over our self-involved chitchat and the swamp of internet porn, slowly loosens the cogs that drive our profit machine until we are no longer able to sustain our unconscionable flight toward the teleological fantasy of endless consumer riches. Like the Native American saying goes, when all the trees are gone and the fish dead, will we learn that we cannot eat money?

There is a pragmatism at the heart of so much indigenous philosophy that we have been able to ignore as we have fought to extricate ourselves from an identification with nature. Our struggle towards individuation can in part be seen to have become self-defeating, and the way forwards does not need to preclude learning from the past. In our own humble beginnings, European culture also walked the earth with reverence, just as indigenous peoples of the land still do (or try to, against many odds). But the process of increase that we have focussed upon has tied the Western style of rationality up with the internal logic of our technology. As we recognise anthropologically, material and symbolic realms reflect each other – you cannot take Aboriginal Australian myth out of the way of life of its people and expect it to make much sense. The same rule applies to our own worldview and way of life. The way we envision matter is intimately tied-up with the way we operate upon it technologically, and this is reflected in our mythology. The light of God, and the abstract mind that he signifies, rules from above, while the darkness of ignorance and bodily sin (or at least discomfort) resides below (in the ‘unconscious’), and we are tormented in between. Freud stands as a development of this Judaeo-Christian vision, transforming its abstractions into a parallel internal framework of super-ego standing over id, with ego the battler in the middle. The secular scientific mind, in some ways coming full circle in its desire to rationalise an ontologically materialist approach to existence, does not challenge the hierarchy that forms its internal logic, it merely transmutes it to its own (and our own) benefit. As with any power structure, conservatism is the first rule of survival; as such, we continue to believe in the light standing over the darkness, only now it is in terms of inner life rather than anthropomorphic cosmic powers. There is now the potential for an understanding of this process to develop even further, as we explore the status of living matter from the perspectives of contemporary scientific theories.

Our technological (post-Christian) vision of distanced mental authority standing over an inert body of matter (the fantasy of the objective observer) could be seen as the zenith of our abstraction. But this observer is a cultural construct, and as such it can be *de*-constructed. Upon completion of this operation we find the *participant*, a conceptual role yet to be concretely defined within the Western paradigm because it threatens the very assumptions upon which we rely. The participant is interdependent within nature rather than standing outside of it; the rules they apply to their experiment determine its outcome, and what is done to nature is done to themselves—just as perennial philosophies maintained. The unutterable complexity and play of life within which the participant incarnates and experiments becomes their conception of the sacred – not divorced from their lived reality or themselves. Cognisant of the indivisibility between themselves and their world, they are awake to the care with which our investigations into reality and how it may benefit us must be tended. The participant in an experiment may certainly also observe, but they do so alongside their own part in the play, and this cannot be divorced from the results produced. This intimate poly-causality, where our attitudes and actions return to us in time, is recognised at a material and symbolic level by cultures that maintain their identity with the land. They remain a part of the web of life that they depend upon for their survival, assigning the same degree of respect to their power to affect it by their actions as they do to its power to direct them. There is a pleasing humility here, as well as a high degree of conscious awareness about the delicacy of the web of life in its most intricate details.

This intensity of consciousness, ironically enough, is exactly what we lack in terms of our ability to maintain homeostasis. I say ironically because the history of Western colonisation has been marked by widely divergent attitudes toward native cultures: swinging from one racist pole of primitivism associated with the dumb animals to another of the noble savages who wandered the desert in a ‘not-really-conscious’ religious haze. Now that the dust has settled on these primitive attempts to define indigenous cultures, we see that they, in fact, are the ones who see the habitat more realistically, with greater conscious awareness and ability to make refined distinctions. The old cliché of the Inuit people having 43 words for snow holds true, in the sense that indigenous language in general shows a marvellous degree of attention to detail in the real terms of what this means to us. And here the argument over how language relates to reality can be refreshed with a simple but profound insight – language relates what reality means to us, not what it actually is, and as such it is not an arbitrary system of signs devoid of any intrinsic value. Like myth, it is a

cultural construct indivisible from its environment. As we have settled, and concerned our mental habits with the regulation of surplus in the cities, our lived environment has become increasingly distanced from the land upon which we ultimately rely, and so has our symbolic language.

This shift, as it records the fundamental driving force behind our culture, can be recognised in our mythological history from early Mesopotamia onwards. When the rising male hero-god Marduk slew the previous highest power, the earth mother Tiamat, and carved up her body to create humans and their arts, he symbolised a recognition of our reliance on the environment even as he initiated a new socio-political order that placed our technology over the raw material that it transformed. The Biblical Fall from grace reiterated the schism that now underscored our division from the natural world, while further distancing our style of worship from culture hero to abstract sky god. Scientific paradigms that assert an objective observation of inert matter transmute this distance to our benefit, while reassuring us that a stable human vision can be maintained against the encroaching vastness and emptiness of the universe that we slowly uncover. Along the course of recent European history, we may recognise in Modernism a similar quest for established codes and structures that could retain such stability. Since then, our self-assurance has dropped away to be replaced by a radically subjective perspectivism that appreciates that any so-called reality can only be known as a construct that is not only partial but in-built with often undisclosed postures concerning the nature of power relations. The gift to be found here, as we reconstruct our cultural vantage point to allow for a balance of stability and flexibility, is in the recognition that this position also reveals a web, or network, within which an idea, symbol or meaning operates and without which it cannot be said to have any intrinsic value whatsoever.<sup>ix</sup>

Language is thus returned to a web of relationships not indistinct from the cultural world within which it arises, and this social reality is deeply embedded in its material, or natural, circumstances. An awareness of the way ‘the Word’ directs the mind first to the rules within itself, then to the web of relations within which these rules operate, and thereby to the gap between, gives us a clue as to one way in which our conscious minds are held away from the sacred. When we focus on what is conscious before us, the holistic is lost to the world of detail. When we loosen up our grip on the detail to recognise the system of relations within which things attain meaning, there is nothing to pinpoint – and we are lost in that haze. Meaning resides somewhere between the two, but not intrinsically in either, and our monolingual conscious

awareness struggles to ground itself in such a wobbly postmodernism. This inability is compounded by the division we suffer from our habitat. As our talent for abstraction convinces us that we can consciously control inert matter to our own purposes, so it has come to convince us that we can likewise force the concrete signs of language in any direction that suits us. We are in a quandary when this turns out to be not the case. Language *won't* in fact reveal reality... Egad! And reality, or the natural world within which we find ourselves, won't endlessly yield to the abstract principles of profit we demand of it. We are not an innocent observer distanced from our actions by our intellectual principles, although this theory has so often allowed us to avoid our responsibility to the earth across the trajectory of our technologically brilliant and highly profitable project of civilization.

The talent of the technological, civilizing and colonising mindset cannot be divorced from the spiritual misery that accompanies it, just as the Shadow of our potential Wasteland cannot be seen as separate from our throne of plenty in the cities. But the double-edged sword, by definition, cuts both ways. Just as we yearn for an experience of a lost *participation mystique* that will absolve us in an effulgence of atonement, so we seek to reopen the wound and the sacred in one. And the only way this wounded sacred can be convinced to appear before us is if it is recognised in reality, reconstituted here from its distant home in the abstract heavens of our transcendental yearning to be elsewhere, newly invited to be present with us as we recognise the sacred in the act of being and becoming at once. If the way we interpret meaning reflects the way that we define material reality, then our idea of ourselves cannot be divorced from our habitat or what we do to it, no matter how cleverly we convince ourselves that we are no longer dependent upon it. There is a space between the mind with its language and the body in its mute aliveness where an intersection brings matter to consciousness. But because we cannot name this place, or control the way it comes into being, we sit back on our (well padded) laurels and identify ourselves with what we can name and control.

In this action we accept the power of technology and rationality divorced from its ground of being, accepting the benefits of muting a matter that is intelligent and receptive by defining it as inert. Like the body, like animals, and like those less 'civilized' than ourselves, the earth *can* be forced to accept the definition that we apply over it. But until we recognise ourselves in the web of relations that embrace all of the things of the world, we continue to condone this wound while

initiating ourselves into a conflicted world. One way through this conundrum is to accept the paradox of indivisible identification between self and world that is couched in the language of mysticism and imminent spirituality, and the only way to realise this paradox is to realise that we act upon ourselves as we act upon the world. This recognition only gains depth as we accept complicity in our collective agenda, and this complicity cannot be accepted without suffering. And so it goes, finding the sacred in the wound and the wound in the sacred. For this is what we have done to the world, and what we have done to the world we do to ourselves, and what we find in the world and in ourselves is the mystery incarnating, melding, exchanging across boundaries, and regenerating against all reason. What we find, at the intersection of self and world, mind and body, is a flow of interdependent, mutually supportive, and poly-causal life. The way we interpret that flow from the vantage point of the ‘civilized world’ is, generally speaking, another thing altogether.

## Notes

<sup>i</sup> Joseph Campbell, *Transformations of Myth through Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1990) 47.

<sup>ii</sup> See especially Jessie L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (New York: Dover Publications, 1997).

<sup>iii</sup> See Michael Groden and Martin Kreiswirth, eds., *The Johns Hopkins Guide to Literary Theory and Criticism* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994) 128-131.

<sup>iv</sup> As catalogued in Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough; a History of Myth and Religion* (London: Chancellor Press, 2000).

<sup>v</sup> When he criticised European philosophy’s atemporal posturing, or ‘descent from Heaven’ model of knowledge, Marx pointed out that the relationship between ideology and social structure must be switched as if in a *camera obscura*, so that we see our ideas as formed by our material reality and not vice versa. Karl Marx, *Karl Marx Selected Writings*, ed. David McLellan (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988) 164. Barthes follows this insight through to comment that myth eternalises our temporal products: ‘...myth is constituted by the loss of the historical quality of things: in it, things lose the memory that they once were made.’ Roland Barthes, *Mythologies* (London: Jonathon Cape, 1974) 142-3.

<sup>vi</sup> Kane calls this ecological imperative a system of poly-causality, with ‘causes-causing-causes-to-cause-causes.’ He goes on to point out that ‘it is all process – unending. The later myths of organized agricultural humanity lose this openness to the circuits of meaning in wilderness, to copy instead the imposed order of the garden.’ Sean Kane, *Wisdom of the Mythtellers* (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 1994) 166.

<sup>vii</sup> See especially Victor Turner, *The Ritual Process* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969).

<sup>viii</sup> Campbell, *Transformations of Myth through Time* 10.

<sup>ix</sup> I am following Saussure, Derrida, and the late Heidegger here.