

The Underworld at the End of the Maze:
Re-entering *Pan's Labyrinth*

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What if the story of the underworld is simply a story to express the state one enters when one is not a happy, well-adjusted, and productive member of society? The underworld is only truly real to the one experiencing it, after all, and these are paths that can only be embarked upon alone; no one can follow, no one should try. Often it is hard enough to understand the altered perspective of the one who has resurfaced, for this lunar journey is done in the quietest and darkest hour of night and plays out in the same way that a dream does: one can try to explain but it is simply impossible. As Thomas Mann says so eloquently in *Death in Venice*: “words are capable only of praising physical beauty, not of rendering it visible” (1852). When the doorway opens, what is found lurking there cannot be relayed—and yet we try, always we try, for what is a story, a myth, but an attempt to shed light on shadows?

The film *Pan's Labyrinth*, directed by Guillermo del Toro, gives a fantastic example of this underworld journey, or as Evans Lansing Smith calls it, the *nekyia*. The movie follows the precepts of any underworld mythic hero's quest—the hybridized folk-tale/hero's journey filled with symbolism, boons, assistance, testing, and finally the return—only in this tale the protagonist is a prepubescent girl of about 8 or 9 years of age. What becomes such an interesting theme for this version of the tale is the continual disbelief held by those around the protagonist of the story she tells, most importantly her mother (whom she is trying to save) and her new step-father (who is trying to kill her). But doesn't it always feel this way in childhood? That adults do not understand, won't listen, and always disparage the stories as mere fantasy? They cannot follow the child into the realms in which they still rule, thus the emphasis placed on the solitary

nature of the underworld journey becomes so much more poignant and that much more dramatic. Not only are we called to witness the child's version of the tale, but we are also called to witness our own disbelief in the outcome: we cannot help but wonder during the ending scene if any of it really happened at all. We find ourselves back at the original question of whether or not the underworld is 'real' or simply an imagined reality, a break from the world of daylight.

The film begins with a car ride. The main character is Ofelia (whose name could tell the story by itself as it is already associated with another, older character who held a one-way ticket to the underworld in Shakespeare's *Hamlet*). Ofelia's namesake's path (as well as hers, we now suspect) is one that will involve a great deal of suffering and end rather dramatically with altered reality and death. She, of course, is innocently oblivious; the beginning scene is one of a lovely country road leading through arching trees in late summertime. She travels with her mother who is enormously pregnant and very weak. Along the way they stop briefly for air; Ofelia finds a piece of a statue and wanders off the path to find the rest, the single piece being an eye. Another underworld clue: in the Egyptian tale of Isis and Osiris, the eye of Osiris' son Horus must be brought back to reinvigorate the corpse of his father (Smith 10). Clearly she is being watched; a fact confirmed when an enormous bug-like creature (later we come to understand that it is not a giant praying mantis but a fairy) crawls out from the gaping open mouth of the statue and looks at her briefly before she is called back to the car.

The journey ends when they enter what turns out to be a military compound, though it could, at first glance, be easily confused for a veritable land of the dead. Everyone wears a somber gray (with one notable exception—the kindest character of the film wears green) and moves with a dispassionate and unaffected gait. Further, her new step-father Captain Vidal stands holding a watch, portraying a vision of military efficiency that could also be easily

recognized as death himself, for who else is that precise about time? The fairy reappears to Ofelia and leads her outside the compound to an ancient archway (threshold doorway #1) crowned with a stone sculpture of a horned creature's head that is somewhere between a satyr, the Greek god Pan, and the Judeo-Christian devil Satan. The image has a gaping mouth similar to that of the first statue and implies a continuity of quest: the gateway is marked for the viewer's convenience. The statue itself implies an old fear. Apotropaic? Possible. Decorative, surely, and also hinting at the reality that some things pre-exist our momentary sense of importance, the war in which we fight, the time in which we dwell.

The threshold itself is often associated with both transition and the underworld journey. As Evans Lansing Smith states, "doorway symbols [...] represent a state of being betwixt and between, of transition, and hence are often found in association with rites of passage" (33). In this case, doorways are especially significant as they bring Ofelia to the edge of the other world, to the literal 'underworld' in the story that could be described as the anti-Biblical underworld. But this is less a place of judgment and punishment—which, at this point in the film seems to occur more aboveground than below—than it is the way the world is supposed to be. In other words, it is a place of wonder, without sickness or death, and where one utterly belongs. Further on through the archway and the crumbling labyrinth that follows there is yet another doorway depicted, but this doorway cannot be opened without the requisite testing. Thus the thresholds (doorways #1 and #2) remind us of the archetypal doorways *in*, one of which can be entered, the other to which entry must be earned. One is reminded of the doorways depicted in the story of Inanna on her journey to visit her sister Ereshkigal, the queen of the Dead, who mourns the death of her husband in her kingdom below. Inanna must go through seven doorways, and at each an item of clothing is removed: "When she entered the seventh gate, From her body the royal robe

was removed...” (*Bedford Anthology* 32), showing us the process of divestiture of all earthly identity, ego, and concept of self. Inanna’s subsequent ‘death’ in the underworld also hints at the direction that *Pan’s Labyrinth* will take, for during a true underworld journey something must die.

But what? A child is without the ego and protective masks of adulthood, a fact which is made abundantly clear in his scenes between the Captain Vidal and the girl. The Captain does not see her; cannot see her bald fear of him and her deep confusion and despair. Vidal’s character is that of a cold-blooded, murdering tyrant (the film is set during the second world war, and he acts perfectly Hitlerian throughout). Further, he is clearly insane. The story continues: Ofelia’s fairy returns on the first evening as she lies in the enormous black bed with her mother (one thinks immediately of the dolorous bed from Arthurian legends), beckoning her to follow. She does, and is led back underneath the archway and through the labyrinth to an underground chamber in which a faun awaits to instruct her. One could say that she has ‘received the call’— and from such a source! Not only from the time before any time, but one of the oldest archetypes of the world: the god Pan, the horned god who represents the ‘other’ to the order and structure of Judeo-Christian mythologies. His instruction is simple: there are three tests which must be completed before the full moon. Here is a book which will give you instruction. Here are three magic nuts for the first task. If all are completed, then the portal will be opened, and you will be able to return to the magical ‘underworld’ where your father the king awaits you.

A child’s compensatory tale to accommodate for a current state of misery in real life? Perhaps; it is easy to see why Ofelia might need such compensation in this film. The movie makes a brilliant move here, for it is not hard to remember the inequities of childhood and the tantrums associated with the distinct feelings of a lack of justice done by one’s mean and terrible

parents. Further, it is not hard to recall the child's periodic assurance that she was indeed adopted (or kidnapped!) by the bad parents and that the real and good parents, the king and queen of some far off distant land, are still out there looking. A child will run away to find that other life but only for the afternoon, returning for dinner having forgotten the drama of the morning. This film, however, presents a different reality in which the return is impossible: they have moved, her mother has remarried and is bearing the baby of a sociopathic killer, and the Captain's level of projection with an innocent child is deeply sinister. He displays to her a cruelty that we know can only escalate. His ruthlessness and brutality are appropriate for a devil: in other words, for a man taken over by his shadow (perhaps the shadow of the war itself). He has lost his humanity. He is the keeper of this underworld prison.

Again, the movie displays an illustrative poignancy. The underworld is, after all, a place where one is at the mercy of so many things. The rules are different and there is no leniency to be counted on; a state profoundly reminiscent of childhood, hearkening back to the time when there was no control over environment nor was there yet any independence, both being markers of maturity and adulthood. Where does one turn to find relief from such a place? A child, given the circumstance, turns within, creating a world in which she or he still has a modicum of control. It is here that we find the mythical parents, the magical faun, the fairies and tasks which will lead to the real world below.

As with any *nekyia*, the mirror reflects both ways: the underworld and the outer-world mimic each other. There are certain images associated with the underworld (which Smith calls "necrotypes") and objects that appear throughout the film which have significance for both Ofelia's world and the world around her. The magic nuts, for example, resemble in size and shape the ampules of antibiotics being smuggled to the band of rebels who are fighting the

Captain and his militaristic regime in the outer-world. A knife wielded by the helping faun is a knife wielded by the woman in green who tries to protect herself and Ofelia. And, as with so many folktales, there is a magic key that is used to open a lock in the dark, underground lair of a monster; the mirror image is a key in the outer-world used to open the Captain's store room. The metaphor is clear and brings up the question: which world is real? Can one be sure? The monster is there in both worlds: is one more alive than the other?

When the goddess Inanna went to visit Ereshkigal, she apparently knew the risk of going and set up a contingency plan in case she did not return. When she stayed away for three days, help did indeed come in the form of the flying *kurgurra* and *galatur* that witnessed and commiserated with the queen of the Dead about her labor pains (*Bedford Anthology* 34-35). Similarly, Ofelia's helpers are also tiny flying fairies who offer assistance and are dedicated to bringing her home. Without these, she too would have perished, for the second task involving the key is easily the most terrifying. Through a doorway (threshold doorway #3) that she has opened with a magical piece of chalk, she slips into the cave of the beast. The walls are the color of blood, the tiles on the floor are an angry red. What she encounters at the end of the hall is the stuff of nightmares; a fireplace is lit to reveal a creature: eyeless, a parody of human flesh with a terrible mouth that calls to mind the Hindu Face of Glory and other archetypal devouring mouths. In fact it seems to exist to eat, as the pictures on the walls display it in a variety of poses eating children. The hall is littered with piles of small shoes. In front of this necrotypal eater lies an immense table piled high with a perfect underworld feast of foods, all of which are in some shade of red—grapes and pomegranates both stand out. The key she has opens a small door to the side of the room within which she finds the knife. She makes to leave, her mission accomplished. She almost passes by the table but pauses to take a grape. And then another. The

monster wakes. The fairies try to warn her and end up sacrificing themselves to that terrible mouth. She escapes by drawing a new door (threshold doorway #4) which becomes a substantial portal of escape—or is it?

This last detail, seemingly innocuous, brings up several more important questions about the underworld journey: can one enter and leave the underworld through the same door? Is it possible to make it out without a sacrifice (for Inanna, it ends up being Dumuzi, her prideful husband; for Ofelia, two of the three helping fairies)? Further, is it possible to resist the food of that realm? Persephone comes to mind. One does not think it possible to conceive of eating in the face of such a creature—all mouth and no eyes—a being who easily reminds us of the realities of eating without seeing; the ever compulsive need to fill flesh with flesh and the cruelty inherent in such a state of being. It is, of course, a mirror image of the Captain on the daylight side, the shadow of the cruelty and greed lurking just beneath the veneer of efficiency and control. The monster is, if anything, just as terrible but simply more honest. He, at least, does not pretend to be acting for the good of Franco's Spain like his 'other' on the outside of the door. He simply exists to devour with unchecked hunger those who stray and do not complete their tasks [A similar figure may be seen in Lansing Smith's description of Vasilisa and the figure of Baba Yaga in *Sacred Mysteries*, as the threat of being devoured is ever present for that young maiden as well (133)]. Finally, if the doorway disappears, does it mean that it, or what happened on the other side of it, was not real? Or does it simply suggest that the doorway exists only for the one who has crossed it and returned, for no one else can know?

I submit that it does not matter one way or the other; the underworld is real for the one experiencing it whether the outsider wills it or not (and how often does one encounter such condescending disbelief after the return...). Whether or not Ofelia is reunited with her true family

in a golden palace beneath the earth likely only really matters to her, and it will not make a difference if those around her have believed her stories. As she lies dying, the sacrificial victim of the madness (and incredible monstrosity) of her erstwhile stepfather, her eyes light up for she knows she has made it home. It is hard not to be encouraged by this, for the smile of a child on death's door is a testament to the strength of the underworld experience which, though it might, at the time, feel like wandering through the bloodstained cave of a monster in hell, tells us that the reward is true and clearly worth the struggle.

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