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2020

# MYTHOLOGICAL STUDIES JOURNAL

SACRED ENCOUNTERS

*Transformational Moments in Myths, Rites, and Rituals*

## O N T H E C O V E R

Image from the *Compendium alchymist* by Johann Michael Faust, 1706 (US public domain via wikimedia).

The cover image was created by alchemist Johann Michael Faust with this expanding text: "Compendium alchymisticum novum, immersive Pandora explicata et figuris illustrata; which the noblest gift of God or a Guldener treasure with which the old and new Philosophi that imperfect metal, by force of fire." Carl Jung notes that "The alchemists professed to a transformation between fire and water, which they regarded as baptism" (CW 14, Para. 702). Faust has placed "Fermantatio," "the force of fire" and "noblest gift of God" between the lunar and solar images.

Faust, Johan Michael. *Compendium alchymist*. 1706.

Ojeda, Cesar. *Alquimia Miscelanea*. 31 Jan. 2013, [www.odisea2008.com/2013/01/alquimia-miscelanea.html](http://www.odisea2008.com/2013/01/alquimia-miscelanea.html).

Jung, C.G, *Collected Works of C. G. Jung*, Vol. 14. 2nd ed., Princeton University Press, 1970. Para. 702.

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## I N T R O D U C T I O N

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Welcome to the Mythological Studies Journal, Volume VIII. This year's theme is "Sacred Encounters: Transformational Moments in Myths, Rites, and Rituals". Little did we know, when we selected this theme a little over a year ago, that the compilation of this volume would be taking place during a time of intense transformation in many aspects of our lives in the spring and summer of 2020. It has truly been a labor of love under pressure, reminiscent of the alchemical process. We are proud of the articles included, and excited to share them with you.

We would like to express our thanks to all of the contributing authors for sharing their work with us. Their articles cover topics such as Jungian psychology in contemporary literature, archetypal processes and modern medicine, the Hero's Journey in classic literature, and the transformation of symbols within religious myths. The result is a diverse exploration of this year's theme.

Much gratitude is also owed to our faculty advisor, Dr. Patrick Mahaffey, for his guidance and support. Additionally, we are grateful to our peer reviewers for their time and input in the preliminary review process. And extra special appreciation is due to the additional members of this year's editorial team: Kiese M. Hill and Jason D. Batt. This publication would not have been possible without their teamwork, patience, and dedication.

We hope you enjoy joining us on this transformational journey!

Hannah Elizabeth Irish and Randall Victoria Ulyate  
*Co-Managing Editors*





# Strange Water:

## An Exile into the Deep Self in Frank Herbert's *Dune*

Jason D. Batt, MFA

### KEYWORDS

*Jungian Depth Psychology*  
*Science Fiction*  
*Anima*  
*Archetypes*

FRANK HERBERT'S NOVEL *DUNE* is the story of Paul Atreides' journey across the face of the desert wasteland of the planet Arrakis, also known as Dune, and below into the myriad hidden caverns of desert dwelling Fremen. The planet Arrakis has captured the attention of the galaxy. Through political conflict driven to possess control of Arrakis's chief resource, the cinnamon-flavored, prescient-gifting spice, stewardship of the planet has shifted from the tyrant House Harkonnen to the noble House Atreides led by Duke Leto Atreides. For our purposes, though, the Duke is not of interest. It is his son, Paul. Paul's exile after the death of his father and the return of the vile Harkonnen is a story of Paul's discovery of both his destiny and his true self. For this paper, the self is defined as "the centre and totality of the psyche . . . rep-

resent[ing] psychic wholeness" (Wang 153). Paul finds himself in flight with his mother into a desert where every drop of water is sacred—so much that even tears in mourning are seen as a great sacrifice. Yet, Paul will discover that there are vast amounts of water on Arrakis, hidden far below the surface. Founder of Jungian Depth Psychology, Carl Jung guides us into seeing the psychological significance of the hidden waters: "[W]ater is no figure of speech, but a living symbol of the dark psyche" (Jung, *Archetypes* 17). Expanding on this, Paul's loss of his father preceding his discovery of the water is a moment that has great significance in Jung's psychology: "[T]he soul in search of its lost father [must find its way] to the water, to the dark mirror that reposes at its bottom. Whoever has elected for the sake of spiritual poverty . . . [so goes] the way of the soul that leads to water" (Jung, *Archetypes* 17). The outer world of Arrakis, populated with a myriad cast, serves as a mirror to the inner world that Paul plunges into all the way to the deep

waters. Paul's poverty and loss guide him to the dark waters, not just the literal waters hidden deep in the desert planet, but the deep waters of his own self and of the collective unconscious, "the repository of man's psychic heritage and possibilities" (Samuels 32). The discovery of those waters and Paul's imbibing of them form his transformational moment, elevating him into something nearly divine.

When we enter the story, "Arrakis lay at the hub of the universe with the wheel poised to spin" (565). The fall of House Atreides sets that wheel spinning with Paul at the center. The sand-strewn planet Arrakis, as Herbert paints it, serves as a map of the self, and what was described of Paul equally applies to Arrakis: "an island of Selfdom" (Herbert 41). Paul's inner journey follows Jung's three psychic levels, "(1) consciousness, (2) the personal unconscious, and (3) the collective unconscious" (Jung, *Essential* 67), and is mirrored in his outward journey, illustrating Murray Stein's observation, "As above, so below . . . As within,

so without" (221).

Beginning on the first of Jung's psychic levels, the surface of *Dune* reflects the conscious mind. The ego serves as the center of consciousness—that part of the mind that is aware of itself (Samuels 135). We find that the axis of those two, ego-consciousness, "is the earth, *terra firma*; it is where we live, at least during our waking hours" (Stein 36). Upon the surface, the city of Arrakeen is a struggling metropolis dependent upon technology to survive; its people hide behind generated electronic shields in fear of attack by giant, territorial sandworms. Unknown to the city-dwellers, those outside have carved out massive dwellings, called *sietchs*, below. There, in the hidden underworld network of *sietchs*, the Fremen thrive. They move in the darkness of night, stepping out of human rhythm to disappear into the unorchestrated cacophony of nature. Their caverns contain their wealth—great pools of water, more water than the surface world dare imagine.

The planet and its populace serve as a symbol of the whole self: ego above (visible and thin) and the unconscious below discovered through Paul's journey (both within the planet and within himself). In the moment of his father's death, all who serve the House Atreides are either killed, turn traitor, or are scattered across the planet. In the first pages, we are introduced to Paul's teachers one after another; they each represent an aspect of who he was and how his psyche was constructed. As Jung states, "the images of the unconscious place

a great responsibility upon a man. Failure to understand them, or a shirking of ethical responsibility, deprives him of his wholeness and imposes a painful fragmentariness" (*Memories* 193). In the fall of House Atreides, Paul, along with his mother, the Lady Jessica, flee to the desert, and the host of characters that populated his life are dispersed. Externally, the aspects of Paul's psyche are fragmented, reflecting the internal fragmenting that drives Paul along his path of integration and individuation. Integration is an internal act, that, with psychological maturity, allows "all outward ceremonies [to] conform to an inborn psychological pattern of change and growth" (Samuels 84). Individuation is Jung's term for "a person's potential for full psychological

development" (Wang 197)—a journey of discovery of the knowledge of their true self.

For Jung, the discoveries within individuation require an understanding of archetypes. "[T]he archetypes of the collective unconscious provided the basic themes of human life on which each individual worked out his or her own sets of variations. The archetype is thus Jung's basic concept" and serves as the collective inherited modes of psychic function given energy through the coalescence of images, emotions, ideas, and myth (Wang 75). The world of *Dune* is populated with archetypes, and the story is moved

through relationships with those archetypes. Jung states that we encounter archetypes within our personal unconscious that often arrive as part of the collective unconscious, those that have been with us before the unconscious existed: "The archetypes most clearly characterized from the empirical point of view are those which have the most frequent and the most disturbing influence on the ego" (*Essential* 91). Paul seeks to understand them and integrate them into his fragmented self.

Of *Dune's* archetypes, the planet Arrakis is a presence and force impossible to ignore. *Dune's* barrenness and its severe judgment of separation between life and death requires it to always be considered in every decision. Arrakis is the archetypal desert—a landscape wrapped in solitude. Mythologist Dennis Slattery draws out the archetypal nature of the desert: "The desert has its mimetic reality in psyche as psyche has a natural impulse

to express those qualities of the desert. Its power of place is archetypal in energy and condition and pulls us radically out of the ordinary" (47). In the desert, Paul's prior life, what he had considered ordinary, disappears and he is confronted with unique situations and individuals one after another. These desert encounters pull him further into his unconscious towards his moment of transformation.

Paul treks across the desert and then descends below the surface "into the dark, hot depths of the unconscious" (Jacobi 186). In descent, Jessica reminds them that navigating the waters ahead, figuratively, is the key to their survival: "Survival is the ability to swim in strange water . . . Paul and I [Jessica], we must find the currents and patterns

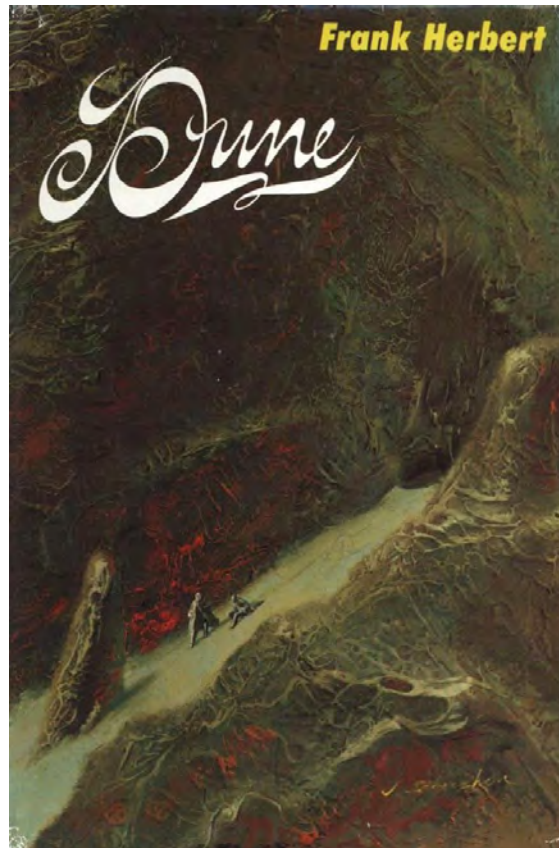


Illustration: Cover of the first edition of *Dune* showing Paul and Jessica traversing the desert. Illustrated by John Schoenherr, 1965. Published by Chilton.

in these strange waters . . . if we're to survive" (Herbert 394). What Jessica does not understand is that her words foreshadow the literal navigation of water that will ensure their survival, both physically and within the unconscious. The planet, at first examination, is nearly without water, so much so that the inhabitants wear still-suits—full-body outfits designed to capture every drop of perspired and excreted water and filter it into drinkable water. As mentioned before, on Arrakis, even tears are precious. Those who have commended long on the planet, trading spice and water, conclude one thing: "There isn't enough water" (177). This belief is in error. While on the surface, across the visible world, there is not enough water, there is water secreted away. The surface is not where the Fremen live nor where their treasures are held. Below the ground, concealed far and wide, are hidden pools, each with "more than thirty-eight million decaliters" of water, "hidden and preserved" (405). Of these, they "have thousands of such caches. Only a few of [the Fremen] know them all." The great reserve of hidden water on a desert planet is the result of generations of effort. Again, Jung's understanding of water is important to understand Herbert's meaning: "[W]ater is no figure of speech, but a living symbol of the dark psyche" (Jung, *Archetypes* 17). Below the surface, Paul finds water, enough to drown a great worm and enough to transform a planet into a verdant paradise. Within the dark psyche is the water to bring life to the barrenness of the conscious surface.

From the hidden water comes the mysterious Water of Life. In her ascension to become the Fremen Reverend Mother, the pinnacle position of female religious leadership, Jessica is brought "the Water of Life, the water that is greater than water—Kan, the water that frees the soul . . . It opens the universe to you" (Herbert 447). The Water of Life is the deep self. For the Fremen, its consumption brings a prescient insight of the internal self that paves the way for the attainment of individuation, as the heavy dose of spice travels within to interact with the ancestral memories. In imbibing the potent substance, the soul is freed and the universe inside is opened. It is a feminine creation, a "poison of illusion and seduction" (Jung, *Essential* 112), because it is believed to only be made drinkable by the tribe by first being transformed bodily within a Reverend Mother. In doing so, Jessica ascends.

Where does the Water of Life come from? As in all things in *Dune*, everything returns to the sandworms. The great makers, as the worms are known to the Fremen, are the force of change upon the surface and below. Everywhere their influence is felt. Everywhere their presence intrudes. The little makers—"leathery half-plant, half-animal makers" (Herbert 348)—are the formers of the material that will later become the coveted resource spice. In its initial phase, this material is called the pre-spice mass—in this early form it can become more than just spice. It can

also, with the proper manipulation, become the Water of Life, created at the moment of the murder of a fledgling sandworm by drowning it. It is the little sandworms's final "liquid exhalation" (454). These little makers are also the hoarders and occupiers of the very water that will kill them when they later grow into great worms. In their part-vegetative state, they form the pre-spice mass which reflects the "prima materia, the 'raw material' of the psyche, which must first succumb to death before it can awaken, recast, to new and perhaps more differentiated, more nearly perfect, and more enduring life" (Jacobi 158-159). Herbert assigns the makers this very capability: anything can arise from the pre-spice mixture and the poison of the Water of Life that is formed when the maker is drowned. The *prima materia* succumbs to death and, from it, the Water of Life is created.

Jessica is not the only one to drink and transform the Water of Life. Paul does as well and it is in his drinking of the Water of Life that he experiences his transformational moment. While Jessica transforms the Water of Life by the gallon, Paul manages to convert only a single drop, and that act alone puts him into a dreamless coma for three weeks. He has found the deep waters within the deep self. Like a Reverend Mother, he transforms the waters of the sandworms into a digestible substance. Inside himself, he, in a much smaller degree than the natural skill of the Reverend Mothers, moves molecules around until the concoction is ready. He takes the intoxicating, deadly substance of the unconscious and, through his skill, transforms it into something others can partake of, although the amount for him is so small, none is passed on. Jung speaks of the artist's manipulation of the unconscious material for the wider audience:

[T]he artist reaches back to the primordial image in the unconscious which is best fitted to compensate the inadequacy and one-sidedness of the present . . . and in raising it from deepest unconsciousness, [transforms] it until it can be accepted by the minds of his contemporaries according to their powers. (*Collected Works* 15, par. 130)

This act of molding the unconscious material is given physical form in the transformation of the Water of Life into something digestible for the tribe. Paul molds the Water of Life into that which is palatable for others, knowing that in its raw form, it would kill the receiving Fremen.

Paul's capabilities are tested at the beginning of *Dune* by the Reverend Mother Caius Helen Mohiam. Finishing this testing, she explains the Water of Life as a path towards the inner anima and animus, the feminine and masculine aspects of the unconscious theorized by Jung:

We look down so many avenues of the past. . . . But only feminine avenues. . . . Yet, there's a place where no



Truthsayer can see. We are repelled by it, terrorized. It is said a man will come one day and find in the gift of the drug his inward eye. He will look where we cannot—into both feminine and masculine pasts. . . . The one who can be many places at once. (Herbert 15-16)

In following the anima, engaging with it, accepting, and integrating it, Paul experiences his transformational moment and discovers the hidden place foretold by the Reverend Mother Mohiam—a place that exists not merely in his unconscious but also in the collective unconscious: "Paul's consciousness flowed through and around her and into the darkness. She glimpsed the place dimly before her mind blanked itself away from the terror" (560). As Paul explores, he discovers that these hidden, avoided places inside are different for male and female. Paul's description of this hidden place reflects a basic understanding of the contrasexual archetypes of anima and animus:

There is in each of us an ancient force that takes and an ancient force that gives. A man finds little difficulty facing that place within himself where the taking force dwells, but it's almost impossible for him to see into the giving force without changing into something other than man. For a woman, the situation is reversed. . . . These things are so ancient within us. (561)

Paul discovers and enters this place—for him, it is a truly feminine place that echoes Jung's anima. He finds himself inhabiting the darkness within himself so that he is able to be in many places at once—many internal spaces across all of humanity.

Paul's transformational moment of taking the Water of Life is a descent into the belly of the worm, in a manner. Jung clarifies this moment: "The overcoming from within is the achievement of adaptation to the conditions of the inner world, and the emergency ('slipping out') of the hero from the monster's belly . . . [s]ymbolizes the recommencement of progression" (*Essential* 64). His drinking of the Water of Life and his subsequent three-week coma is his descent into the monster.

This moment of the Water of Life is sacred because the sandworms are perceived as divine, as evidenced in the Fremen planetologist Liet Kynes murmuring prayer: "Bless the Maker and His water . . . Bless the coming and going of Him. May His passage cleanse the world. May He keep the world for His people" (Herbert 157). Quoting Jung, Jungian scholar Edward Edinger says, "To this day God is the name by which I designate all things which cross my willful path violently and recklessly, all things which upset my subjective views, plans and intentions and change the course of my life for better or worse" (Jung qtd in: Edinger 101). On the planet Arrakis, the great Maker crosses Paul's "path violently and recklessly," upsetting his plans. The im-

age of the great Shai-Hulud (as the Fremen also reverently refer to the worms) burrowing through the sand, dangerous and hungry to be tamed, is an echo of the exploration of the divine archetype, the *imago-dei*, the image of God, in the deep self. Reflecting on the various descriptions of the worms in *Dune*, in their appearance, actions, and presence, the fictional desert monster conjures images of a host of mighty creatures swimming below the surface: Jonah's big fish, Ahab's whale, the biblical leviathan, and the world serpents Jörmungandr and the ouroboros. In the singular image of the sand worm, these fragmented images of the unknown divine are merged. The threat of its appearance is always present, although its form is often occluded. When it does emerge, the moment follows the beats of a numinous revelation. The sandworm is the holy divine in the unconscious, holding the tension of "the opposites within the God-image itself" (Jung, *Memories* 338). The worm's rational aspects are subjugated below its numinous nature: it is both tremendous (inspiring awe) and mysterious (of a nature and origin and destination unknown). It does not seek to relate. It does not even seek to acknowledge. It simply aims to "cleanse the world" with its passage. The worm's own passage across Dune conjures Genesis: "And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters" (King James Version, 1.2). Jung concludes that God's declaration to Job is summarized with this characterization: "This is I, the creator of all the ungovernable, ruthless forces of Nature, which are not subject to any ethical laws. I, too, am an amoral force of Nature, a purely phenomenal personality that cannot see its own back" (*Essential* 320). The worm is this form of the divine, "an amoral force of Nature." It is born from the *prima materia*, the "primordial unconsciousness [that] likes to haunt 'caverns and tenebrous places'" (Jacobi 146).

Frank Herbert uses similar language about the worm as he does about the race consciousness that Paul explores deep inside himself: "But he could feel the demanding race consciousness within him, his own terrible purpose, and he knew that no small thing could deflect the juggernaut" (Herbert 402). Paul does not merely integrate his consciousness with his unconscious, but he moves towards integrating with the collective unconscious. Author Brian Herbert, son of Frank Herbert, in the afterword to *Dune*, acknowledges Jung's contribution to *Dune*:

[T]he women of the Bene Gesserit Sisterhood have a collective memory—a concept based largely upon the writings and teachings of Carl Gustav Jung, who spoke of a "collective unconscious," that supposedly inborn set of "contents and modes of behavior" possessed by all human beings. (684-685)

The race consciousness of *Dune* is essentially Jung's collective unconscious. Frank Herbert, despite naming it

something different, harkens upon the perfect description: "There is in all things a pattern that is part of our universe. It has symmetry, elegance, and grace. . . . We try to copy these patterns in our lives and our society, seeking the rhythms, the dances, the forms that comfort" (480). The archetypes of the collective unconscious emerge within these patterns of our universe—the rhythms and the dances. The archetypes are in all of our thoughts, all of our glimpses, in the brush stroke of the painter, and the complicated melody of the composer. Archetypes are the towering figures of myth, and they are the watchful visages deep in each of us.

One of those figures of myth in *Dune* is the worm, moving leviathan-like below the sands. Paul's waking awareness of the collective unconscious moving through his deep self symbolically echoes these movements of the great worm. Herbert encourages us to consider that what is perceived as the great maker's path across Dune is mirrored in each of us as an image of the manifestation of the collective unconscious. Paraphrasing Kyne's blessing here expands our understanding of this Jungian concept into something akin to a personal mantra: "Bless the collective unconscious and its transformative ability. Bless its coming and going in our life. May the collective unconscious cleanse the world. May it keep the world for those awakened to it."

When Paul returns to the surface to bridge his identities of the prophesied Kwisatz Haderach, a Fremen messiah figure whose title is "interpreted as 'The shortening of the way' or 'The one who can be two places simultaneously'" (Herbert 638), Paul moves between the two, abandoning the mantle of House Atreides above to discover the role of the prophesied Fremen messiah Muad'Dib below and then returning to bring the two into unity as Duke Paul Muad'Dib. Paul navigates the inner world, mirroring the steps in his external desert world with the internal steps toward becoming the Kwisatz Haderach—a messianic consciousness for a future interstellar empire. His whole person has been assimilated in the final moments, and, in keeping pace, so has the external world. The House Atreides is brought into alignment with the Fremen Muad'Dib, and they both ascend to the Emperorship over the known human empire spanning multiple worlds.

As *Dune* concludes, we are left wondering if Paul has gone too far from a Jungian perspective, as Edinger's warning rings loud at this moment: "[T]he ego totally identified with the Self experiences itself as a deity" (7). However, this is the work for later books by Frank Herbert. For the transformation Paul has navigated, a Fremen mantra applies: "Arrakis teaches the attitude of the knife—chopping off what's incomplete and saying: 'Now, it's complete because it's ended here'" (Herbert 219). In the final moments of *Dune*, standing on the surface of Arrakis, as Duke Paul Muad'Dib, Paul has completed his journey, fulfilled the long waiting of the Fremen and bridged the separation of

the Houses and the separation within himself. He is complete.

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# The End of Times:

## Seeing the Book of Revelation through a Mythic Lens

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Caitlinn R. Curry, MA

### KEYWORDS

*Book of Revelation*  
*D. H. Lawrence*  
*Joseph Campbell*  
*Christian Mythology*

THE BOOK OF REVELATION, the last book in the biblical canon, is a text pregnant with odd beasts, terrifying prophecies, deadly battles, and intense, almost horrific, images. Readers of the book find themselves transported into a surreal landscape where the moon turns to blood, good defeats evil, and Heaven is tangible. In many reformed sects of the Protestant Church, the meaning of the Book of Revelation has become fixed: read through the lens of literalism, many pastors, theologians, and congregations assert there are limited ways to understand what this story conveys. Unfortunately, a modernist belief in a single interpretation as “right” tends to be exclusionary and condemning, and leaves many feeling alienated from a text, and the text’s God, in which they had hoped to find meaning. Is it possible to see an inclusive

and magical irrationality in this Biblical text? Is it possible for the text to be read in a mythic, rather than theological, way? By consulting the voices of D. H. Lawrence, Joseph Campbell, and C. G. Jung, this paper seeks to assert that there are, indeed, a variety of pathways through which to read the Book of Revelation.

Before exploring the ideas of Campbell, Lawrence, and Jung, it is helpful to clarify the way in which some Protestant Christians interpret the Book of Revelation. To begin, according to Stephen Spencer, Revelation is considered to be “the doctrine of the last things [which] concerns the culmination of God’s purposes, focused on the last One, Jesus Christ, ‘the last Adam’ (1 Cor. 15.45), whose (second) coming in judgment and blessing is the focus of Christian hope” (Spencer 438). Many Christians perceive this book to be prophetically speaking of the literal end of the world: when Jesus Christ physically, and as promised, returns to earth and wages war against Satan and his forces of darkness, when there

will be a seven-year period of Tribulation (global famine, suffering, disease, war, in short, pain that affects all of Creation), a thousand years of peace, and a Rapture in which the true believers (living and dead) are taken up to Heaven. The order of these events is still widely contested within Protestant communities.

For many Christians, Revelation and “the last things are integral to the biblical message,” as it prophetically “announces the climactic triumph of the kingdom of God over hostile earthly kingdoms” (Spencer 438). Spencer continues on to claim that “salvation is inseparable from the culmination of God’s work. Victory over enemies, healing from disease, cleansing from impurity, abundant and satisfying provision” (438) are bound up in Christian understandings of Revelation. With all this said, it can be asserted that eschatology informed by the book of Revelation is a vital theological crux in the Christian tradition, and, for many, Revelation and the images within are seen as both

promise and fact. While there is nothing in-and-of itself that is wrong with this understanding, the assertion that Revelation is a literal decree limits interpreting the text to meaning one or few things. In that, other interpretations are seen as untrue, an Enlightenment-inspired notion that comes head-to-head with the fluid nature of myth.

It is this limiting of the fluidity of the text that, from a mythological perspective, is problematic. As is best asserted by Joseph Campbell, allegory and the establishment of a myth's meaning are detrimental to both the myth and its psychological power: myth is damaged by the systematic theologian, for, due to the nature of systematic theology, mythology is then read "as direct history or science" in which "symbol becomes fact, metaphor dogma, and the quarrels of the sects arise, each mistaking its own symbolic signs for the ultimate reality--the local vehicle for its timeless, ineffable tenor" (53). Campbell argues that this modernist thinking, like that which has anchored theological meaning to the book of Revelation, reduces myths, for "they lose their force, their magic, their charm for the tender-minded and become mere archaeological curiosities, fit only for some sort of reductive classification" (52). Through these snippets of Campbell's view on myth and religion, readers can gather that the way in which some in the Christian Church have fixed the meaning of the Book of Revelation is, from Campbell's perspective, limiting and reductionistic. The question then arises: if, according to Campbell, myths are fluid, multifaceted, always churning and moving, and if fixed interpretation and allegory are detrimental to myths, frankly rendering traditional interpretations of Revelation mythologically void, how then does one mythically interpret the Book of Revelation?

While this is a vast question, D. H. Lawrence's book *Apocalypse* provides an imaginative steppingstone for mythologists to engage with the Book of Revelation. *Apocalypse* reveals Lawrence's bitterness towards dogmatic interpretations of Revelation, in particular the ones he had encountered in his childhood attendance of a Congregationalist Church, a bitterness which led him not just to assert that Christianity had co-opted and overwritten the pagan myths and mythic nature of Revelation, but to trace the images in Revelation back to their pagan roots. In *Apocalypse*, Lawrence reveals that, over time, Christians inserted their ideologies of salvation and sin into the book of Revelation, theologically correcting the "unorthodox," working the text in their favor, and deciding the meaning of the myths within. This happened, from Lawrence's perspective, for a political reason: this rewriting and inserting was a way of deciding who would be in Heaven, and who would not. He writes of how Revelation, in its current state, is "ugly moral, condemning of other people" (Lawrence 15). This is because, from his perspective, it has taken the occult and pagan rebirth mythologies, such

as Osiris, Adonis, and Dionysus, who are "life-bringers for the good and bad alike—like the falling rain—on the just and unjust—who gives a damn?—like the sun" and, from an exclusivist standpoint of belief in being the elect and the chosen, changed and fixated the myths. Instead of rejuvenating life being given universally to all, Jesus, the Messiah, gives Heaven and salvation to the good (15), while those who are sinful are damned to eternal punishment. For example, Lawrence asserts that certain verses, such as Revelation 21:8, which reads, "But for the cowardly and unbelieving and abominable and murderers and immoral persons and sorcerers and idolaters and all liars, their part will be [emphasis in original] in the lake that burns with fire and brimstone, which is the second death" (The New American Standard Bible), are later additions to the text in order to remove all pagan loose ends (Lawrence 186-7) whilst having a theological motive. These additions have worked to immovably fix the meaning of the text, and thus immovably fix who is "in" and who is "out."

With this said, Lawrence gives concrete examples of the ways in which he claims Revelation is an inherently pagan text that has been adapted by Protestant Christian theologians to declare the dominance of one group over another. In *Apocalypse*, Lawrence points to how, even more than the Jews hated the pagan gods, they hated the pagan goddesses (119). Instead of eliminating the Great Mother Goddess from Revelation, the later Christian writers rework her into the story as the maleficent, sensual Whore of Babylon, a harlot belonging to a city they utterly disdained: "For the great Woman of the pagan cosmos was driven into the wilderness at the end of the old epoch, and she has never been called back" (121). Lawrence believes that Christian writers drove her, the Great Mother Goddess, into the wilderness in order to theologically assert the supremacy of Jesus and prove his superiority to the pagan traditions. Continuing on this trajectory, Lawrence moves to the four horsemen and informs readers that the horse is a creature that denotes lordship and simultaneously connects humanity to the raw strength of the divine (101). Because of this, Lawrence notes that the four horsemen are "obviously pagan" and obviously astrological and zodiacal (101). However, Christianity has mellowed these horsemen into patrolmen, harbingers of God's wrath. Standing along with the horsemen, Lawrence also sees the dragon in Revelation (chapter 12) as blatantly pagan in origin. He notes that the dragon is the primal symbol of human consciousness, that which "belongs to the old divine cosmos" (135), the "half-divine, half-demonish nature" of the potency and passion within a human being (123). This dragon is a cosmic dragon, one, who in its good aspect, is "the great vivifier, the great enhancer of the whole universe" (124); in its evil aspect, this dragon of the *Apocalypse* "is a much more ancient beast . . . he is kakodaimon" (128), or a demon. Ac-



cording to Lawrence, this apocalyptic dragon is “the same dragon which, according to the Hindus, coils quiescent at the base of the spine of a man, and unfolds sometimes lashing along the spinal way: and the yogi is only trying to set this dragon in controlled motion” (125). By asserting the dragon as an externalized devil, Christian writers sought to erase any semblance of divinity within humanity and divorce humankind from the cosmos, a marriage that they wished only to grant to the mediator of Jesus.

While perhaps many would take issue with Lawrence’s aggressive reclamation of paganism within the Book of Revelation, what is important to see is that Lawrence frees the Revelation myth from its concrete tower, challenging the reading of the book as simply Christian science or history. When one considers the person of Christ, a deep lover of people of all backgrounds, who used spiritually-charged stories (parables) to convey the unboundedness of God and God’s kingdom, it appears unfair to literally use Revelation as a fence by which to designate who belongs and who does not. Considering the fantastical imagery of the text and its metaphorical nature, even with the Christian “corrections” to the text that Lawrence notes, it hardly seems appropriate to limit such a mythic text to a singular interpretation. Indeed, was Godself not exhibited in several ways? God, incarnate divine, and Holy Spirit? Thus, whether or not his interpretation is “correct,” Lawrence’s reimagining of the book is a gateway that opens Revelation to have many possible interpretations and engage with many different people. In the words of Campbell, Lawrence begins weaving the force and magic back into a vivid and numinous text, a text that has been chained by the systematic theologian. Though Lawrence’s clear anger towards the Protestant Church and the ancient Christian writers leaks through his words, he, nonetheless, affirms the Book of Revelation as important, as a myth that needs to be examined, and a mythic text which would not be helpful to merely throw away.

Indeed, in “Answer to Job,” C.G. Jung employs a mythic understanding of Revelation, an understanding that could be seen as the co-mingling of Campbell’s and Lawrence’s philosophies. On one hand, Jung asserts that John’s Revelation can be understood as the Shadow (the unacceptable and dark aspects of one’s psyche), up until this point unconscious, confronting the Ego (the person’s sense of “I, Myself,” or personal consciousness) of a man who naively sees himself as identified with Christ (as a symbol of the Self, which is the totality of one’s psyche, the psyche

as a whole). In the beginning of Revelation, John seems to speak as if he somehow understands a “sinless state” and “perfect love,” lacking in Paul’s self-reflection (Jung par. 698). However, due to the compensatory nature of the shadow and the unconscious (the parts of one’s psyche that they are unaware of consciously), John cannot stay in this inflated position forever. Thus, his revelation expresses a counter-position which contrasts this infantile state, pushing John to see reality and his own person as bearing darker aspects, and moving him toward a place where he



Illustration: The Number of the Beast by William Blake / Public domain.

acknowledges and accepts his repressed negative feelings (par. 708). In coming to grips with himself and the Self as a marriage of opposites, John is moving forward in the individuation process (the psychic development that leads one to a place of psychic wholeness), stepping towards personal wholeness. This process of individuation, of the shadow confronting the conscious person and the need for one to integrate the shadow, is a process that we all must go through, and, in a way, Jung exhibits how the Book of Rev-

elation can stand as a guiding map for anyone's personal individuation journey while still being a "Christian" story.

At the same time, John's visions as recorded in Revelation cannot be seen as merely personal: as the birth of Christ mirrors the birth of Apollo, John's visions can be seen as the unconscious asserting the archetypal (psychic, behavioral, or thought patterns which are common to all humans in all times). In this, the Revelation of John is seen by Jung as an encounter with a "complexio oppositorum," a "uniting symbol, a totality of life" (par. 712) which holds the opposites within itself. In said archetypal encounter, John experiences and reveals the inclusion of both light and dark, love and wrath, man and God in the Divine. Thus, the Book of Revelation can be seen as John's psychic encounter with the immensity and complexity of God's love, and a gnosis that God is a tension of opposites. In this, God is to be both loved and feared, for God is both the passive, motherly ewe and the savage, wrathful ram (par. 732). As those in modern Western society tend to shy away from vengeful ideologies of God and any sort of internal darkness, Jung's assertion that the Book of Revelation reveals the united opposites of God's entity can stand as an inspirational catalyst for holding the opposites within one's self, and likewise for releasing human expectations of the Divine.

All this to say: through the works of Campbell, Lawrence, and Jung, the concretized walls of systematic theology surrounding the Book of Revelation become creatively imbued with new windows and doors. Campbell and Lawrence would assert that literalistic interpretations so prominently held by certain sects of Christianity are reductionistic and problematic, for Lawrence saw the book as multivalent: in the words of Campbell, Lawrence viewed Revelation and the images within as fluid and "living symbols" (Campbell 53). This is played out in the archetypal and psychological understanding of the myth as conveyed by Jung, who further serves to open the possibilities of Revelation's interpretation to one of personal transformation and likewise transformation in understanding God. Even still, it is unfair to call the aforementioned conservative viewpoints unfaithful, as myths, by nature, are liminal, thus engaging with people in a variety of ways and conveying a variety of truths. However, if one were to marry the ideas of the fluidity of myth, as discussed by Campbell, and the possibility that Lawrence opens with his pagan understanding of the book of Revelation and that Jung does with his depth-psychological analysis, contemporary readers of Revelation may perhaps awaken to a sense that, much like what Jung communicates, the boundaries of Heaven are less crisp than systematic theology allows, and that encounters with the Divine are for all people, and not just the select chosen. A mythic lens through which to view Revelation opens the text to be full of possibilities: a pagan

psychological and cosmological experience of mystic liberation (Lawrence 4), an artistic transport into the mysteries of the Divine, a creative discussion on what it means to be alive, a correspondence between Ultimate Reality and the individual, a psychic journey, a depth psychological encounter with the Self. Perhaps a mythic lens would serve as a catalyst for one's individuation process. Perhaps, most of all, unlocking Revelation from its confines will enable Biblical readers to engage with the Bible as a whole in a newly compassionate and unexpectedly beautiful way, in a way that allows the myths to flow as "all things for all people" (1 Cor. 9.22).

The book of Revelation is filled with vibrant, vivid imagery, and terrifying descriptions of beasts, angels, fire, and war. While some Protestant Christian views have tended to limit the meaning of this book to literal or allegorical, mythologists such as Joseph Campbell claim that fixing the meaning of a myth ultimately decapitates it, and this is a notion that poet D. H. Lawrence would have affirmed, and C. G. Jung exegeted. Lawrence traces the symbols in Revelation to their fluid, pagan roots, and, in short, states that the text of Revelation cannot be limited to theological viewpoints or fixed symbology, for theology and Christianity have corrupted the pagan, cosmic, fluid beauty of the text. Rather, as Campbell reveals, Lawrence shows that Revelation may be read as a doorway to the psyche, an inspiring symbol which has the potential to reconnect humanity with the divine and the divine within. This mythic fluidity and movement, which offers personal transformation, is exemplified in C. G. Jung's section on Revelation in "Answer to Job". The numinous beauty of Revelation can be reclaimed when approached through the viewpoints of Campbell, Lawrence, and Jung, who reopen the text from its concrete, theological prison to the free cosmos within and beyond.

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# Encountering the Goddess:

## Transformation

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## in the Hero's Underworld Journey

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### KEYWORDS

*Goddess*  
*Underworld Journey*  
*Gawain*  
*Orpheus*  
*Inanna*

THE UNDERWORLD JOURNEY is one of the most significant parts of the hero's journey, as it is what leads to his apotheosis. Without the underworld journey, the hero cannot return with the boon, whatever form it may take. According to Joseph Campbell's "Hero Journey" cycle, whether "helpful crone" or "fairy godmother" (71), "threshold guardian" (77), "Queen Goddess of the World" (109), or "queen of sin" (123), "woman" plays a critical role in the hero's journey in the Underworld, as the hero meets different women who either help or hinder his progress. While Campbell depicts these feminine figures as being simply encounters, albeit significant ones, on the hero's journey, in many cases it is the Triple Goddess herself (the Great Goddess in the three manifestations of maiden, mother, and crone) who instigates the hero's descent

into the Underworld. Considering the utmost importance of the underworld journey, the Goddess's role must not be undervalued or dismissed as a simple encounter with the hero. As the gatekeeper to the Underworld, allowing the hero to both enter and depart, and as the architect of his trials therein, without her presence and power the hero would be incapable of attaining the apotheosis that is the purpose of his entire journey. While the figures he meets and the trials he faces prior to the underworld journey prepare him for it, it is his encounter with the Goddess in the Underworld in which all his trials and travails culminate. Only after this, if the Goddess deems him worthy, may he ascend and return with the prize he sought. These sacred encounters with the Divine Feminine are instrumental in the transformation of the hero, as no hero returns from the Underworld unchanged.

Among the many literary examples of the Goddess' role in the hero's underworld journey, three stories stand out in their clear inclusion of all three

aspects of the Triple Goddess. The Goddess appears distinctly as Maiden, Mother, and Crone in: Orpheus' descent to the Underworld in an attempt to rescue Eurydice; Dumuzi's call to the Great Below after he fails to properly honor his wife, the goddess Inanna; and Sir Gawain's trials on his journey to meet the Green Knight. In all three stories, it is a woman, who embodies an aspect of the Triple Goddess, that initiates the hero's journey. Each of the three aspects then appears, guiding him, testing him, or protecting him. Again, without her, the hero would not undertake the underworld journey to begin with, and thus would not experience his transformation or apotheosis.

In the story "Orpheus and Eurydice," from Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, on the day of her wedding to the musician, Orpheus, the maiden Eurydice is bitten by a snake and dies, descending into the Underworld before her marriage can begin. Overcome by grief, Orpheus determines to rescue her, so he travels to the entrance of the Un-





Illustration: Orpheus and Eurydice as portrayed by Edward Poynter, 1862 / Public Domain.

derworld. The obvious instigating event for Orpheus' journey to the Underworld is the death of his wife. As a maiden, and as Orpheus' bride, Eurydice embodies the Maiden aspect of the Triple Goddess, and thus it is the Maiden who initiates Orpheus' underworld journey. This journey, rather than being an initiation into his marriage, is an initiation into death, both Eurydice's literal death and thus the death of their marriage, but also Orpheus' encounter with the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, as he travels to the Underworld in search of his beloved, and then faces the Goddess in her other aspects there.

It is not only the Maiden aspect whom Orpheus must engage on his journey. To enter the Underworld as a living human, rather than as a dead shade, and to have the ability to return to the land of the living from the Underworld, Orpheus must gain Persephone's favor. In her role as queen of the Underworld, Persephone is both the Mother and Crone aspects of the Goddess. While Persephone never gives birth herself, as queen of the Underworld, she tends to the shades of the dead, thus she can be interpreted as Mother in the Underworld. Concerning Orpheus' entrance into and future exit from the Underworld, to attempt his rescue, he appeals to both Hades and Persephone:

"I came here, not to see dark Tartarus,  
[. . .] I came  
For my wife's sake, whose growing years were taken  
By snake's venom. [. . .]  
[. . .] I beg you,  
Weave over Eurydice's life, run through too soon.  
(Ovid 1283)

In response to Orpheus' plea, "Neither the king nor consort / Had harshness to refuse him," (1284) on one condition: "he must not, till he passed Avernus, / Turn back his gaze, or the gift would be in vain." Thus, the Goddess grants the hero entrance to the Underworld.

However, Orpheus' quest meets a tragic end, "[w]hen he, afraid that she might falter, eager to see her, / Looked back in love, and she was gone, in a moment." Thus, as the Goddess initiates Orpheus' journey, so does she determine the end of it. Though Orpheus may return to the land of the living, because he does not abide by Persephone's rule, he loses Eurydice forever. In this, Persephone is the Crone, who is associated with end of life transformations, including the link between death and rebirth, which Orpheus embodies as he descends into the Underworld and later returns from it. So, as always, per Campbell's model, the hero is transformed by his time in the Underworld (in Orpheus' case, it is for the worse), and the nature of his descent and

return are inextricably linked to the nature and will of the Goddess.

In the Sumerian poem "The Descent of Inanna," the goddess Inanna's husband, Dumuzi, is sentenced to the Great Below by Inanna herself. Inanna most visibly embodies the Mother aspect of the Triple Goddess, as she is the birth mother of her two sons, as well as the Queen of Heaven and Earth, thus mother to all of her subjects. In the first section of the poem, "From the Great Above to the Great Below," Inanna herself descends to the Underworld. Upon her arrival, however, her sister, Erishkigal, who is queen of the Great Below and yet envious of Inanna's place in the Great Above, locks Inanna in the Underworld and kills her. Clearly, Erishkigal embodies the Crone aspect of the Triple Goddess, as she rules the Great Below, and thus, like Persephone, presides over end of life transformations and the link between death and rebirth.

Inanna remains dead for three days, after which her servant follows previously explained instructions to save Inanna from being trapped forever in the Underworld. After Inanna is resurrected, she is allowed to leave the Great Below only if another takes her place. When she returns to the Great Above, she finds her servant and both her sons displaying proper mourning for her death and then joy at her return, thus Inanna begs the *galla*, "the demons of the underworld" (Wolkstein and Kramer 68), not to take any of them as her replacement. However, when they find her husband, Dumuzi, he has not clothed himself in mourning and he "makes the fatal mistake of remaining seated on his throne [which he acquired only by virtue of his marriage to Inanna] when his wife returns from her hellish journey. He fails to grovel and groan in acknowledgement of her suffering" (Smith *Sacred Mysteries*, 18). Thus, Inanna chooses Dumuzi as her replacement in the Underworld. Further, he "is the perfect substitute, for he is also the King of Sumer" (Wolkstein 162). In this story, it is the Mother who initiates the underworld journey, as opposed to the Maiden in Orpheus' journey, though both women are the wives of the respective hero. However, upon her return from the Great Below, Inanna also embodies the Crone, as she is initiated into death, but is then reborn. She also presides over the life, death, and rebirth cycle of Dumuzi in fulfilling the terms Erishkigal set.

Following this, in the second section, "The Dream of Dumuzi," Dumuzi has a dream that he requires his younger sister, Geshtinanna, to interpret. Geshtinanna is the character who most embodies the Goddess' Maiden aspect. With a wisdom that calls to the reader's mind the prophetic gift of the maiden Cassandra, she tells Dumuzi that the dream bodes ill for him, that it foretells his demise. After this, Dumuzi escapes from the *galla* several times, hiding in various places, often with Geshtinanna's help. Finally, he is caught, and the poem concludes with the details of

Dumuzi's death:

The *galla* seized Dumuzi.  
They surrounded him.  
They bound his hands. They bound his neck.  
[...] Dumuzi was no more. (Wolkstein and Kramer 84).

In the final section of the poem, "The Return," both Dumuzi's wife and mother weep for him, but it is Geshtinanna whose grief is greatest. She laments, "I would find my brother! I would comfort him! / I would share his fate!" (88). At this, Inanna takes Geshtinanna to Dumuzi, and, in an act of motherly compassion, declares:

"You will go to the underworld  
Half the year.  
Your sister, since she has asked,  
Will go the other half.  
On the day you are called,  
That day you will be taken.  
On the day Geshtinanna is called,  
That day you will be set free." (89)

With this pronouncement, Dumuzi and Geshtinanna are both clearly connected to the Triple Goddess, Dumuzi as consort, and Geshtinanna, again, as the Maiden. They are also linked irrefutably with the Crone, as they are now both part of the cycle of death and rebirth, each descending into the Underworld and returning from it once a year for all eternity. And in a beautiful, symbolic image, immediately following the above lines, the poem concludes: "Inanna placed Dumuzi in the hands of the eternal. / *Holy Erishkigal! Great is your renown! / Holy Erishkigal! I sing your praises!*" Thus, the Triple Goddess is presented in all three forms (Smith *Hero Journey*, 11), with her consort, and, again, the Goddess' roles in instigating Dumuzi's Underworld journey, as well as in determining his return, are explicit.

Finally, the Triple Goddess appears explicitly in her Crone aspect in the figure of Morgan the Goddess, better known as Morgan le Fay, in the fifteenth-century English poem *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*. After accepting a strange New Year's Day challenge from an even stranger green knight, Sir Gawain sets off from King Arthur's court on Halloween to hold up his end of the bargain: meet the Green Knight at the Green Chapel on New Year's Day so the apparently immortal knight can chop off Gawain's head with his axe, "returning the favor" that Gawain paid the knight by chopping off the knight's head the previous New Year's Day. Gawain travels for several weeks before finally, on Christmas Eve, coming to a mansion where the lord invites Gawain to be his Christmas guest.

At Bertilak's court, Gawain beholds two ladies, one young and fair, "more lovely than Guinevere," (Tolkien 59)



and the other "who was older than she, indeed ancient she seemed, / and held in high honour by all men about her." The young woman is Lady Bertilak, who most closely embodies the Goddess' Maiden aspect (not as traditionally virgin as she is married, but as one who has not yet given birth, at least that can be ascertained from the text, and who plays at the courtly games of love). After five days of feasting, Gawain goes to take his leave. However, Lord Bertilak informs Gawain that the Green Chapel is a very short ride from the mansion, and so Gawain agrees to stay until New Year's Day. At this, Bertilak suggests a game: each day that he goes out hunting, he says, "whatever I win in the woods at once shall be yours, / and whatever gain you may get you shall give in exchange" (65). Gawain agrees.

For three days, while Bertilak is out hunting, Lady Bertilak goes to Gawain's chambers and wakes him, trying to seduce him, and each day Gawain resists. On the first day, he agrees to let her kiss him once; when Bertilak returns, Gawain kisses him in exchange for the stag that Bertilak caught. On the second, Gawain agrees to two kisses, and he gives these to Bertilak in exchange for a wild boar. On the third, and final, day Gawain accepts three kisses, as well as a green girdle that Lady Bertilak says will keep the wearer from harm. When Bertilak returns, Gawain kisses him three times in exchange for a fox, but keeps the girdle hidden for himself. After this, Gawain sets out for the Green Chapel.

When he finds it, the Green Knight is waiting for him. Gawain readies himself for the Green Knight's axe, but the knight misses the first two strikes because Gawain flinches. On the third strike, Gawain remains still and the knight nicks Gawain's neck, and Gawain rejoices that he still has his life. Now the Green Knight reveals that he is Lord Bertilak, and he knows all about his wife's kisses and the girdle, explaining that, "I sent her to test thee, and thou seem'st to me truly / the fair knight most faultless that e'er foot set on earth." (115). Bertilak then finally explains that the entire test was put in place by Morgan le Fay, or Morgan the Goddess, the old woman at Bertilak's court, in order to ascertain if the rumors of the Knights of the Round Table's valor were true. Thus, the Crone orchestrates the hero's descent into the Underworld, using the Green Knight as her herald, and Lady Bertilak, the Green Knight's wife, to conduct the tests of honor.

While Morgan le Fay is not revealed until the end, and Lady Bertilak as the Maiden arrives about halfway through, the Goddess appears around a quarter of the way into the poem in her Mother aspect as the Virgin Mary. This is a subtle, yet significant appearance, as she is mentioned during Gawain's investiture scene as he finishes arming himself for his quest. In the middle of an extensive description of his shield, the poet mentions that "Heaven's courteous Queen" is "on the inner side of his shield [. . .]

depainted, / that when he cast his eyes thither his courage never failed" (Tolkien 48). She appears twice more shortly before Gawain arrives at Bertilak's castle on Christmas Eve, when "his plaint to Mary plead, / her rider's road to guide / and to some lodging lead" (51) for the night, and then as he beseeches the Lord "and Mary, who is the mildest mother most dear," (52) to find a suitable place to receive the Mass and Matins on Christmas.

Mary's figuring in the poem is significant, especially juxtaposed to Morgan le Fay's in the end, because of the poem's situation in history. It is a strong example of Celtic literature attempting to reconcile pagan traditions with Christianity in an area of Britain "where Christianity still mingled with the diverse elements of pagan mythologies" (Smith *Hero Journey*, 83). Thus, when considered with the roles of Lady Bertilak as Maiden and of Morgan le Fay as Crone, Mary completes the traditionally pagan image of the Triple Goddess, allowing the Goddess to fulfill her prominent role in Gawain's Underworld journey. "Morgan the Goddess is the puppeteer pulling the strings, the weaver of the tapestry who sent the Green Knight to Arthur's court and who arranged for Gawain's temptation. She is his fate, his temptress, his judge, and the mother of his new identity" (89). Morgan le Fay instigates the journey, Gawain's devotion to Mary sustains him on it, and Lady Bertilak enacts Gawain's trials, which ultimately determine his fate as he meets the Green Knight at the Green Chapel and then returns from his Underworld journey. Thus, all three aspects of the Goddess are inextricable from Gawain's journey, and, as always, the Maiden and the Crone are connected in the cycle of death and rebirth, evidenced in the pair of Lady Bertilak and Morgan le Fay, and Gawain's life-altering journey.

In all three stories, the Triple Goddess' participation is vital to each of the heroes on his journey. Without her, none of the heroes would embark on their Underworld journeys to begin with, and, even if they could, the outcome would likely be very different. These particular stories also illustrate that each of the three aspects of the Triple Goddess has this power over the hero, as each journey is initiated by a different aspect: Orpheus' by the Maiden, Dumuzi's by the Mother, and Gawain's by the Crone. However, it is always the Crone who presides over the terms of the hero's return from his journey. While Persephone never indicates that Orpheus' own return from Hades is at stake, she does present a rule for the return of Eurydice, which Orpheus breaks, thus, while he can return, Eurydice cannot return with him. It is both Erishkigal and Inanna who determine that Dumuzi must serve his time in the Great Below, and then allow him to share his time with Geshtinanna, thus allowing his temporary return to the Great Above. Finally, Morgan le Fay orchestrates Gawain's entire journey, setting the tests he must pass to prove his valor and thus retain his

life. Each aspect (Maiden, Mother, and Crone) is illuminated in relationship to the heroes, exemplifying the diverse and transformational impact of the Divine Feminine on the “Hero Journey” cycle. In all three of these stories the hero’s boon is explicitly his own personal transformation in the form of knowledge and wisdom of the Divine Feminine. All three must reckon with the Goddess’s power and then choose how to proceed thereafter. While Orpheus’ story ends in sorrow because he is unable to accept Eurydice’s death as part of the cycle of life, death, and rebirth, nor does he appear to return to the land of the living with a greater appreciation for life and its cycles in general, both Dumuzi and Sir Gawain emerge from their journeys with a profound understanding and appreciation for these cycles, and with the appropriate reverence and respect due to the Goddess who embodies them.

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# Antipodal Worlds:

## Being Human in the Forests of the Amazon is Not the Same as Being Human in the City of Madrid

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### KEYWORDS

*Amazon*  
*Animals*  
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THE FRENCH ANTHROPOLOGIST Claude Lévi-Strauss liked to recount the following anecdote, taken from Oviedo's *Historia General de las Indias*, as an illustration of the fact that human societies everywhere are fundamentally ethnocentric:

In the Greater Antilles, a few years after the discovery of America, while the Spaniards were sending out investigative commissions to find out whether or not the natives had a soul, the natives set about drowning white prisoners in order to observe whether their corpses would decompose or not after a certain length of time. (*Race*, 21; my translation)

In one remarkably pithy sentence, Lévi-Strauss sums up the dramatic encounter of two alien worlds, revealing two antipodal conceptions of what it means to be human: for what each side is attempting to fathom is indeed the humanity, or, more precisely, the degree of humanity of the other. For the natives of the “Old World,” the object of inquiry is its inner subjectivity: How human is this unknown creature’s soul? For the natives of the “New World,” on the other hand, the object of analysis is its corporeal exterior: How human is this unknown creature’s body? From a hermeneutic perspective, the Europeans and the indigenous people of the “New World” were both doing what we are all brought up to do, which is to see the world through the lens of the pre-defined interpretive paradigms that shape the ways we perceive and experience ourselves and others in relation to our environment. Through these master narratives—the myths into which we are born—we come to dwell in a world that is in reality a worldview.

In Lévi-Strauss’ anecdote, both sides were therefore quite naturally carrying out their investigations on the basis of their respective mythologies or worldviews.

The question of what makes a creature human or nonhuman is one of those timeless questions that all mythologies set out to answer. And while the questions may be universal, the answers are inevitably local. In other words, a human being in the forests of Abya Yala<sup>1</sup> is not the same as a human being in the city of Madrid—unless one has been conquered by or converted to the mythology of the other, in which case, that difference would effectively be annihilated. We are all brought up into an answer of what it means to be a human being,<sup>2</sup> and

1. Dating from pre-colonial times, this name is used by the Kuna peoples in present-day Panama and Colombia to refer to the Americas. Abya Yala means “land of blood” or “mature land.” It has been taken up, at the suggestion of Bolivian Aymara leader Takir Mamani, as an indigenous name for the American continents as a whole.  
2. I am indebted to Dr. Michael Sipiora for

that answer is provided by the master narratives and traditions that we inherit. In order to answer the questions raised by the investigations of the natives and the Europeans in the fifteenth century, we will remain on the shores of the (ethnocentrically dubbed) "New World" and turn to the narratives inherited by the indigenous peoples of the present-day Amazon. The first section, "Predator, Prey or Human," will explore the shape-shifting sense of being and body in the Amerindian<sup>3</sup> cosmos. In this context, human is one of three identities accessible to all beings in the presence of a non-predatory relationship. This will lead, in the second section, entitled "Humans and Animals: Myths of Origins," to an examination of the Amazonian and Western narratives of the origin of the divide between humans and animals as eloquent mirror negatives of each other. Finally, the third section, "Human by Nature or Human by Culture," will consider the ways in which beings are not born but become human in the Amazon through a collective, cultural process. The primary sources for this inquiry will be the work of the iconoclastic anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro, the essays in the exhibition catalogue *Qu'est-ce qu'un corps? (What Is a Body?)*,<sup>4</sup> and the words of the Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa. In considering Amazonian notions of the body and the soul, of nature and culture, of the relationship be-

tween humans and animals and the myth of their differentiation, we will see that they are the antithesis of our own in the most fundamental and illuminating ways.

If human societies everywhere are ineluctably ethnocentric, each unwittingly seeing the world through the monocle of its own particular master narratives, one way of breaking out of our cyclopean perspective, of recognizing and at the same time freeing ourselves from the monumental prison of our own history and culture, might be through the unexpected encounter with an unknown other. In seeking not to analyze the Amazonian and the Western narratives, but to simply offer, as in the Lévi-Straussian example, a nonhierarchical juxtaposition of two antipodal yet equal conceptions of what it means to be human, the intent of this discussion is to propose a sort of double vision, allowing us a glimpse not only into an unknown other world but (perhaps with some insight) into our own as well.<sup>5</sup> Out

of the meeting of two alien worlds comes the revelation of difference. The ultimate aim of the present inquiry is thus to contemplate and revel in differences, to marvel at their mysteries and to rejoice in their persistence.

## I. PREDATOR, PREY OR HUMAN

Although the encounter described by Lévi-Strauss eventually led to the decimation of the natives of the Caribbean, a certain number of indigenous peoples on the southern continent were able until quite recently to resist or remain uncontacted by Western civilization. Many of these peoples, representing a large diversity of ethnic groups, inhabit the Amazonian lowlands, which span the present-day countries of Brazil, Peru, Ecuador, Venezuela, Suriname, Guyana, French Guiana, Bolivia, and Colombia.

In the Amazonian lowlands, "human" does not refer to an objective being (a human being) or a particular species (the human species), but instead to a particular identity in a relationship. As the renowned Brazilian anthropologist Eduardo Viveiros de Castro observes, "'Human' is a term designating a relation, not a substance" (*Cannibal Metaphysics* 59n19). While we in the Western world are born

into a world of things, the indigenous peoples of the Amazon are born into a world of relations. If, in our environment, we are surrounded by a mul-

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*Just as humans have a history of their relations with animals, so also animals have a history of their relations with humans.*

*Only humans, however, construct narratives of this history.*

- Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*

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tiplicity of concrete objects (distinguished as animate or inanimate), in their environment, they are surrounded instead by a web of virtual and concrete relationships—the former lying dormant (inanimate) until engaged or materialized (animated) by events, encounters, rituals, and so forth. As an example, "mother" in the eyes of a Westerner is a person (an animate object), while from an indigenous point of view, "mother" is above all a relationship—a relationship that is, as shall be seen, co-created through certain rituals and customary practices. Among a large number of Amerindian societies in the Amazon, this web of relations revolves around what Viveiros de Castro, echoing Lévi-Strauss, has called a "metaphysics of predation."<sup>6</sup> It is based on the ontological notion of a universal food chain: the fact that all living beings require nourishment and must therefore feed on, as well as serve as food for, other beings. As the authors of *Qu'est-ce qu'un corps?* observe:

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The predatory urge is thus inherent in all living things, including humans, animals, plants, and spirits. Through the interpretive lens of this fundamental insight, one creature can only occupy, with regard

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Western world.

6. See, for example, *Cannibal Metaphysics*, p. 49, 57, 139.

this expression gleaned from a lecture at Pacifica Graduate Institute.

3. This is the term used by Amazonists, and unless specified otherwise, I use it here to refer to the indigenous peoples of this region.

4. For the exhibition held at the Musée du Quai Branly in Paris, France in 2006. All translations from the original French are my own.

5. Under my pen, "our" or "we" may include all self-identified humans weaned on the master narratives of Western culture and thus brought up into the answer of what it means to be human in the proverbial

to another creature, one of the following three positions: that of predator, that of prey or that of congener. (149)

These three subject positions are necessarily defined in relation to another being. In what we might more euphemistically call a metaphysics of eating, there are two core modes of relating to one another that in turn encompass three possible positions. The relationship may be one of predation: if I am the predator, I want to eat the other being; if I am the prey, the other being wants to eat me. On the other hand, our relationship may be one of non-predation: if the other being and I do not eat each other but eat like and with each other, then we are fellow creatures. Depending on the situation, any subject can find itself in any one of the positions at different times. As a result, predator, prey and congener are not fixed identities and are not immanent in any particular being or species. Instead, these three identities are—like “mother”—to be understood as relationships, as modes of interaction, that are in fact applicable to all living beings, human as well as nonhuman, since all living beings are required to nourish themselves.

However, it is not only the subject’s identity or sense of being that is unstable, but the body itself that changes according to the position it occupies. In the words of Breton et al., “the body does not have a form of its own and takes the form imposed on it as a result of the relationship it has to another subject. It is the product of a mutual exchange of perspectives” (22). Whereas in the Western worldview the body is perceived as an (animate) object with an inherent form of its own, in the Amazonian worldview the body is perceived as the variable manifestation of a position in a relationship. For example, in a given relationship:

1. If I am the predator, from my perspective the other being will have the body of a prey. If I am an Amerindian, I will see it as one of my favorite game animals, such as a peccary or an armadillo; if I am a harpy eagle, I will see a mouse. At the same time, I will appear to have the form of a predatory animal such as a jaguar (to the peccary or armadillo) or an eagle (to the mouse).
2. If I am the prey, from my perspective the other will have the body of a predator. In this case, if I am an Amerindian, I may see a jaguar (for whom I am a favorite game animal); if I am a mouse, I will see an eagle. Likewise, I will look like a peccary to the jaguar, or a mouse to the eagle.
3. If the other being is a congener, however, we will see each other with human bodies, whether I am an Amerindian, a peccary, a mouse, a jaguar or an eagle.

There are two things that stand out in this ontological configuration. First of all, the protean nature of the Amazonian body, which, unlike the Homeric Proteus, does not shape-shift at will, but is instead shape-shifted via the per-

spective of an external observer. Its visible form is determined by the point of view of another being in a mutually acknowledged relationship. In other words, one might say that, in the Amazon, *body* is in the eye of the beholder.

The second significant element is the distinctive status of the human body. The human form is universalized as the trans-species expression of a non-predatory, congeneric relationship. All creatures, including animals, plants and spirits, undergo the same metamorphosis: when they are among themselves, they see each other in the form of human beings. What this means, for example, is that a jaguar being (i.e., the being that an Amerindian sees as a jaguar) will always see another jaguar with a human body—but will never see an Amerindian with a human body.

All beings thus have two types of bodies: a variable external form that is imposed from the outside and an invisible human form that remains invariable “on the inside.” The former is like a temporary garment that is removed whenever one is “at home,” so to speak, so that when jaguars or peccaries, eagles or mice are among themselves, they shed their theroid appearance and take on their true anthropomorphic form. In other words, underneath the diversity of their exterior corporeal forms, all living beings have human “souls.” As Viveiros de Castro explains it:

In sum, animals are people, or see themselves as persons. Such a notion is virtually always associated with the idea that the manifest form of each species is a mere envelope (a ‘clothing’) which conceals an internal human form, usually only visible to the eyes of the particular species or to certain trans-specific beings such as shamans. This internal form is the soul or spirit of the animal: an intentionality or subjectivity formally identical to human consciousness. . . . (*Cosmological Perspectivism* 48)

The human body thus has a special status in the Amazonian cosmos. It is not exclusive to those beings that we call human, but is accessible to all beings whenever they are with their own species. It is the embodiment, we might say, of a common identity and a common point of view. All creatures, under the same conditions—the absence of predation, a shared perspective—see themselves as fellow “humans” in the same way.

How did things come to be this way? That is the question that lies at the heart of every mythological cosmogony. Myth is the matrix that gives birth to the cosmos into which we are born and then learn to inhabit. It provides the symbolic frameworks that inform the ways in which we perceive ourselves and others, our bodies and their bodies, in an effort to make sense of the ineffable, enigmatic existence of it all. In the forests of the Amazon, the Myth of Origins is the myth of how things came to be the way they are between predator and prey, between humans and animals, between human and nonhuman bodies.



## II. HUMANS AND ANIMALS: MYTHS OF ORIGINS

What is a myth? To this question, Lévi-Strauss replied that an "American Indian" would probably say: "A story from the time when there was no difference between humans and animals" (*De près et de loin* 193; my translation). In his opinion, this is a very profound definition of myth. It seeks to explicate the inexplicably tragic situation in which humanity finds itself, namely, the fact that it shares the earth with so many other unfathomable creatures with whom it cannot communicate. This definition applies not only to Amerindian cosmologies, but also to our own evolutionary cosmology as it is represented in the Western tradition.

Beginning in the Amazon, Amerindian myth tells the story of how all the creatures in the forest came to inhabit the diversity of bodies that exist today. In the beginning, or rather, before the beginning, in the time before time, they were all part of one collective humanity. Everyone was human and at the same time everyone possessed all of the qualities of all possible bodies, both human and nonhuman. In the words of Viveiros de Castro:

A sizeable slice of Amazonian mythology deals with the causes and consequences of the species-specific embodiment of different agents, all of them conceived to have originally partaken of a generalized unstable condition in which human and non-human features are indiscernibly mixed. All the beings peopling mythology display this ontological entanglement or cross-specific ambiguity. ("The Crystal Forest" 16)

The original state was thus one of superb "totipotency," as *Qu'est-ce qu'un corps?* describes it (157), a state of infinite possibilities, in which humanity was the common denominator.

Unfortunately, due to a mundane event or, in other versions, as a result of improper conduct, the primordial ancestors were transformed into game animals and dispersed throughout the forest. The Yanomami shaman Davi Kopenawa describes this metamorphosis in *Yanomami: l'esprit de la forêt*:

Back in the early time, when the forest was still young, our ancestors, who were humans with animal names, were changed into game. The peccary Yanomami became peccaries; deer Yanomami became deer; agouti Yanomami became agoutis; macaw Yanomami became macaws. They took the form of the peccaries, deer, agoutis and macaws that live in the forest today. They are our transformed ancestors that we hunt and eat. In the beginning, all animals were Yanomami. (75; my translation)

In his account, Kopenawa states that all creatures started

out as Yanomami, that is, as human beings.<sup>7</sup> Those who were endowed with animal names already possessed some of the prototypical traits of their future species: for instance, the ancestor of a certain bird "already spoke with a voice that sounded like the way it would sing in the future" (Breton et al. 155). Bruce Albert, an anthropologist who has lived and worked extensively with the Yanomami, explains how the animal forms were inherited from the primigenial names:

[T]he original mythic ancestors were humans with animal names, the *Yarori pë*. They indulged in all kinds of deviant practices. . . until they found themselves being taken over by an irrepressible 'becoming-animal' and, one after another, they ended up losing their human form (*xi wāri*). ("Native Land" 151)

As for the "human" humans, Kopenawa goes on to explain in *Yanomami: l'esprit de la forêt* that they, too, are game. It is only their name that distinguishes them from the other animals:

We're game, too. Our flesh is like theirs. We just call ourselves with the name human beings. . . . But to them, we're still the same, we're animals, too. We're game that live in houses, while they're game that live in the forest. . . (76; my translation)

From primeval congeneracy to heterogeneous multiplicity, the Amazon myth of origins is a myth of the origin of difference. The shattering of the pre-cosmological matrix that led to the creation of difference coincided most significantly, as Kopenawa makes clear, with the creation of game: from one unified humanity to the manifold forms of hunter and hunted, it created the ontological divide that exists today between predator and prey. Predation and difference, mythologized as speciation, thus go hand in hand. Conversely, the absence of predation implies the absence of difference/speciation and vice versa: the negation of one corresponds to the negation of the other. It is thus, under the conditions of this double negation, that each species is able to retrieve its original state of undifferentiated humanity. That is why, when they are amongst their own kind, all beings see themselves as human beings.

The relationship between humans and animals and how they came to differ from one another is an archetypal motif in mythologies around the world. Like the Amerindians of the Amazon, Westerners, too, have their myth of speciation, their cultural narrative of the origin of difference. In fact, Lévi-Strauss' suggestion that mythology is concerned with "a time when there was no difference between hu-

7. The ethnonym Yanomami comes from *yanomae thë pë*, which means "human beings." For a discussion of linguistic terms, see Kopenawa and Albert.

mans and animals” and the reasons for the separation that come to divide them could apply not only to “American Indians,” but to Euro-Americans as well. Like the Amerindian narrative, the Western narrative, which we call “evolution,” starts off back in the mists of a prehistorical time when there was no difference between animals and humans; and, like the Amerindian narrative, it goes on to explain the separation that accounts for the situation as it exists today.

However, the story we tell is the antithesis of the story they tell. If, in their narrative it is the animals who were once humans, in ours, which we know not as myth but as science, it is the humans who were once animals. The transformation takes place in reverse; rather than a metamorphosis from human origins to animal bodies, our scientific myth speaks of an evolution from animal origins to human bodies. Underscoring this inversion, Viveiros de Castro writes, in reference to Amazonian mythology, that “separation was not brought out by a process of differentiating the human from the animal, as in our own evolutionist mythology. The original common condition of both humans and animals is not animality, but rather humanity. . . . animals are ex-humans, not humans ex-animals” (*Cosmological Perspectivism* 56).

The two mythologies can be further juxtaposed by observing that, in the Amerindian worldview, human bodies are what the animals once had—and to a certain extent still have—while in the Euro-American worldview, animal bodies are what humans once had—and to a certain extent still have. From the indigenous point of view, animals are still human “deep inside” (in spite of their bodies), while from the scientific (and sometimes Christian) point of view, humans are still animals “deep down” (primarily because of their bodies). In other words, in the former case, the other once was what we now are (human), while in the latter, we were once what the other is now (animal)!

However, it is important to note that “human” in the forests of the Amazon does not mean the same thing as “human” in the cities of Madrid or New York. While the Amazonian and the Euro-American cosmologies both endow human beings with a specific human body and a specific human soul, their notions of what makes a body or a soul specifically human could not be more antipodal.

### III. HUMAN BY NATURE OR HUMAN BY CULTURE

For the Amerindian, culture is the substratum that connects all living creatures: all beings are kindred beings in the “humanity” of their souls. For the Westerner, that substratum is a matter of biology; all living organisms are connected through the “animal” nature of their bodies. The universal foundation for the Westerner is nature, while for the Amerindian it is culture. These contrasting cosmologies correspond to two different ways of viewing the other and

how we (as humans) relate to that other. Western civilization, based on its scientific and Biblical mythologies, sees culture as differentiating humans from nature: culture is exclusive to the human species and makes it superior to all other creatures. By contrast, in the Amazonian cosmology, culture is what unites all creatures and makes them ontological equals in spite of their apparent differences. “[I]f sundry other beings besides humans are ‘human,’” remarks Viveiros de Castro, “then we humans are not a special lot” (*Cosmological Perspectivism* 101).

A human being in the Western way of thinking is a member of a particular species, the human species. All members of that species are naturally born with a human body, and it is that body that is the ticket to being human. In other words, the human body is the ground zero of a person’s humanity. There may be other qualities (moral, psychological, intellectual) that we consider “human,” but without that biological body, one is not considered a part of the human “race.” Once again, the Amerindian way of thinking reverses that equation: one is not human because one has a human body; rather, one has a human body because one is human. The human body is not the source but the corollary of one’s humanity. As we have seen, all creatures, when they are amongst their own kind, regain their humanity—and thus the body that goes with it. “The human body is not a ‘species garment’ like the others; it is, in fact, nothing more than the form the subject automatically takes as a member of a ‘society’” (Breton et al. 160). Rather than the natural form of a particular species, it is the natural consequence of a particular relationship.

In the eyes of an Amerindian, the human body is crafted not by nature but by culture. It is literally created by means of a collective effort. Deliberate processes and techniques are employed to nurture—to cultivate—the humanity of the child and its body. When children are fed they are understood to ingest a relationship along with the food. Special massages are used to give a child’s flesh those attributes that are considered specifically human.<sup>8</sup> As a consequence, the ties between parents and children are not biological but acquired or co-created as the child develops—so that “mother” is indeed and above all a relationship. Whereas Westerners invest in the production of goods, Amerindians invest, as *Qu’est-ce qu’un corps?* expresses it, in “the production of persons:”

‘Humanity’ is the attribute of a body produced in common by a group of individuals defined as parents, kindred or congeners—here, the three terms can be taken as synonymous—as a result of their involvement in this work. (161)

8. For a more in-depth analysis of the processes and techniques employed to “produce the human body,” see “Fabriquer du corps humain” (Breton et al. 160-163).

In the Amazonian cosmos, then, one is not born human. One becomes human by acquiring the traits inherited from the original human ancestors, and those traits are acquired through interaction with one's kin and community. A few of the cultural prerequisites necessary for participating in relationships and "becoming human" are: knowing how to act and communicate with others, possessing social and technical skills (such as the art of adorning and painting the body), understanding the knowledge of things material and immaterial as revealed in the myths.<sup>9</sup> Humanity refers not to a category of nature—to a common species—but to a capacity for participating in relationships—to a common culture: "[I]n that pre-natural stage depicted in the myths, all existing beings shared a common humanity, 'humanity' being here synonymous with culture" (Breton et al. 155). Therefore, in spite of having different bodies, all beings continue to share that original culture and identity. From their own perspective, they have the same kinds of bodies, thoughts, emotions, eating habits, shamans and social lives as humans (in our sense of the word), including activities such as hunting, fishing, drinking beer, painting their bodies, and so forth.<sup>10</sup>

In the cosmovision of the indigenous peoples of the Amazon, all beings, including animals, plants and spirits, are thus endowed with the same subjectivity. And the Amazonian subject, like the Western subject, sees itself as human. However, these two "human" subjects are very different. In the West, the human subject is first and foremost an individual with a private interiority: a personal conscience, a rational mind, Descartes' famous "I think therefore I am." However, in the Amazon, as in many other indigenous cultures, subjectivity is not perceived as individuated and isolated from the collectivity. In the Amazonian experience,

subjectivity has little to do with that private space that is opaque to others and pre-exists any cultural or social molding, which we associate with the mind. Its interiority is made up of all of those things that we classify as 'culture,' which in our eyes is a thoroughly public sphere, shared by everyone. (Breton et al. 153)

9. See Breton et al. p. 153 for a more detailed description of the types of knowledge, aptitudes and skills that characterize a human subject.

10. Although they share the same culture, each species inhabits a different body and thus a different nature, which necessarily gives it a different point of view. If a jaguar sees an Amerindian as a peccary, what it sees as beer looks like blood to the Amerindian. In Amazonian animism, everything is a matter of perspective and this way of rooting the perspective in the body is called perspectivism. While the complexities of perspectivism are beyond the scope of this essay, I would like to point out that it is a cosmovision that, once again, stands our own worldview on its head. Where we posit a "multi-cultural" world—one ("Mother") Nature with a multiplicity of cultures—they posit a "multi-natural" world—one Culture with a multiplicity of natures. For an in-depth analysis of perspectivism, see all three works by Viveiros de Castro (who coined the term along with Tania Stolze Lima).

It is not the ability to reason alone in one's head but, on the contrary, the ability to relate to others, to interact with one's own kind that defines the subject. A person is first and foremost a member, not an individual: the Community exists, therefore I am. The archetypal North American myth of the "self-made man" would thus be unthinkable in the South American lowlands. On the other hand, any living creature nourished by the culture of its community has access to human subjectivity, for culture, as we have seen, is synonymous with human. "*Culture is the Subject's nature*; it is the form in which every subject experiences its own nature. . . ." writes Viveiros de Castro, "the common condition of humans and animals is humanity, not animality, because *humanity* is the name for the general form taken by the Subject" ("Perspectivism and Multinaturalism" 50). In the Amazonian worldview, there is no singular human species; there is only one human culture.

In sum, a human being in the Amazonian lowlands of Abya Yala is not the same as a human being in the cities of Madrid or New York. In the Amazon, a human is a being who is not born but co-created through the collective and deliberate efforts of kin and community. Humanity does not refer to a distinctive species but instead to a common original culture shared by all living beings. The Amerindian myth of speciation is in fact the antithesis of our Western myth of speciation; while ours tells the story of humans who were once animals (through our bodies), theirs tells the story of animals who were once human (in terms of culture). As a result of this common ancestry, all beings continue to be endowed with the same human subjectivity or soul. However, Amazonian animism further complicates matters by making this subjectivity or humanity a function of a particular relationship. It is only when it is amongst its own kind that each species retrieves its humanity and perceives its members with human bodies. A human being in the Amazonian lowlands is the embodiment of a sense of fellowship and a shared perspective. Humanity is in the eye of the beholder.

To conclude, let us return to the dramatic encounter between the Spaniards and the natives in the Western Indies. In Lévi-Strauss' description, both sides were attempting to fathom the humanity of the other (an unknown "species") on the basis of their respective mythologies. We can now see how their divergent methodologies might be a reflection of the two antipodal conceptions of what it means to be a human being that we explored above. The aim of the European interrogation was to decide whether the natives should be regarded as humans or as animals (and thus, in the latter case, treated as animals). The body being the common substratum, it was the soul, and, in fact, a certain type of "rational soul," that was the object of inquiry. However, for the Amerindians, the site of differentiation was not the soul but the body. Since, from their point of view,



the whites naturally had souls like any other creature—the soul being the common substratum—it was the body that was the object of analysis. We might say that the enigma, for the Europeans, was whether alien yet identical bodies could have souls like theirs, whereas for the Amerindians, it was whether alien yet identical souls could have bodies like theirs.

Embedded as we are in our own worldview, in our own lived reality, spun as we are by the mythologies spun by those who have come before us, how can we ever come to see that our own experience, for example, of human-beingness is not a universal experience? One of the only ways of removing (if only partially) the lenses and the blinkers inherent in the master narratives that shape the ways we perceive ourselves, others, and the world around us is through the meeting of two worlds, in other words, through contrast and comparison and the apprehension of difference. As the authors of *Qu'est-ce qu'un corps?* observe, “our indigenous perspective concerning ourselves is always biased. . . . Comparison is the only way of freeing ourselves from it” (22). We are all ineluctably indigenous to our own cultural matrix. Looking at other configurations of what it means to be a human being in contrast and comparison to our own perspectives defamiliarizes our indigenous perceptions; by decentering us, it allows us to step over the threshold of our own ethnocentrism into another cosmovision, into another human cosmos. Fortunately, the mythologies of the so-called New World have not been completely conquered, converted or annihilated by the mythologies of the self-styled Old World. We have much to learn from them.

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# Mnemosyne's Well: The Ritual of Bathing in *Beloved* and *The Odyssey*

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## KEYWORDS

*The Odyssey*  
*Beloved*  
Water  
Memory  
Ritual Bathing

BATHING IN *THE ODYSSEY* AND *BELOVED* functions as a ritual of *xenia*, a welcoming act of hospitality that prepares the central characters of Odysseus and Sethe for their eventual *nostos*, their true homecoming to their households and communities (Slattery, *Epic* 340–42). In both Homer's epic poem and Toni Morrison's novel, bathing releases physical and psychic residues, reveals histories, and re-gathers body and soul. Water serves as a type of mattered memory, drawn from the mythic waters of the Greek Titaness Mnemosyne and, in *Beloved*, the Nigerian river goddess Oya. This ritual of receiving occurs in nature, through encounter with rivers, and in the household bath, suggesting that a tempered union of the wild and domestic is necessary to the protagonists' claiming of psyche, memory, story, and belonging.

Water, the central element of the ritual act, flows throughout *The Odyssey* within feral seas, threshold-defining rivers, and gentle domestic basins. There are, of course, the chaotic wine-dark seas and Poseidon's wrath from which Odysseus yearns to escape in order to find his way back to the shores of Ithaca. These are the "great and dire" seas (3.322), the "terrible, disastrous" seas (5.367), water as wild and wide and vengeful—reflective, perhaps, of the psyches of Odysseus and his men still burdened by the violence of war. As he wends deeper into his journey, however, Odysseus comes across rivers: "deep-whirling Oceanos" that girds the edge of the known world and several streams within Hades that he and his men must cross to seek the counsel of Tiresias (10.511–15). There is also the unnamed "sea-mingling river" (5.460), the brackish water that receives him on the island of Scheria, which he addresses as a god: "Hear me Lord, whoever you are; I approach you with many / Prayers, fleeing the rebukes of Poseidon out of the ocean"

(5.445–46). This divine river accepts him as a worthy suppliant, a crucial moment in the epic that begins to set Odysseus' course homeward. Here water becomes a receptive, liminal presence, mixing the unrestrained sea and the sweet waters replenishing civilization.

This concept of river as threshold also conjures the Lethe, the waters of forgetfulness the dead must cross in Hades, which washes away memories to Mnemosyne's pool of remembrance. Ivan Illich in *H2O & the Waters of Forgetfulness* beautifully explains this relationship of river, well, and memory:

The streams carry the memories that Lethe has washed from the feet of the dead to this well ... This well of remembrance the Greeks called 'Mnemosyne.' In her clear waters, the residues of lived-out lives float like the specks of fine sand at the bottom of a bubbling spring. Thus a mortal who has been blessed by the gods can approach this well

and listen to the Muses sing in their several voices what is, what was, and what will be. ... When he returns from his journey ... he can tell what he has drawn from this source. (31)

Mnemosyne was one of the Titans, who appeared "when the sky still rested in the arms of the earth" (Illich 31), and whom Hesiod relates was the mother of the nine Muses (126). It is her well of memory from which the ritual bath in *The Odyssey* draws. The Titaness of memory is, perhaps, another unnamed water divinity within the text, but Homer must invoke her daughter, the Muse of epic poetry, to tell the story of "the man of many turns" (*Od.* 1.1).

The mythic resonance of the Lethe, the river that "removes the residues of lived-out lives," is present when Odysseus bathes himself in the welcoming river of Scheria. Having sheltered overnight between two bushes upstream, "one wild olive, one tame" (5.477), and been discovered by the Phaeacian princess Nausicaa and her retinue, he removes himself from the maidens and washes away the brine and "scurf of barren salt water"—the sharp-tang residue of his many rough years wandering the fierce, unkind seas—and "[rubs] himself richly" with oil (5.224–227). Bainard Cowan writes that in traditional epic, "that moment of takeover of his own conditions marks the hero's transition to his *aristeia*, his great deeds that form his primary definition as a hero" (222), and by the Phaeacian stream Odysseus is engaged in a quiet ritual takeover, a necessary stripping away of past life and the beginning of self-recovery.

This subtle letting go and anointing of self, this ritual river bathing met by the gods (for Athena here enhances his appearance), is a large part of what gains Odysseus access to and audience within the palace of Alcinoos and Arete. This cleansing releases the feral, salt-harshness of his experiences at sea, enabling Odysseus to regain his agency and translate his trauma into stories for the Phaeacians, tales that convince them to escort him back home. "[The telling of stories] helps shape and order the 'wild' experiences of one's past by giving them a 'tameless,' a shape and structure that can be apprehended by others," writes Dennis Slattery (*Wounded* 38). But preliminary to Odysseus' re-storying of his experience is his softening and loosening of those encounters through immersion in the river, a bridge between sea and home.

Parallel to this ritual river bathing is the footbath Eurykleia later gives the hero while he is still disguised as a vagrant. The old nurse first mixes cold and hot water, which recalls the in-between quality of the brackish Phaeacian river. These are also *temperate* waters, offering Odysseus further *tempering* within the "glittering basin" (19.386) next to the hearth of the home he is so close to reclaiming. The emphasis here is not on what is released, as was the case in the river, but upon what is revealed and retrieved. As Eury-

kleia bathes Odysseus, she sees his scar, which immediately recalls his identity and story. Homer then elaborates upon how Odysseus' maternal grandfather gave him his name and how the hero lived into it during his rite of passage, when he charged and was wounded by a wild boar. Slattery writes "when she traces her fingers over the scar she immediately retraces, or retrieves the life of the man she is cleansing. Touching and tracing the scar returns the story to her and to us of the original wounding" (*Wounded* 40). Her action also returns this story to Odysseus, who needs to be received, washed, and touched by this elder mother figure in order to reclaim and reintegrate his own origin myth—coming back into wholeness with himself and his story in order to recover his homeland. It is the waters of remembrance, ritually contained and offered compassionately to the hero within his own home, that make this possible.

And so the element of water in all its mythic resonance is a conduit of Odysseus' slow tempering. Homer moves the hero and the reader from the wrathful seas of Poseidon, to the gentle Phaeacian river reminiscent of the Lethe in its ability to wash away the past, and, finally, to Mnemosyne's temperate waters of remembrance drawn within the home. The river within nature and the bath within the chamber together offer a type of wild and tame *xenia*, like the two olive bushes that shelter Odysseus on Scheria, and both waters are necessary to soften and ripen the hero toward his *nostos*. And in a tale in which the protagonist evolves, as Slattery says, "from warrior to bard" (*Wounded* 25), it is delightful to remember that the Titaness who guards the pool of memory is also the mother of the epic Muse. Integration and story must both be drawn from the well.

In *Beloved*, as in *The Odyssey*, water takes form as sea, river, and domestic bath. The ocean is the deep Atlantic of the Middle Passage, unnamed but present in the text as are the ancestral ghosts who haunt the narrative, the millions of kidnapped Africans who perished in slave ships. The sea is referenced in the second part of the novel, in the chapters beginning "I am Beloved and she is mine" (Morrison, *Beloved* 248, 253), which appear to express the personal perspective of the child whom Sethe murdered, comingled with the collective perspective of those lost at sea. The river is the Ohio: a place of birth and rebirth (of Sethe's daughters, Denver and Beloved) and of boundary (between freedom and enslavement). Like the river of Scheria in *The Odyssey*, the Ohio is receptive, liminal and reminiscent of the Lethe, marking a threshold between worlds and carrying the residual memories of those who cross its waters. And, as she is present in the Greek epic, Mnemosyne also inspires *Beloved's* bathing scenes, the re-membering and remembering acts of *xenia* offered to Sethe by her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, and her lover, Paul D.

But Morrison brings another myth to these waters,



coupling Western classicism with the spiritual traditions of Africa. Tessa Roynon explains Morrison's allusiveness "is often a simultaneous invocation of Graeco-Roman and either West or North African cultural forms" (382), and, indeed, narrative elements within *Beloved* also conjure the Yoruba goddess Oya, who presides over the Niger river. K. Zauditu-Selassie, in *African Spiritual Traditions in the Novels of Toni Morrison*, says Oya "represents the transition

gatherings and kindness. The simple, powerful line "She tore" relates to Sethe—her whipped skin, the opening of her womb, and the tragic tearing of her baby's neck in the shed—while also invoking Baby Suggs, who ripped cloth to make both a new dress and bandage-dressings for her daughter-in-law, newly escaped from slavery. This African myth holds the story of *Beloved* within its river.

It is a river, the Ohio, that is the first to welcome Sethe



Illustration: "Odysseus and Polyphemus" by Arnold Böcklin, 1896. Odysseus taunts the Cyclops Polyphemus who heaves a boulder at the escaping soldiers / Public domain.

between life and death" and "provides access for the egression of departed souls across the river" (161)—a strong correlate to the Lethe, as well as to the Ohio as both the crossing point for slaves seeking freedom and the waters from which Denver, as new life, and *Beloved*, as embodied dead, emerge. In discussing the Oya myth, Judith Gleason states that "a big tree was uprooted ... the head of the household in whose shade we felt secure suddenly perished. She tore, and a river overflowed its banks. Whole cloth was ripped into shreds. Barriers were broken down" (qtd. in Zauditu-Selassie 158). The uprooted tree suggests the stump where Sethe first finds her revived daughter, *Beloved*, waiting for her and where the townswomen leave food for the beleaguered family at the end of the novel; the rugged wound on Sethe's back engraved by a cruel master and likened to a "chokecherry tree" (Morrison, *Beloved* 93); and, of course, Baby Suggs, the trusted head of the household on the freedom side of the river, whose death leaves her community without the tree-like shelter and grounding of her

and her unborn child after the long journey north toward freedom: "It looked like home to her, and the baby (not dead in the least) must have thought so too. As soon as Sethe got close to the river her own water broke loose to join it" (*Beloved* 98). As Odysseus is received by the Phaeacian river, experiencing a divine-wild *xenia* pivotal to his homecoming, so is Sethe first blessed by the Ohio in a powerful, primal moment of transition. This encounter is so intense, that the waters of her womb burst to meet the waters of this river, and her child emerges into the larger, receptive, liminal body of the Ohio that gives Sethe her first glimpse of home.

The most significant bathing event in *Beloved* happens right after Sethe crosses the river and is received by the maternal surrogate in her life, her mother-in-law, Baby Suggs, at 124 Bluestone Road—just as Odysseus, upon returning to his palace, is bathed by the maternal nursemaid Eurycleia. The elder begins tending Sethe's broken body as soon as her daughter-in-law enters her home, an im-

mediate and assured act of *xenia*. Ritual elements infuse the scene: Baby Suggs, a recognized holy woman within her community, "an unchurched preacher" (102), performs the bathing in a special chamber, the "keeping room," by the light of a "spirit lamp" (109), phrasings that conjure a gentle sanctuary. She heats water pan by pan and bathes Sethe in sections, removing the old clothes, dirt, blood, and dried milk from the body, before finally soaking Sethe's feet in a bucket of salt water and juniper. It is a slow, sacred process, one that welcomes the body bit by bit and releases the physical residues Sethe has carried up from the "bloody side of the Ohio" (37). While Baby Suggs removes what isn't "worth saving" (110), she also blankets Sethe, binds her womb and stomach with torn cloth, and clothes her in a newly stitched dress, gathering her together again.

As Eurycleia uncovers Odysseus' scar, so does Baby Suggs uncover the wound on Sethe's back, described in the novel as "roses of blood blossoming" and "flowering" (109–10). What is revealed is both horrific and suggestive of new life, perhaps the wounded body "as a site of history and identity" that is "at once a burden and a means of redemption" (Thomson 106). And Baby Suggs, who understands "everything depends on knowing how much ... and good is knowing when to stop" (Morrison, *Beloved* 102), does not ask for the story, but rather drapes the laceration so it can heal. These are transitional waters, both fresh and salt, like the river that rescued Odysseus and removed the residues of his travails, and the Lethe's waters of forgetting. Baby Suggs calls these waters into the home, gives them domestic shape with each pan she heats on the stove. She begins to gather them into the well, but Mnemosyne is present here only for the body. There is much to be released, and the body must be remembered before the story.

Baby Suggs, who gathers her community and implores them to "love [their] flesh" (Morrison, *Beloved* 103), knows the importance of reclaiming the body. She understands that "to retrieve one's own embodiment, bit by bit and piece by piece, and to stitch the parts back together is at the same time to reclaim the history of that embodiment, for incarnation always insists on a context—a history and a future" (*Wounded* 211). Her bath is a form of "fixing ceremony" (*Beloved* 101), an attempt to bring Sethe back into wholeness by first tending and lovingly re-membering the body that had been so hated and abused. The wound, revealed, points toward a violent history but also, in its blossoming, toward the prospect of a future.

That future is realized in *Beloved* when Paul D returns to care for Sethe, who, after *Beloved*'s departure, has surrendered herself to Baby Suggs' deathbed. He moves to warm some water, and Sethe wonders "if he bathes her in sections, will the parts hold?" (321), recalling the bathing and binding her mother-in-law delivered. Because Paul D pauses, there is no actual bath drawn, only the memory of

those healing waters, but that is enough. Mnemosyne is present and here attends to more than a remembrance of the body, her imaginal waters now holding the possibility of new expression. Indeed, when Sethe looks at Paul D, she sees him again as the man to whom she could cry and tell her story. He, likewise, admits, "he wants to put his story next to hers" (322), just as Odysseus did with Penelope. And while they both sense with gratitude how their histories are safe with each other, what Paul D speaks aloud is that they need "some kind of tomorrow" (322). They have finally reached the place where restoring and re-storying and is not just a looking backwards, but a looking ahead. They have finally found their *nostos* in the house and with each other.

Throughout the text, Morrison grapples with what she refers to as "prehistoric memory," of how to meet the memories of the individual and an entire people that have not yet been storied and claimed ("Unspeakable" 162). Characters consume and are consumed by memories, they chew and are chewed, each metabolizing an overwhelming unresolved past and being metabolized by it. And the result is their stories, which spiral through the novel like ripples through water, at times a trickle, at times a flood, at times an undifferentiated sea. But it is only when the group of townswomen arrive to ward off the angry spirit of *Beloved*—a ravenous memory made flesh—that the painful collective memories are faced ritually and powerfully within the vessel of community, just as Sethe's individual wounding was faced by Baby Suggs within the vessel of the domestic bath. Now those memories that feed off the future can be laid "down by the riverside" (*Beloved* 101), as Baby Suggs advised. *Beloved*, exorcised, returns to the river, but now in mythic form, as a mysterious "naked woman with fish for hair" (*Beloved* 315), a description that conjures both the idea of a Greek gorgon and an African river orisha. She is finally released—to the Ohio, to the Lethe, to the Niger—and is consciously forgotten.

In *The Odyssey* and *Beloved*, scenes of bathing reveal how necessary *xenia* is to *nostos*, how being received by both nature (rivers) and one's people creates the conditions for true homecoming. In both we see how bathing, as a formalized act of *xenia*, relates to memory, offering a mythic holding in which water, infused with archetypal resonance, both washes away what must be forgotten and returns what must be remembered. And both texts show how this ritual way of dealing with memory creates a container that allows the integration of self necessary to tell new stories, an act central to the claiming of home—which is, perhaps, one of the primary endeavors of epic tradition. Slattery writes: "Homelessness and rootlessness, the epic imagination implies, is directly linked to the loss of memory. ... the epic serves to reestablish the home and the experience of dwelling for both individuals and entire civilizations" ("Narra-

tive Play” 333). In epics that both wrestle with questions of homelessness—for Odysseus, of how to return, and, for Sethe, of how to create home from the bricolage of a wounded past—the bath as ritual opens a welcoming door: to forgetting, to remembering, and ultimately to re-visioning what it means to be whole, what it means to belong.

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# The Significance of the Horse in Black Elk's Vision

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## KEYWORDS

*Oglala Lakota*  
*Black Elk*  
*Horses*  
*Dreams & Visions*

**V**ISIONS OF FORTY-NINE HORSES with manes like lightning, thunder emitting from their nostrils, and eyes shining like the morning star fills the mind of a nine-year-old Oglala Lakota named Black Elk, as he lay unconscious from an unknown sickness. Ancestors called the Grandfathers tell the young boy strange stories in this vision, showing Black Elk ways to bring healing to his people. Fearful of all he saw and heard, Black Elk stayed silent about these powerful images for years. The enormity of the fear became so strong, however, that Black Elk consulted a medicine man when he was seventeen. The vision had to be enacted and embodied, according to the medicine man, to allow the power behind the images to come forward and the medicine in the stories to release. This ceremony would reveal Black

Elk's own powers and lead to a life of healing members in his community, as well as reaching across the cultural divide of the late nineteenth century. The colorful and plentiful horses play a central role in Black Elk's vision, and subsequent ceremony. Acting as messengers, transformers, and healers, the horses provide the possibility of new pathways for humans to navigate between worlds of varying terrains, cultures, and beliefs.

Horses carry people and the culture physically and symbolically. They pull plows that cultivate the land, march into battle, with soldiers on their back, elevate heroes on statues and in parades, and transport fallen leaders in flag-draped caskets to their final resting place. Mythically, horses travel between worlds and play a key role in rituals related to agriculture, creativity, and transformation. Whether it is the winged horse Pegasus inspiring the muses with creativity or the sun god Helios leading four fiery steeds across the sky, horses are part of our world physically, spiritually, and in our imag-

inations. Author Julian Rice writes that "the appropriate symbolic expression could transform a horse from an ordinary animal to a sentient and sympathetic wawokiya (helper)" (15). The horses that appear in Black Elk's vision embody the ancestors and serve as messengers for the future while holding traditions of the past. They offer ways to prepare for the clashing of cultures when the Oglala Lakota's way of life is challenged. The horses also bring hope and transformative methods of healing after the community suffers devastating losses from men who, motivated by greed, try to dominate the natural world.

When Black Elk was just two years old, in 1864, the United States Government created the Bozeman Trail to connect the Oregon Trail to Montana for easier access to the west to allow for the prospecting of gold. This cut straight through Oglala land (the Oglala Tribe is part of a bigger nation called Lakota). Soldiers took the land through force, annihilating much of the Oglala Lakota's way of life, culture,

and traditions. Author Paul Olson writes, "The nineteenth century was a period of great movement for the Lakota people as well as the Euro Americans. Both were threatened by the loss of cultural bonds and by intense individualism. It was a period when an old culture appeared to be dying and a new one was, in Matthew Arnold's phrase, 'powerless to be born'" (4-5). The succeeding years would be filled with violent battles resulting in the death of men, women, and children, as well as the near extinction of the buffalo roaming the land. This devastation would lead to a crisis of faith, livelihood, and independence among the Oglala Lakota people. By the time of Black Elk's vision, the severity of the coming conflict was not fully known but the rising anxiety could be felt within the community.

According to author Joe Jackson, horses began appearing in the Lakota Nation in the early 1800s. A class division developed for the first time with those having more horses receiving more respect. Jackson writes, "A name that included 'horse'—Crazy Horse, American Horse, Man Afraid of His Horses—signified strength of character" (30). For these men, and other revered warriors, "The horse symbolized a fundamental spiritual force that these former foot soldiers found hypnotic: charging horses sounded like thunder, and many Lakota visions included the experience of riding with supernatural warriors in the clouds" (30-31). By the time of Black Elk's birth, horses were a fundamental part of the tribe's way of life. Young boys played games on horseback while families traveled across the Plains to attend ceremonies and hunt buffalo. New myths arose connecting the Lakota people to the horse in conjunction with the land and their beliefs. Rice writes, "The speed of a horse is inseparable from the flow of energy and emotion in a skilled rider. Together *akicita* (soldier) and *sunkawakan* (horse) became a *wakinyan* (thunder being)" (8). Herds of horses running across the land mimicked the sound of thunder. Thus, horses earned the name Thunder Beings.

The sound of thunder is an initiation theme that appears frequently in Black Elk's visions. When he was five years old, Black Elk remembers sitting on a horse aiming his bow at a bird. Suddenly the bird spoke, saying, "Listen! A voice is calling you!" (*Being* 16). The young boy looked up and saw two men in the clouds singing sacred songs and creating the sound of thunder through their drumming. Black Elk continued to hear voices over the next few years but never dared to tell anyone. When he turned nine, the voices said, "It is time; now they are calling you" (18). A short time later, Black Elk remembers dismounting from his horse and feeling his legs collapse. No longer able to stand or walk, Black Elk had to ride in a pony drag to the next camp. His legs, arms, and face swelled and by evening, he was unconscious. This is when Black Elk's legendary vision begins. Author Vine Deloria writes, "The vision that followed introduced him, as a young boy, to breathtaking

spiritual (or psychological) experiences with the powers of the directions, a multitude of sacred horses, and the power to hear the sacred" (90-91). Throughout the vision, the horses embody this sacredness, helping Black Elk access the medicine within the stories.

The vision begins when the ailing nine-year-old sees two men from the clouds descending through the hole in his tepee ceiling carrying a spear and lightning bolt. They tell Black Elk to hurry and follow them, emphasizing, "Your Grandfathers are calling you!" (*Being* 19). Black Elk remembers leaving his body, following the men through the air, and arriving at a new world in the clouds. The two men then say, "Behold him, the being with four legs!" (19). Black Elk looks and sees a bay horse<sup>1</sup> "standing there in the middle of the clouds" (DeMallie 114). The bay horse begins talking, saying, "Behold me; my life history you shall see. Furthermore, behold them, those where the sun goes down, their lives' history you shall see" (114). The bay horse acts as guide to Black Elk, giving him a solid center to receive the messages while grounding the young boy as he enters different realms. Much of the vision is seen through the bay horse's eyes, as he directs Black Elk's gaze throughout the experience. He brings an instinctual knowledge into form and taps into ancestral knowledge through verbal and nonverbal communication and the embodiment of rituals. The bay horse enters into a relational and interactive field with Black Elk, allowing for the integration of the messages to be received through the body, mind, and imagination.

Like the needle of a compass, the bay horse turns Black Elk's focus to each of the four corners of the world. Forty-eight horses stand before Black Elk to witness his initiation. Each one is a messenger with specific wisdom to relay. The horses, symbolizing a time of transformation, form a mandala. Jungian analyst Edward Edinger writes, "Quaternity, mandala images emerge in times of psychic turmoil and convey a sense of stability and rest. The image of the fourfold nature of the psyche provides stabilizing orientation" (182). Thus, the horse and the circle provide grounding and perspective for the young Black Elk as he receives his vision in the clouds. Psychologist C. G. Jung writes, "It is worth noting that the animal is the symbolic carrier of the self" (*CW* 14 par 283). There is a Native American proverb that illustrates Jung's sentiment: the legs of a horse represent four directions, his head points toward the sky, and his tail points toward grandmother earth. Upon the horse's back, we are centered.

The forty-eight horses in the vision are divided into groups of twelve, based on the color of their coats. In the west, there are twelve black horses, each with buffalo hoofs strung around their necks and twelve birds flying above

1. A bay horse refers to the color of the horse's coat, typically reddish brown.



them. Though beautiful, Black Elk says he is scared because he “could see the light[ning] and thunder around them” (DeMallie 114). These horses are referred to as Thunder Beings. Rice writes the horse “is an *akicita* (messenger) of potential embodiment of the *tonwa* (physically manifest power) of only one direction—the Thunder Beings of the West” (6). When the central bay horse turns Black Elk’s attention to the north, he sees twelve white horses: “Their manes were flowing like a blizzard wind and from their noses came a roaring, and all about them white geese soared and circled” (*Being* 20). Next Black Elk looks to the east where “twelve sorrel horses, with necklaces of elks teeth, stood abreast with eyes that glimmered like the daybreak star and manes of morning light” (20). Lastly, the bay horse turns Black Elk to the south where there were “twelve buckskins all abreast with horns upon their heads and manes that lived and grew like trees and grasses” (20). These horses hold sacred space in the circle, creating a container, or *temenos*, for Black Elk. Stephenson Bond writes that a “holding environment is essential in the transitional process” (109). He continues explaining that “the ancient idea of the *temenos*, or sacred circle, suggests the work required so that the breakthrough does not result in a breakdown” (110). The need of a helper during this time of uncertainty is paramount. Thus, the image of a horse, an animal of familiarity for Black Elk, is an excellent guide. Jackson writes, “Since the horse symbolized to the Sioux strength and hope, Black Elk was witnessing a vision of power and prosperity far beyond imagining” (59). Indeed, this vision would be the defining factor in Black Elk’s life.

Horses frequently appear in dreams and visions, often representing a connection between the physical and spiritual world. The Lakota recognize this phenomenon in their culture by creating symbols and ceremonies to honor and contain the energy that can generate from such experiences. Rice writes, “For the Lakota the horse was the carrier of a person’s *nagi*<sup>2</sup> through constricting fear so that his four souls might breathe in harmony. Accordingly, a horse was made receptive to the thunder power through symbols, the Lakota means of opening a circle of individual being to *wakan*<sup>3</sup> presence” (6). Black Elk’s vision created a spiritual crisis that would have him questioning his traditional beliefs and, later, his Christian ones as he tried to navigate a way to heal a divide between cultures and within himself.

The next part of Black Elk’s vision involves six Grandfathers who presented various sacred objects from the Lakota tradition. These objects, and correlating stories, represent the spiritual and emotional health of the Tribe, individually and collectively. They also provide warnings of turbulent times ahead. A story, song, and transformation involving horses occur with the presentation of nearly every gift. The

objects, rituals, and stories shown in the vision are all common in the Lakota culture including the sacred peace pipe, bow and arrows, buffalos and other animals such as birds and horses (who are often paired together), and certain herbs.

The first part of this initiation ceremony involves the recognition of forty-eight horses standing in the four directions. The lead bay horse tells Black Elk to have courage and then guides him to the Grandfathers, who are “having a council” (*Being* 20). More horses arrive as a preamble to the presentation of the sacred gifts. They are in an array of colors, invoking the senses in an organized chaos of movement and sounds. Not all the horses are symbols of peace and harmony, however, as they can also invoke the extremes of terror and beauty. For example, when the bay horse looks in the west and neighs, “suddenly the sky was terrible with a storm of plunging horses, in all colors that shook the world with thunder, neighing back” (20). However, when the bay horse neighs in all the other directions, the response is more joyful. The bay horse “whinnied to the east, there too the sky was filled with glowing clouds of manes and tails of horses in all colors singing back. Then to the south, he called, and it was crowded with many colored, happy horses, nickering” (20). Black Elk remembers the bay horse saying, “See how your horses all come dancing! I looked and there were horses, horses everywhere—a whole skyful of horses, dancing around me. ‘Make haste!’ the bay horse said; and we walked together side by side, while the blacks, the whites, the sorrels, and the buckskins followed, marching four by four” (21). The vision continues in vivid detail until the horses begin running and “changed into buffalo, elk, and all kinds of animals and fowls and they all went back to the four quarters” (DeMallie 115). Joseph Campbell writes that everything in Black Elk’s vision, from the landscape, to the animals, including the “colors and virtues of the four directions, the attitude toward nature and the supernatural, the high roles of the buffalo, and the horses, the peace pipe, spotted eagle, etc., are of the architecture of the mythic world of the North American Plains” (*Flight* 91). Campbell further explains that the vision was personal to Black Elk, but it was also “collective, indeed, not only in the sense that its imagery was archetypal, but also in that its prophecy was of the destiny, not merely of this boy, but of his folk. It was the foresight of an impending crisis, subliminally intuited, together with a statement of the way it was to be met” (91). The horses play a crucial role as guides to navigating this new world, watching and participating with the six Grandfathers as they layout different potential scenarios.

Throughout all the stories and lessons spoken next, the horses are cheering for Black Elk, neighing their approval and acting as a chorus witnessing the initiation. In contrast, a few specific horses play a crucial role in illustrating

2. *Nagi* means the spirit that guides man.

3. *Wakan* means powerful or sacred.

possible transformations through embodiment. Black Elk says, "The two men with the spears now stood beside me, one on either hand, and the horses took their places in the quarters, looking inward, four by four" (*Being* 21). The first Grandfather, who represents the west, gives Black Elk a bow, which has the power to destroy, and a wooden cup filled with water that has the power to heal all the sickness on earth. The Grandfather then runs and morphs into a black horse. A horse often represents a container, or vessel. Author and Jungian analyst Regina Abt writes the horse "symbolizes in a wider sense what carries our instinctual vital forces, our unconscious life basis and body wisdom. It is one of the most comprehensive life instincts. The horse energy carries the ego through life and all the necessary heroic deeds" ("Fiery" 335). Thus, the transformation into a horse by the ancestors represents the health of the nation, and community. Black Elk says the horse "stopped and turned and looked at me, and the horse was very poor and sick; his ribs stood out" (*Being* 22). The second Grandfather, representing the North, gives Black Elk a powerful herb to cure the ailing horse. Suddenly, the sick horse "fattened and was happy and came prancing to his place again and was the first Grandfather sitting there" (22). Symbolically, the herb is a connection to the part of mother earth that has the power to restore health and vitality to an individual. When the second Grandfather transforms into a white goose, an even larger transformation occurs simultaneously as the "horses in the west were thunders and the horses of the north were geese" (23). Now the message broadens from healing the individual to the greater collective.

Subsequently, each Grandfather presents Black Elk with another sacred gift while demonstrating the potential power through embodiment, transformation, and song. These transformations always involve an animal in some form, stressing the importance of the animal instinctual and natural world. For example, the third Grandfather pointed to a red man who "changed into a bison that got up and galloped toward the sorrel horses of the east, and they too turned to bison, fat and many" (*Being* 23-24). Thus, the power of rebirth and renewal for the earth, animals, and humans is illustrated. The Oglala Lakota were known for working in harmony with nature. When Black Elk recounts the vision later in life, he said, "It is the story of all life that is holy and is good to tell, and of us two-leggeds sharing in it with the four-leggeds and the wings of the air and all green things; for these are children of one mother and their father is one Spirit" (1). When the government soldiers came to conquer and dominate the land, and all the inhabitants, it created confusion for the Lakota since it was foreign to their way of being. The white man's external hunt for gold was like an alchemical process where they projected the inner search one must undergo for transformation into an external, materialistic search.

In their hunt for gold and need for possession, the soldiers killed the buffalo to the point of near extinction. They also claimed and divided the land for themselves exuding violence and domination over anyone standing in their way. As a result, the Lakota became disoriented, traumatized, and unable to fend for themselves. In Black Elk's vision, some of the Grandfathers warned that the devastation from any culture clash could last for generations. The images in the vision do not always represent renewal and positive transformation. Each sacred object from the Grandfathers holds the potential for both good and bad, symbolizing the tension of opposites and the possibility of change. The fourth Grandfather demonstrates this when the vision shows what happens when Black Elk travels down both a red and a black road. The red road, running north to south, is one of good, while the black, running from east to west, is a road of fear and war. The roads lead either to devastation or harmony, health or sickness, peace or war. Symbolically, Black Elk "was caught between the recurrent, ritualistic, and formulaic aspects of the old culture, and the record-keeping and linear progressions of the new" (Olson 5). After the Grandfather presents all the possibilities, he and the buckskin horses in the south turn into elk. Jung writes that when animals show up as being helpful in stories, they often "act like humans, speak a human language, and display a sagacity and a knowledge superior to man's. In these circumstances we can say with some justification that the archetype of the spirit is being expressed through an animal form" (*CW* 9.1 par 421). Each animal in the Grandfathers' stories, whether it is an elk, bird, bison, or horse in the vision, relays specific information being taught visually, with attributes that help Black Elk embody the message. These animal forms represent the connection the Grandfathers have with nature. The horse, in particular, holds the archetypal energy of spirit.

When the Sixth Grandfather was about to speak, Black Elk says "I stared at him, for it seemed I knew him somehow; and as I stared, he slowly changed, for he was growing backwards into youth, and when he had become a boy, I knew that he was myself with all the years that would be mine at last" (Neihardt 25). This powerful symbolism shows Black Elk beginning to fully integrate all the teachings from the council of Grandfathers. The older version of Black Elk represents the Spirit of the Earth, providing a grounding path to nature. However, the Sixth Grandfather warns of significant troubles for the nation. Without further explanation, the older Black Elk leaves the tent. The young Black Elk follows, and becomes an active participant in the vision, instead of a passive observer. Besides representing the Earth Grandfather, he is also a nine-year-old boy who is now riding the bay horse, not just standing or walking beside the animal. He is essentially integrating the vision into his mind, body, and spirit. Heinrich Zimmer

writes, "The horse is a symbol of the body vehicle and the 'rider' is the Spirit" (162). The bay horse, with Black Elk on his back, faces the horses in all the directions while a voice recounts the gifts Black Elk has received. The animals respond with supportive neighs before they all travel down the black road of fear and troubles in unison. Other riders join on horseback, creating much pageantry, as Black Elk, the horses, and riders proceed to overcome obstacles together, including killing drought and restoring peace in the nation. There is a true sense of community and support. Black Elk temporarily turns into a spotted eagle but quickly returns to earth saying, "I was on my bay horse again, because the horse is of the earth, and it was there my power would be used" (*Being* 33). Indeed, Black Elk becomes an active participant in healing a horse in the next part of the vision.

Black Elk recalls seeing a "horse all skin and bones yonder in the west, a faded brownish black" (*Being* 33). A voice tells Black Elk to use a particular herb to heal the horse. As he does this, he invokes the power of the tribe surrounding him as well as nature, including the mountains, rocks, and forests. Black Elk writes, "[I] rode above the poor horse in a circle, and as I did this I could hear the people yonder calling for spirit power" (34). Like the buffalo in a previous part of the vision, this horse rolled around in the dirt, signifying rebirth. When the horse stood up,

he was a big, shiny, black stallion with dapples all over him and his mane about him like a cloud. He was the chief of all the horses; and when he snorted, it was a flash of lightning and his eyes were like the sunset star. He dashed to the west and neighed, and the west was filled with a dust of hoofs, and horses without number, shiny black, came plunging from the dust. Then he dashed toward the north and neighed, and to the east and to the south, and the dust clouds answered, giving forth their plunging horses without number—whites and sorrels and buckskins, fat, shiny, rejoining in their fleetness and their strength. It was beautiful, but it was also terrible. (34)

A renewal is occurring as the spirits of nature, man, and animal combine forces for the greater good. The horses, representing each corner of the earth, join in the celebration, rearing up in unison amongst the chaos. Suddenly all is quiet. The horses form a circle around the stallion: "All the universe was silent, listening; and then the black stallion raised his voice and sang" (34). Filling the air with his rhythmic chant, the black horse sang prophecy of a horse nation arriving from all over the world, dancing, prancing, and neighing. As the black horse sang, horses, humans, birds, trees, waters, and grasses all began dancing "together to the music of the stallion's song" (35). Black Elk later recalls that "The horse's voice went all over the universe like

a radio and everyone heard it. It was more beautiful than anything could be" (DeMallie 133). The amplification of the vision reaches out to the collective, vibrating through music and movement made from all organic matter on, and of, the earth. The black stallion is like an Orpheus figure with everyone singing in joy at the sound of his voice. There is an integration of spirit among all beings. It is a celebration of Black Elk and his people surviving the journey to the underworld of chaos and despair. At the moment Black Elk experiences the possibility of the underworld, there is no harmony between the people, animals, or nature. This contrasts sharply with the possibility he is shown in which "the people are transformed into animals, which symbolizes their reintegration into the cycles of nature, a transformation that also represents purification" (Olson 8). In other words, the people and nature are in harmony. Throughout the vision, Black Elk is being given a choice in his life's journey. The black stallion chief represents a world brought together in rhythm with all life.

After the horse dance celebration, Black Elk rides the bay horse east, with a parade of horses following him. There he says he sees more than he understands, "for [he] was seeing in a sacred manner the shapes of all things in the spirit, and the shape of all shapes as they must live together like one being" (*Being* 36). This is a prescient image of the clashing cultures between the Oglala Lakota and the white man, showing the absolute necessity to choose harmony through commonality. More vibrant imagery of healing follows in the vision of the two men who, from the clouds, return Black Elk to his sickened body on earth. One of the last images Black Elk remembers is: "I was painted red all over, and my joints were painted black, with white stripes between the joints. My bay had lightning stripes all over him, and his mane was cloud. And when I breathed, my breath was lightning" (36-37). Black Elk fully embodies all he is learning in the vision, merging with the elements of nature and becoming one with all the great spirits. Shortly afterwards, Black Elk saw his own body lying on the ground in his teepee with his parents hovering over him. A Grandfather's voice sang out with a song to heal the sacred boy and more voices sing as Black Elk walks a lone path back to his home. He turns back to see a spotted eagle fly above, and then he wakes up.

Throughout the vision, horses play a crucial part in supporting, transporting, carrying, transforming, and embodying the potential for healing the nation, the earth, and spiritual ills. Jungian analyst Barbara Hannah writes, "no animal like the horse has worked so hard nor stood by, helped, and even fought at the side of man" (99). In the years following Black Elk's vision, he witnesses devastating deaths at the Battle of Big Horn, sees his people and horses starve to death as they migrate across the lands, and experiences numerous other atrocities. Horses die beside the



humans on both sides of the conflicts that ensue, staining the earth with blood in battle and surrendering to starvation and exhaustion. It seems to Black Elk that many of the horrific scenes of his vision are coming true. He becomes more withdrawn as the voices and images of his Grandfathers continue to visit him over the years. Eventually Black Elk becomes so afraid of the visions that he develops phobias, especially of thunder.

Finally, at the age of seventeen, Black Elk tells a medicine man named Black Road about his fears and the visions that haunt him. The medicine man responds by saying, "You must do what the bay horse in your vision wanted you to do. You must do your duty and perform this vision for your people upon earth. You must have the horse dance first for the people to see. Then the fear will leave you; but if you do not do this, something very bad will happen to you" (*Being* 135). Black Elk agrees and arranges a horse ceremony in Fort Keogh, Montana. The year is 1881.

DeMallie writes, "For the Lakota people, prayer was the act of invoking relationship" and "Ritual provided the means for actualizing religious power and for expressing belief" (82). The horse ceremony incorporates the relatedness between human and animal with the connectedness to nature and the celebration of spirit manifesting through dance, song, and enactment of the prayers through custom rituals. The entire camp gathers in a circle where a sacred tepee is painted with images of Black Elk's vision. Joseph Campbell explains "the shaman may translate some of his visions into ritual performances for his people. That's bringing the inner experience into the outer life of the people themselves" (*Power* 123). Sixteen horses, equally divided by colors of sorrel, black, white, and buckskin, as well as a bay horse for Black Elk are chosen to participate in the ceremony. The horses and their riders are painted various colors with drawings of lightning highlighting limbs, and white spots mimicking clouds or hail. They all transform into Thunder Beings. Rice writes that the lightning streaks on the horses in the north, east, and south shows that the "connection between purification, enlightenment, and the power of destruction provides a significant continuum" (7). Men portraying the six Grandfathers sit in the tepee as people ride the horses in a processional to begin the ceremony. Many of the horses appear to be prancing, dancing, and singing through their whinnies and neighs until all at once, everyone becomes silent, and a low thunder roars.

The horse, called *sunkawakan* in the Lakota tradition, is "the predominant animal of transformation in the Great Vision and the Horse Dance" (Rice 6). As the Grandfathers begin singing a song of reverence for the horses, Black Elk says a "strange thing happened" (*Being* 142). He explains, "My bay pricked up his ears and raised his tail and pawed the earth, neighing long and loud to where the sun goes down. And the four black horses raised their voices,

neighing long and loud, and the white and sorrels and the buckskins did the same" (142). Black Elk then notices, "all the other horses in the village neighed, and even those out grazing in the alley and on the hill slopes raised their heads and neighed together" (142). Black Elk recalls seeing the six Grandfathers from his vision suddenly appearing and nodding their approval. Soon, lightning appears during the ceremony and thunder begins rumbling. Since horses are known as Thunder Beings in the Oglala Lakota Tribe, the thunder is seen as an affirmation. The dancing, singing, and processions continue and "all the horses neighed, rejoicing with the spirits and the people" (145). The ceremony provides a way to embody the healing element for individuals, the community, the nation, and the earth. People report being joyful and those who had been feeling ill said they were feeling better. Black Elk says, "Even the horses seemed to be healthier and happier after the dance" (147). By acting out his vision in a ritual, Black Elk realizes this is his calling. He later says "a man who has a vision is not able to use the power of it until after he has performed the vision on earth for the people to see" (*Complete* 127). DeMallie echoes this, writing, "By acknowledging the vision in this manner before his people, Black Elk, at last, put himself in harmony with the spirit world and publicly announced his spiritual calling" (7). After enacting the vision, Black Elk recognizes his true gifts, and becomes a renowned healer to his people. He becomes a legend after his words and vision are immortalized in the book, *Black Elk Speaks*.

The Oglala Lakota Tribe continues their belief of living in harmony with nature and respecting the land. However, history is repeating itself. In 2017, the white man once again commandeered the Oglala Lakota land, this time in the name of oil. The United States Government installed over 1,500 miles of Dakota Access oil pipeline across sacred ground in the Standing Rock Sioux Reservation. The pipeline cuts through four states from Illinois to North Dakota. Dozens of protests ensued, with people dressing in traditional Native American outfits and riding horses. Soldiers shot at the people, and horses, with rubber bullets, while also pepper-spraying the protestors and arresting people. Although there is a legal injunction to stop the pipeline, with many more court battles to come, the damage is already substantial with leaks contaminating the water and the land being desecrated. Black Elk and his Grandfathers tried to warn the white man with messages from nature herself. Instead, many on the land are being killed for standing up for their beliefs.

When the vision persisted in plaguing Black Elk, he had to enact it in a ceremony to facilitate healing so the medicine could be released. Pertinent to the vision was the presence of forty-nine horses in five different colors, each representing an essential component to healing the culture. Their role as carriers of the ancestral knowledge serves to



bring the community together across the cultural (and species) divide. Paying attention to the horses that appear in our dreams, landscapes, stories, and visions is just as paramount now as it was in Black Elk's day. If we listen, we will hear the thunder of the herd once again leading the way.

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Photo: Black Elk and Elk of the Oglala Lakota, 1887. Elliott & Fry. London, England / Public domain.

# Birth of the Mother:

## A Dionysian Descent into Labor and Madness

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### KEYWORDS

*Dionysus*

*Apollo*

*Motherhood*

*Labor*

*Initiation*

I BECAME A MOTHER at 5:52 a.m. on a rainy November morning as the darkness faded and turned into dawn. My contractions started the night before under the full moon, with the first one hitting me right as I fell into bed after a long day. I was so hungry for sleep that I tried to ignore the call. I kept the midwife and doula at bay, promising that I would be fine, and I would be able to sleep it off. My doula recognized the tone in my voice, the long pregnant pauses when I could not speak through the contractions, and immediately drove to my home to assist me in the birth of my daughter.

Through the labor process, I lost all sense of time and being. I had a strong recurring urge to urinate, and that feeling kept me tethered to the physical world. It never came to fruition, but distracted me enough so that I spent hours

on the toilet promising myself that everything would feel better once I could relieve my bladder. The midwives arrived and filled the birthing pool as I writhed in pain in the bathroom, resisting the touch of others yet still needing the comfort of knowing they were there.

My apartment turned into a calm and feminine space, where I was able to roam the dimly-lit hallways. My husband was the only male in the home, and he was doing his best to lead me through the darkness. I had no concept of time, and little awareness of things around me. I was in a haze, yet somehow clear. I felt relief as each contraction subsided, and was resistant each time the wave returned, fearful of its crest. I grunted like an animal, whimpered in pain, and repeated the words “no, no, no, no, no” in my fear. I so desperately wanted to change my mind and go back to my life before this painful transformative process. However, once the initiation had started, I no longer had the choice to turning back.

I was scared and exhausted as I labored through the night. I remember wishing that someone would just hit me over the head and take the baby out—I felt like I could not go on. This is what the midwives refer to as “transition;” when the woman is at the brink of delivery and it feels impossible to go any further. This is the moment I arrived at the threshold. It felt like my body was splitting in half with each contraction, and I wanted to just curl up and allow the pain to overtake me. And part of me did die, though it was not my body or soul. This was the moment when the maiden inside of me was dying. I was being reborn as a mother. Like any birth, it hurt. Not just birthing my daughter, but the birth of my motherhood. The pain cut and the dying maiden screamed out for help, frantically begging to resist that change, but there was no saving her. I crossed the threshold into the unknown and pushed on.

Labor is an initiation into motherhood, and the process of the transformation of woman as a maiden into



woman as mother is to force a confrontation with the unknown, inviting and embodying Dionysus. The process of labor and delivery, like initiation rituals of the Great Mysteries at Eleusis, forces the initiate to be present in the moment and push into the unknown; however, we live in a culture ruled by Apollonian instincts, "a world that is ruled by a futuristic drive" (Lopez-Pedraza 11). In birth, the Apollonian presents itself in the form of focusing on the production of a healthy child over the experience of labor and delivery, and the creation of a mother. While of course the delivery of a healthy child is important, it is not the only way to frame the narrative. The modern Apollonian medical approach to hospitalized birth is static, while a woman's experience of motherhood, from conception on, is constantly fluid and changing, throughout the 40 weeks of pregnancy, labor, delivery, and in life after birth.

Similar to the period of human gestation, the Eleusinian rituals took approximately one year to prepare for (Paris 23). The Great Eleusinian Mystery Thesmophoria was initially performed to mark the separation of Demeter and Persephone in the fall. In the ritual, seeds were mixed with menstrual blood, a symbol of feminine power and fertility (Paris 21). During the ritual "the initiate...identifies with the goddess...and 'feels' life, love, and cyclic time through

the image of the mother-daughter eternal chain of being" (Paris 23). Another ritual was performed again in the spring to celebrate the reunion of mother and daughter.

Hillman argues that "we still catch our soul's most essential nature in death experiences, in dreams of the night, and in the images of 'lunacy'" (*Re-Visioning* 68). It is here that labor exists, in the twilight, on the boundary between life and death, physical and psychological, personal and collective. This is also the realm of Dionysus—it is "the feminine experience of 'feeling like an animal' that comes with giving birth and nursing a baby. This feeling is the perfect initiation for the Dionysian experience" (Paris 41).

While the process of labor and delivery is often presided over by goddesses, it is the very realm of Dionysus in many ways. In her book *The God Who Comes: Dionysian Mysteries Revisited*, Rosemarie Taylor-Perry explains the traits of the Dionysian archetype:

Dionysian archetypes display consistency in two aspects, which tend to appear together regardless of secondary, cultural traits. The first of these constants is *shapeshifting*, imparting a "trickster" aspect to such Deities, generally utilized for evasion or as a test of the faithfulness of a worshipper . . . The second Dio-

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Illustration: Hellenistic Greek mosaic of the god Dionysus as a winged daimon riding a tiger, from the House of Dionysos at Delos, South Aegean region of Greece, 2nd century BCE / Public domain.





nysian constant is *rebirth from death*, the promise of which is conveyed upon adherents. (It might be successfully argued that rebirth itself is a form of shape-shifting, meaning that there is really only one major constant among Dionysian-syncretistic divinities). (Taylor-Perry 5)

The maiden's body literally shapeshifts as she grows a child inside her womb, physically reflecting the archetypal change into motherhood. It is tricksters who often have the power of creating life, and we as mothers create life by embodying Dionysus.

Dionysus is the god of madness and chaos. Joseph Campbell explains in *Goddesses* that true transformation and creativity must come from chaos—the motif of carnival that exists in the depths outside of everyday life. Dionysus' associations with transformational ritual and energy can be seen as part of his feminine side, taking after the goddess cults. I would argue that for a woman, the process of labor and delivery is one of the biggest transformations in life, aside from our own births and deaths. The chaos allows for experiential religion, where Dionysus can nurture the initiate from the place he once was and assist in his rebirth back into the normal world as a transformed individual. "Man's experience tells him that wherever there are signs of life, death is in the offing. The more alive this life becomes, the nearer death draws, until the supreme moment when something new is created—when death and life meet in an embrace of mad ecstasy (Otto 137). A hazy break from real life into another world, an encounter with the sacred, where once the mind has been opened, reality shifts and the woman who was once a maiden is now a mother.

Dionysus embodies the variation of experience—the highest of the high, lowest of the low, and the middle earthly realm. Dionysus is initially the son of Zeus, the highest god of the sky, and Persephone, the queen of the Underworld (Lopez-Pedraza 3). He is destroyed as a child and Zeus saves his heart. Zeus then impregnates a human woman, Semele, with Dionysus. Eventually Semele is destroyed and Zeus saves Dionysus, sews him up in his thigh, and he is born of his father (Campbell 214). This trinity of parents gives Dionysus claim to all three realms: of the gods, the mortals, and the dead. He embodies the entire cycle of life, death, and immortality.

Dionysus is the first figure seen upon entering the sacred space across the threshold to transformation (Campbell 194). As a boundary crosser that represents the dichotomies of the world—male/female, nature/culture, sanity/madness, Dionysus is the perfect figure to greet those on their way into their journey of transformation. Labor and delivery are also all those dichotomies at once. During labor, the maiden stands "on the threshold where one step beyond leads to dismemberment and darkness" (Otto 136),

and it is from here that she must trust in Dionysus and the initiation to lead her to the mother side.

Dionysus was not quite born of his mortal mother, Semele, but cut from the thigh of his father, Zeus, in a variation of an ancient cesarean section. As Campbell explains, the feminine is commonly associated with nature, while masculine energy is heavily associated with culture. Traditionally, children are born from the natural childbirth process of a mother, with her feminine associations with the earth and nature. The child is then enculturated by his father and goes from his or her default natural state to that of a "civilized" being. Humans are literally leaving the natural space inside of their mother's body and being brought into a culture. Dionysus, on the other hand, is born of culture and brought up back in nature, as Zeus brought him to the nymphs to raise. In this way, he is essentially the opposite of all humans and gods born of female mothers, which may explain his connection to madness.

To embody Dionysus is to be in the body and leave intellect behind (Lopez-Pedraza 31), since "Dionysian ecstasy is reached through an intensification of bodily feelings" (Paris 12). It is the experience of being present in the body while leaving the rational, intellectual Apollonian world behind; a dive into the unknown without thought of the past or future. This correlates strongly to the birth experience, as one of the hallmarks of progressing first-stage labor according to the *Bradley Method of Natural Childbirth* is the onset of a sleepy, trance-like state and a loss of modesty (McCutcheon 144-6), and who but Dionysos "makes us tear off our clothes" (Paris 15). It is here that social niceties disappear and the animal instinct fully takes over.

The process of labor is what Hillman would call "de-humanizing" through soul-making (*Re-Visioning* 180). Birthing people participate in the out-of-body experience through surrender to Dionysus that leads to connection with the collective unconscious; this state is what my birth coach calls being on the "birth planet," a unique state of mind that lies outside the boundaries of everyday life. Labor exists in the third, middle position between the psychological and physiological pathologies—the "fuzzy conglomerate of mind, psyche, and spirit" (*Re-Visioning* 68). The psyche leaves the personal, familiar, physical field and enters into an archetypal state that has been necessary to bring every human into this plane of existence.

Archetypal experiences are intensely personal and trans-personal; they are life-changing, earth-shattering, and universal. The commonality of birth does not take away from the unique miracle of the experience. My personal experience is my gateway to the archetypal. While this experience is unique in my life, it is an archetypal realm that every mother must push through to be born. It both is and is not *my* experience that I possess, but is universal and archetypal, and only "lent [to me] by [my] ancestors"

(*Re-Visioning* 180).

In a culture ruled by Apollo, how can we remain in touch with Dionysus? Apollonian society is "hypertecnologized, hyperrationalized" and needs Dionysus energy to balance. Apollo is dry; Dionysus is moist. Apollo is rational; Dionysus is madness (Paris 17). The modern medical system, including hospital birth workers and staff, relies on a rationalized Apollonian approach created by men who have never, and will never experience labor and delivery themselves. How can the initiate be led by the uninitiated?

While Apollo seeks to understand, rationalize, categorize, and explain, Dionysus seeks to lose the rational mind and get caught up in the ecstasy and frenzy natural experience. When women are raised in a patriarchal culture, it can be daunting to dive into the unknown realm of Dionysus, since they do not know that they are capable of not only surviving the madness of Dionysian ecstasy, but will come away from the experience initiated with the sacred feminine power.

How does today's modern Apollonian approach to medical birth affect the transition to motherhood for women who elect for a c-section or epidural? Research suggests that the highest risk factor for cesarean delivery is the location of where the mother chooses to give birth, with the lowest rate of cesareans occurring at midwife-assisted homebirths (Galvin). Cesareans and epidural-assisted vaginal deliveries have a higher rate of postpartum complications than unmedicated vaginal deliveries (Galvin). Even so, many women in today's society opt for an epidural during their labor experience in order to lessen the pain of contractions and have a sense of control over the unknown.

C-section deliveries account for 30% of all births in the United States, up from 4-6% in the 1960's, and surveys point out that approximately one quarter of those women who gave birth by cesarian felt pressured into it by their doctors (Childbirth Connection). What is the cause for this high rate? Since c-sections lead to a higher risk of postpartum depression and a lower occurrence of successful lactation and breastfeeding (Galvin), one could reason is that they would be performed only if absolutely necessary. The reasoning for this is multifaceted, and of course, varies by medical provider. Common reasons for this shift include a medical provider's distrust in the natural bodily processes, side effects of common labor interventions (such as induction, fetal heart monitoring, immobilization during labor, and epidurals), and a loss of training and skills required to naturally birth twins and breech babies, and simply a medical provider's schedule, personal preference, and convenience (Childbirth Connection). This is need for control over a natural bodily process is an Apollonian approach, and in surrendering control to the medical system instead of the natural instincts of Dionysus, the birthing person may avoid the full descent into the depths of mad-

ness and the edge of death during the transition to motherhood. The transition then becomes sterile, controlled, and in the hands of the medical staff.

Let me be clear—there are many different paths to motherhood, and vaginal birth is not a prerequisite. Mothers are made through love, cesareans, adoption, and in many other ways. I am simply considering the physical and psychological effects of our modern medical society on the mythic and archetypal experience of labor, delivery, and motherhood. In psychological language, "contempt for Dionysos' can be translated as a 'repression of instincts'" (Paris 27). If we are repressing our animalistic instincts and turning ourselves over to the one-size-fits all approach of the masculine hospital birthing processes, we are revering Apollo alone and largely losing the embodiment of Dionysus. The transition to motherhood still happens, just without the ritual allowing a birthing person to get in touch with their animal nature. What does this mean for mothers and society that our mythic experience is changing?

Simone de Beauvoir found in her research on masks and gender roles that "a strong woman will put on a show of helplessness and end up believing it herself" and that "an adult woman is asked not to challenge the superiority of men's opinions and status...the feminine mask was designed for the convenience of the male audience, not to enhance a woman's performance" (qtd. in Paris 64). Doctors have traditionally been men up until the last few decades and birth has largely moved out of the midwife-assisted feminine domestic space and into the male-dominated hospital setting. This shift into the male, Apollonian realm forces women to wear the feminine mask and comply with medical requests that are for the doctor's convenience over the women's experience. Perhaps the version of Dionysus these women are seeking is that of "Dionysus the liberator" (Paris 34).

The mother is reborn in strength as a goddess through this out of body experience with Dionysus. Labor and delivery are like the Eleusinian Mysteries in that the "process [has] to be lived to be understood" (Paris 25). The physical and psychic pain of labor and birth is a necessary part of the initiation to endure the challenges of motherhood with a newborn, the chapped and bleeding nipples, destroyed pelvic floor, lack of sleep, and complete exhaustion at every level—physical, mental, and emotional.

There is always the risk of Dionysus' violence, madness, and frenzy in the process of labor. It is not often in life that one gets so close to death. The initiation distorts and rips away the maiden's reality to allow the mother to flourish, and there is trauma in this, as well. Lopez-Pedraza claims that he "cannot imagine that psyche moves without the trauma of leaving behind the previous stage in which it has been involved."

In the United States, recent studies estimate that 70-

80% of mothers experience at least mild postpartum depression, with as many as 20% of women experiencing clinical postpartum depression (*Postpartum*). In 2017, 32% of live births in the U.S. were cesarean, with many of these not medically necessary (Galvin). A 2019 British study found a causal relationship between emergency cesarean deliveries and postpartum depression, and that “the effects of postnatal depression can be far reaching, with previous studies suggesting that it can have a negative effect, not just on the health of the mother and her relationships with her partner and family members, but also on the baby’s development” (Tonei). These effects can present in different ways for different people, and it can be difficult to contextualize in our modern society.

Our culture lacks the images to contextualize traumatic birth experiences, and society in the United States expects birthing persons to seamlessly transition into their new role, not only psychologically, but physically as well. There is a large and lucrative industry built up around mothers trying to get their bodies back. There is pressure to fit back into pre-pregnancy clothes, and even close friends and family often engage with the harmful idea that bodies can “snap back” to their maiden state. These show the tendency of modern society to ignore the complete transformation of the body and mind can cause trauma to the psyche of a woman in her new status as a mother.

The oftentimes unresolved trauma of birth leads to increasing rates of postpartum depression in modern times. Dionysus “invites us into the dark night of the psyche, pushes us into the depths of the cavern, but the going is often easier than the coming back...When intensities turn to horror, Dionysos can be heard in groans of agony and screams of pain” (Paris 29). Oftentimes, the ritual is nothing like the psyche expects, and this alone can be traumatic. This trauma needs to be fully realized, contextualized, and accepted into the psyche in order for the initiate to emerge from the transformation complete.

One modern folk remedy for postpartum depression is found in a delightfully Dionysian act—cannibalism. Modern folk wisdom encourages the mother’s consumption of her placenta from a science-based perspective, claiming that it will help replace nutrients and balance hormones. This is addressing the physical needs to improve the state of the psyche. Psychologically, however, engaging in the ritual of eating the placenta symbolizes the complete acceptance of the loss of the transitional stage of pregnancy, and the acceptance of the new role as a mother. What was created by the maiden has nourished the child now nourishes the mother.

The descent into madness during the transition from maiden to mother is paralleled in the rituals of Dionysus. The process of labor and delivery brings the initiate to the brink of death and madness, and she is then reborn into

her new role as mother and Dionysian initiate. The female lifespan always cycles through the archetypal roles of maiden and crone. Taking on the role of a mother is (hopefully) each woman’s individual choice, a transition they prepare for throughout their pregnancies as initiates prepare for the Mysteries. Their close encounter with the death and madness of Dionysus informs their transition from maiden to mother. Dionysus encourages “the violence of untamed mothers” (Paris 41), and maidens who choose to embody Dionysus during their initiation to motherhood remain untamed by the sterile and rational Apollonian medical system.

On the brink of madness, I pushed for three hours, helpless to fight the physical needs of my body. My daughter was fighting me from the inside, fighting to make her way into the world on her own terms. I was simply her vessel, and she had outgrown me. As she pushed, I pushed, surrounded by the warm waters of the tub with her father behind me. At last, her head and face were exposed. I touched her head, feeling the warm fuzz of hair. She had made it out to just above her chin, and then all the pressure was gone. *Was that it?* I looked down and saw only myself in the pool. She had retreated. Another push and her head was out again, born twice like Dionysus. I moved to stand up, and it only took two more pushes and she was fully born, we were both fully born—mother and child. An extension of myself. I held her in my arms while she was still part of me, connected by her umbilical cord to the placenta still attached to my womb. As I laid down in my bed with her in my arms, I delivered the placenta. Her father then severed the cord between us and my initiation to motherhood was complete.

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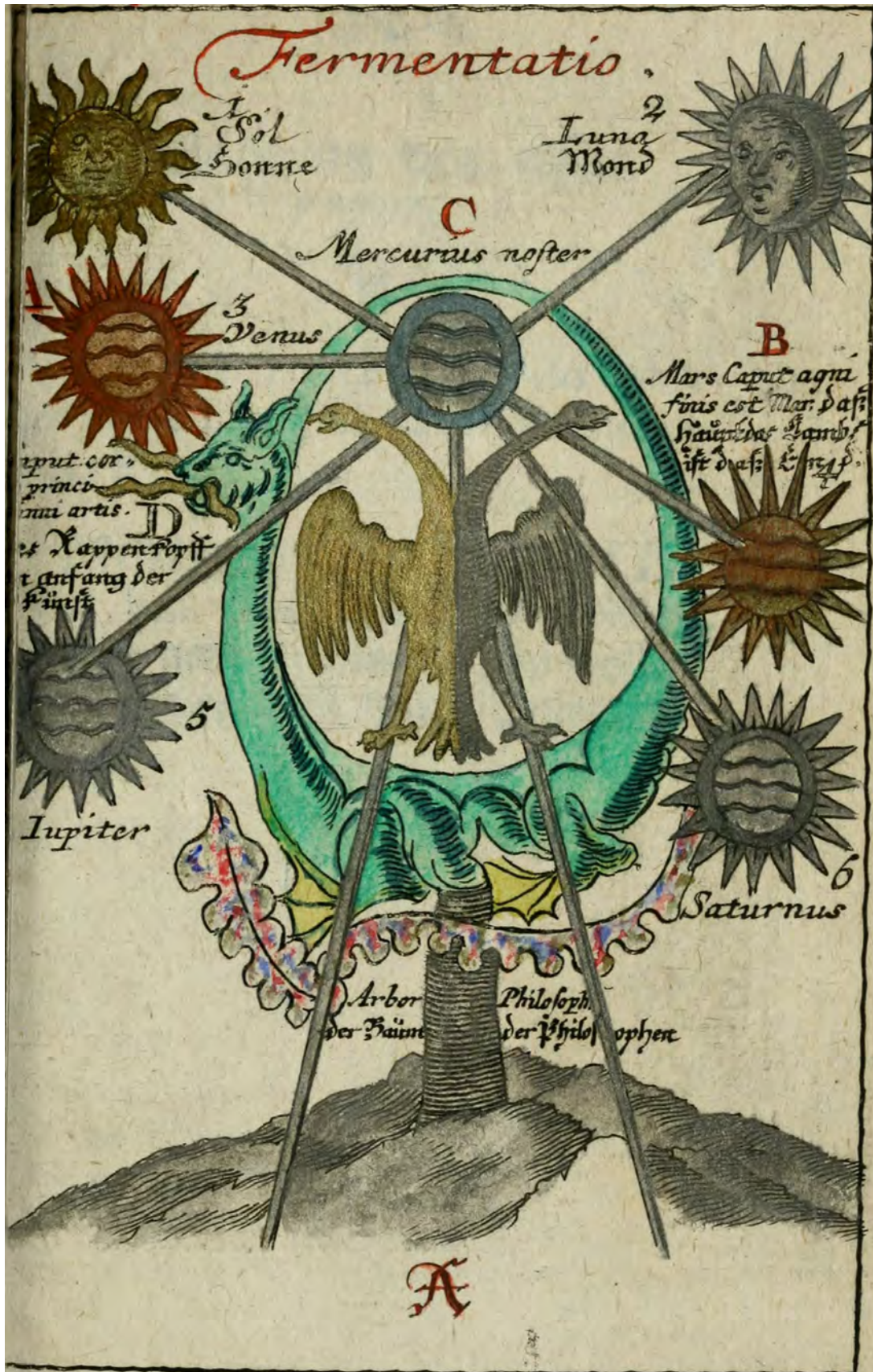


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