

“WHAT A MYTH IS”

Lifelong Learning Course

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Freudian and Jungian Perspectives on the Myth of Orpheus¹

Joseph Campbell and William Doty in tandem provide us as comprehensive a description of “what a myth is” as we are likely to parse, fashion, or paraphrase. The latter crafts an expositional definition in *Mythography* (11) while the former delineates a functional understanding in *The Masks of God: Occidental Mythology* (519-522).



Doty explains the particular cultural stories that, aggregated, form a mythology as defining stories or foundational accounts comprising metaphoric and symbolic diction and imagery that foster emotional conviction and participation while charting a particular culture’s values and beliefs — its engagement with the world as experienced and understood — and its sense of humanity’s role and status within the world. Crucially, Doty emphasizes, such accounts provide means of interpreting individual and collective experience within a shared (community or cultural) perspective as well as material for creative (“secondary”) elaboration.

Campbell elucidates mythology according to four operations or functions: evoking (or retrieving) our wonder at the paradoxical riddle of phenomenal being (returning us to recognition of what Rudolf Otto termed “the numinous”, the presence of divinity); mapping cosmology (an imaginal structure or order of phenomenal being that derives from and validates our wonder); reinforcing community (our chosen civilizational constructs and social contracts) toward orienting and assimilating individuals into community; and introducing and familiarizing each member of a community into awareness, exploration, and understanding of oneself in terms of personal-*cum*-communal evolvment.

And yet having defined “what myth is” (even how it functions), how may we apply our understanding? How may we enter a mythological system, or one of its specific stories? Contrasting the perspectives of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung — two of our most avid parsers of myth and mythic imagery — offers guidance. For this, of course, we require a mythic story. The example par excellence may be the myth of Orpheus and Eurydice. For Orpheus was the son of Calliope, eldest of the Muses, who delighted in philosophy and epic poetry. She married her Thracian lover Oeagrus and had by him Orpheus, who later was called “son of Apollo” for his unmatched poetic skill and grace upon the lyre. Orpheus was the greatest musician and poet of Ancient Greece, whose songs could charm wild beasts and coax even rocks and trees into movement. As one of the Argonauts, Orpheus saved the expedition as it passed the islet of the Sirens, his music counterweighing their song luring the Argo to disaster between crushing Scylla and swirling Charybdis. When Orpheus’ wife, Eurydice, was killed by the bite of a serpent, the poet descended to the underworld to retrieve her. So beautiful was his song, so mournful his lamentation, so compelling his plea that Lord Hades, moved by Queen Persephone’s tears, allowed Eurydice to return with her lover to the world of the

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living. But on one condition: Orpheus must not look back as he conducted Eurydice into the light of the living world. And yet just before reaching their goal, Orpheus turned and looked, and Eurydice slipped back into the netherworld again, forever. Inconsolable at the second tragic loss of his wife, Orpheus spurned the company of women, and kept apart from ordinary human activities while turning his songs to celebration of soul freed from its miring in body (Ovid, 40).

Later, a group of Ciconian Maenads, female devotees of Dionysus, came upon him singing beneath a tree. And they attacked the poet, throwing rocks, branches, anything that came to hand. But Orpheus' beautiful music always charmed even inanimate objects, and the missiles refused to strike him. Finally, the frenzied Maenads, deaf to his song, attacked him with their own hands, and tore him to pieces. And his head, fallen free, floated down the River Hebron, still singing, and came to rest on the isle of Lesbos (Comte, 150-152).

In Freudian terms, the myth suggests neuroses of libidinous attachment and denial of loss, as exemplified by Orpheus' unremitting sorrow, a grief so unquenchable as to inspire him to challenge the fact of death with an unprecedented — and putatively impossible — journey into the precincts of the dead. This suggests that Orpheus projects onto Eurydice both a latent fear of death and a wish for immortality — that is, life and death instincts. The former becomes evident in Orpheus' valuation of Eurydice as, in effect, too good for death; the latter becomes evident in his ultimate capitulation to death by turning (against all sense and warning) to see her just at the moment of successfully retrieving her, and by courting his demise through antagonizing the Maenads, formerly his cohorts in Dionysian revel. Freud asserts that the life instinct, or *eros*, includes all drives of sex, hunger, and thirst, those needful urges that prolong life: "The life instinct seeks to perpetuate life" (Hergenhahn, 473). Eurydice can be seen to represent and heighten this instinct for Orpheus, and to reveal his neurotic attachment to her and fear of life's loss through death, in that her demise prompts him to deny the naturalness and inevitability of her mortal fate, and to seek actively to counter it, to retrieve her as the repository or embodiment of his projected *eros*.

Freud perceived that *eros* fulfills, "a condition of the body that represents the ultimate steady state or state of non-tension" (ibid.) — a little death, say. Further, Freud claimed, every human to some degree longs for death — that is, carries a death instinct — "because only in that state is there no longer the constant struggle to satisfy biological needs. " Eurydice can be seen to awaken and inspire this instinct in Orpheus, and to reveal in him a rather psychotic dissociation from and dismissal of participation in living, in that her second, decisive loss spurs him to retreat from the toilsomeness and mundanity of daily life, and to speak against it, to disdain body as penitentiary or tomb of soul set free only in death. In this new song or testament, Orpheus courts the outrage of the Maenads, and thus invites his own demise: "...the death instinct seeks to terminate [life]" (ibid.).

Of course, even these initial observations (the Orpheus story offers rich fodder for further psychoanalytic treatment: Orpheus and Eurydice as Id and Ego — respectively or in alternation — and of Hades and Persephone as Super-Ego) indicate Freud's predilection for employing mythic image to example psychological states or conditions.

In Jungian terms, by contrast, the figures of Orpheus and Eurydice, and their story itself, present quintessential expressions of universal qualities — that is, of archetypes, "inherited disposition[s] contained in the collective unconscious" (ibid. 489) or the "deposit of ancestral experience" echoing significant events "to which each century adds an infinitesimally small amount of variation and

differentiation” (Jung, Baynes, & Baynes, 162). For Jung (1997, 1293-1295), Orpheus represents a faculty within humanity to quell (“charm”) our unconscious drives and powers, that in inspired moments or periods the human imagination can “by the exercise of the right kind of art...the art of feeling” realize “almost miraculous effects.” This clearly portrayed in Orpheus’ unparalleled power over the natural world. And yet, Jung noted, we pay a price in for such divine potency: a loss of soul. Then, “one must return to the life of the earth, or to the cauldron to be made over. “ That is, one must retrieve lost essence, essentiality — or, we may say, lost Eurydice. That the ending of the myth remains ambiguous in both interpretation and detail — “By the time that Orpheus emerges as a figure with a recognizable physiognomy and biography his myth has already been through the hands of generations of artists literary and plastic” (Warden, viii), while in some earliest versions the poet succeeds in retrieving Eurydice back into life — leaves wide room for deeper, and variable, investigation of the myth’s archetypal qualities. Yet even from this brief glance, we may note how Jung, quite distinctly from Freud, approaches myth for what it reveals of human patterns of understanding and living rather than to enunciate theories about human behavior per se.

Though at best partial distinctions (even provisional in being reductive), these allow us distinct models for entering mythology — mythic imagination and awareness as well as story itself — and allowing their images of character, action, belief, and pattern to speak to us, to work into, within, and through us. In that great work of soul tempering, I favor Jung’s approach. For instance, while Freud seems content to focus on origins and explanations of religion, ritual, and human behavior, Jung tends mythic story as such, as maps of meaning within religion, ritual, and human consciousness. And where Freud examines religious belief as a crucial factor in human awareness and activity (individuals as, essentially, the product of their society), Jung ponders mythic story and pattern as the foundation of all human consciousness and meaning (society as, fundamentally, an aggregate of individuals). Where Freud employs myth to illustrate (and example) observed human conditions, Jung approaches myth to illuminate the essential nature of humanity, and thus to desecrate its soul.

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