

MYTHOS AND LOGOS

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Mythos

The Greek word *Muthos*, or, as it has now become, *Mythos*, means 'story' or 'speech,' the story that sets a pattern and has purpose and design within it, deriving ultimately from the Indo-European root of the verb *mud*, meaning 'to think' and 'to imagine.' As the dual meaning of story and speech suggests, these stories come out of an oral tradition and were told for centuries, if not millennia, around a communal fire, in the market place, inside the home. These were the sacred stories of the tribe, passed down the generations, offering an image of the deep heart of the cosmos and the place of humankind within it, exploring how to live with joy and meaning.

Generally, the words 'story' and 'myth' in our culture no longer reflect the depth and complexity contained in the original term *Mythos*. We have always to remember that we are bringing our largely secular minds to try to understand a sacred universe, structured on different principles, existing nearly 3,000 years ago. (The *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, for instance, the earliest of the Greek stories to be written down, date to 700 BC). Indeed, it sometimes seems as if the language, and the values within it, have almost entirely lost their original meaning. Generally, our culture dismisses stories as tales for children or 'anecdotal evidence,' something arbitrary and not to be taken seriously. Similarly, myth has become a term frequently used for a religion belonging to an earlier time or someone else, and, more widely, an illusion ('just a myth'), and at best a framework of belief such as 'the myth of progress.'

In ancient Greece, by contrast, *Mythos* was magically resonant of origins: it was the first imagining of how things are or might be or could be. As the American poet Wallace Stevens writes:

*"There was a muddy centre before we breathed.
There was a myth before the myth began,
Venerable and articulate and complete.
From this the poem springs..."*(Stevens, p. 88)

Story-tellers all over the world still begin with 'once upon a time.'

Logos

In early Greek thought *Mythos* came first and *Logos* arose out of *Mythos*. Originally, *Logos* simply meant speaking *about Mythos*, from the verb *Legein*, to say, to speak, deriving from the proto Indo-European root *leg*, to collect, and derivatively to speak, to 'pick out' words (as in 'lecture'). It was the thing said, the discussion when the story had ended, conversations about goddesses and gods and their interactions with human beings. *Logos* accrued many other meanings, such as word, speech, statement, account, thought and reason - from which all our 'ologies' come: 'mythology' - the logos of myth; 'psychology' - the logos of the psyche, 'anthropology' - the logos of humans. *Logos* became *ratio* in Latin, which was interpreted as 'reason' alone, and, as with so many Greek ideas, lost its original complexity.

This 'speaking about,' or 'rational discourse' is necessarily outside the story, and was contrasted to *Mythos* as a different kind of consciousness, but it was a consciousness which did not, initially at least, leave the original story too far behind. Heraclitus (535-475 BC) was the first to extend the meaning of Logos from rational discourse by humans to a rational structure inherent in the world itself. Though when he writes "*When listening not to me but to the logos it is wise to agree that all things are one,*" (Heraclitus) he is himself articulating the meaning of the sacred stories which speak of the world as one whole.

In ancient Greece, it was held to be crucially important to have a balance between these two kinds of consciousness, accepting that each had their own unique virtue and both were necessary to each other and the whole which they manifest. They came to embody two different but complementary ways of knowing the world, and so vital was this distinction that there were two different words for 'knowledge': *Gnosis* and *Episteme*. To relate these terms very broadly, and inevitably to over-simplify, we could say that *Mythos* is a

story inspired by Imagination known through *Gnosis* - gnostic knowledge - while *Logos* is an account answerable to Reason, known through *Episteme* - epistemological knowledge.

Gnosis and Episteme

Gnosis was knowledge won through participation and relationship with what would be known, involving imagination and empathy. This is knowledge which changes you or which you have to change to know: the way we know a person, an animal, a tree and a garden - gradually and mutually - and also how we come to know a poem, painting, story or myth. *Gnosis* engages the individual's whole personality and exacts a commitment.

By contrast, *Episteme* is knowledge *about* something, and does not require participation between the knowing subject and the so-called 'object' - person or poem or plant - whatever would be known. Indeed, epistemological knowledge values the separation of the knower from the known, on the hard-won assumption that subjective and objective points of view need to be distinguished so that the knowledge can be empirically tested and rationally verified. Essential as this was in the earlier struggle to wrest freedom of thought from the overweening control of the Christian Church, it has now to reckon with the findings of psychoanalysis that such distinctions are not always reliable, as well as with Heisenberg's principle that the observer is implicated in the observed.

The balance between Gnosis and Episteme

In English there is now only one unqualified term for knowledge which, if it *were* specified, would be epistemological knowledge, not gnostic knowledge. Significantly, in our present paradigm, no specification is deemed necessary. Since the 17th century, with the rise of science and the ever-increasing influence of the industrial mind, *Logos* has become supreme, as has the rational way of knowing which goes with it, and the balance between *Mythos* and *Logos*, and *Gnosis* and *Episteme* has been lost. Further, the value and meaning of gnostic knowledge is often dismissed.

Ultimately, in gnostic knowledge, knowing is a way of being: what we can know is limited, or expanded, by who we are. Consequently, the relationship remains primary between the knower and the known. We cannot - and should not - know, as it were, beyond ourselves, which includes our responsibility to render that knowledge into life by giving it form. This 'limitation' is emphasized in Gurdjieff's teaching that it is the right relation between what he calls Knowledge and Being that creates Understanding (Gurdjieff, pp. 66-7). From a gnostic point of view, epistemological knowledge depends on a divorce between thinking and being, and this is of value only *after* an initial relationship with what would be known. If gnostic knowing comes first and stays first (as it does if we do not override it), then we do not name things, people, ideas, which we have not related to and thereby jeopardise any future relationship we might wish to have with them. As Rudolf Steiner frequently writes, begin with intuition and think about it afterwards. Einstein says the best thing is intuition: "*Imagination is more important than knowledge. Knowledge is limited. Imagination encircles the world*" (Einstein, 1929). Yeats reflects: "I thought that whatever of philosophy has been made poetry is alone permanent." (Yeats, p. 65) But there is a danger that when we seek to know with *episteme* alone, we withhold the truth of ourselves and cannot reach the truth of others. There's a poem by the 15th century Sufi poet Kabir, in Robert Bly's translation, which ends with the extreme position on this: "*What Kabir talks about is only what he has lived through. If you have not lived through something, it is not true.*" (Kabir p. 37)

More importantly, perhaps, we have also lost the reciprocity between these two modes of thinking and knowing, which ideally would work together as an ever-deepening process of understanding, in which the insights of the one would fructify and inspire the other. Each requires the other to progress, as in Kant's diagnosis that "concepts without intuitions are empty, intuitions without concepts are blind." (Kant, A 51/B 75) In George Eliot's novel *Middlemarch*, for instance, Will Ladislaw expresses this idea while defining a poet: "To be a poet is to have a soul ... in which knowledge passes instantaneously into feeling and feeling flashes back as a new organ of knowledge." (Eliot, ch.12) Here, 'knowledge' is standing in for *Logos*, in our terms, epistemological knowledge, and feeling is representing *Mythos*, gnostic knowledge. These divisions could also be expressed, in current discourse, as left and right hemisphere thinking. But whatever the discourse, the aim is to bring them to work together. Coleridge takes this further:

"Grant me a nature having two contrary forces, the one of which tends to expand infinitely, while the other strives to apprehend or find itself in this infinity, and I will cause the whole world of intelligences ...to rise up

before you.” (Coleridge, p. 162)

Consequently, in our time, it would seem imperative to emphasize the value of story and image, and the imaginative way of knowing that they invoke, as against the claim of Reason to dominate and be sufficient on its own, dismissing the Imagination as not equally essential to human thinking. On the contrary, some would say Imagination is the ultimate in human thinking, and has laws of its own no less rigorous than those of logic. Reason, says Blake, is only “the ratio of what is already known;” unlike instinct, passion and feeling, it can create nothing from itself; whereas, “To a Man of Imagination, Nature is Imagination itself. As a man is, so he sees.” (Blake, p. 835) Jung memorably wrote that “hemmed round by rationalistic walls, we are cut off from the eternity of Nature.” (Jung, p. 381) While Thomas Berry, the once Passionist Monk who was a cultural historian and ecological theologian, or, as he preferred to describe himself, ‘geologian,’ urgently proclaimed: “Loss of Imagination and loss of Nature, they are the same thing.” (Berry)

It is difficult to see how to restore some semblance of balance unless we address both story and gnostic knowing in a new way, one which recognizes how they may have fallen into the unconscious and be now undervalued in our culture, but are never actually absent, and structure our thinking - both collective and individual - more than we are generally aware.

We are all born into a story. We enter the story of our family, which changes as we enter it, just as our own story grows with us as we grow. It expands into our local community, then into our tribe, our race, our country, our species, other species, our planet and the age in which we live, which is the story of our time. But no story is complete without the ultimate story of the Universe, which is the primary story: the story of origin of every family of the Universe - non-human as well as human. From this Universe Story all the other stories take their reference and meaning.

Stories of Origin, or Myths of Creation, as they are also called, belong to every culture in every age. These are sacred stories which explore a vision of the whole Universe and the place of human beings, and all other beings, within it. They are stories of wonder and celebration and gratitude, fostering harmony between people and the Universe, between the microcosm and the macrocosm, the part and the whole. They ask for understanding and guidance as to how to be in the world that comes to us as a gift of life.

Fundamentally, these stories are a search for dialogue, a quest for relationship with the mystery of the whole which surpasses and encloses us. As mythic images they have a universal dimension common to all human beings by virtue of being human, which is why they are recognizable to all of us; just as they also have a local, ethnic dimension, particular and specific to each person, tribe, race and place. The different kinds of answers to these questions all over the world are then central as to how the people within their own unique culture are going to live and what they will value. This is *Mythos*, known first gnostically, shaping the way we live, whether we are aware of it or not. In the west, inheritors of the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we are implicitly taught – in orthodox doctrine - that the divine is transcendent to Nature, that we live in a fallen universe. Faced with the de-sacralisation of Nature all around us, it is not unreasonable to suspect a direct relation between the Judaeo-Christian mythic images and the consequences for our Earth. Consequently, Logos has an urgent role to play - to examine the possibility of ‘mythological conditioning.’ Let us become aware of - think epistemologically about - which stories we tell ourselves or, more crucially, which stories were told to us before we could create our own story?

What happens, then, when a Story of the Universe becomes fixed in the past, and cannot grow and change when the conditions of life and the needs of the time have grown and changed? What happens when the old story can only answer the old questions, which may have been first asked long ago - in a different time, in a different world - even as far away as two thousand years ago? Or when radically new questions, arising from a changed experience of the world, cannot be heard because the old story rules them out? Inevitably, the old Universe Story loses its magical wonder and its sense of the infinite, and can no longer guide and inspire. Then we are left *between stories*, cut off from the deepest roots of our being which relate us to the whole of life. There is inevitably an interim stage in the process of change when we try to break free from the constraints of the old but have not yet been completely captured by the radical call of the new. For the new story may demand sacrifice from us, not least the sacrifice of the old story to which we had become accustomed. “What

is the new mythology to be,” the Mythologist Joseph Campbell asks, “the mythology of this Earth as one organic unified being?” (Campbell, p. 17)

Ideas of time

Coleridge’s ‘two contrary forces’ may also be found reflected in the ancient Greeks’ precision in having two words for Life and Time: infinite and finite. *Zoe* (from which we get Zoology) was infinite, non-characterized life and *Bios* (from which we get Biology and Biography) was finite life, which lives and dies. *Zoe* contains *Bios*, as the whole contains the part; *Bios* comes forth from and returns to *Zoe*. Both images of life were comprehended in the Moon, the invisible yet ever present cycle as *Zoe*, with the waxing and waning phases as *Bios* which, in earliest times, was understood as the Moon living and dying (in the three days dark), and being reborn out of the eternal *Zoe* in the returning crescent. The Moon was the first ‘image’ of time, and all the earliest calendars were lunar. (Indo-European, Greek and Latin words for Moon and measurement are all related through the root of *men, mensura*, etc). (Cashford, 2003, pp. 38-67.) Time set by the Moon as a sacred being was ‘living time,’ time lived in harmony with the infinite, in which human life followed the cycles of the Moon. Time was then a quality not a quantity, not simply something to be counted and measured in relation to ourselves, but that in which life inhered.

So when Plato, in the *Timaeus*, calls Time “a moving image of eternity”, he is drawing on the distinction between *Zoe* and *Bios*, which he called the noumenal world and the phenomenal world, where ‘all change is a dying.’ However, he regarded the ‘eternal return’ of the Moon as the closest thing to eternity – the unchanging pattern of change.

Time was also imagined through two different mythic figures: *Chronos* and *Aion*, where, following the characteristic pattern of thought, *Chronos* was finite time and *Aion* was infinite time. Plato’s word for ‘time’ is *Chronos*, and that was also the name of the Greek god *Chronos*, who was the son of *Gaia*, Mother of All and ‘the first to arise from chaos’, and *Ouranos*, Heaven, once her son then her lover, and together they created all living forms. The story, in *Hesiod*, goes that, after *Gaia* gave birth to ugly giants, Heaven lay upon Earth so closely that she could not give birth and creation was arrested (*Hesiod*, pp. 27-9). She slips *Chronos* a sickle from her body and he lops off his father’s genitals which fall into the sea, and come forth as *Aphrodite*, Goddess of Love, she who was “born from the foam” (*aphros*). Creation then began to move again. This sickle, was, of course, the sickle of the new-born crescent, “thinned...to an air-sharpened blade,” as Philip Larkin puts it, (Larkin, p. 181) disclosing the phases of the Moon – *Bios*, the living and dying moving principle of Time itself, coming forth from *Zoe*, the cycle that has to be inferred and is the inference which locates us in the time of life. *Chronos*, in turn, ate his children as soon as they were born – an image of empirical time claiming death as its own – until he was tricked by *Zeus* to regurgitate them, allowing past, present and future to take place first. *Chronos* became *Saturn* in Latin, Father Time.

The original god who carried the idea of *Zoe* in Greece was *Dionysos*, the ever-living, ever-dying expression of the eternal cycle beyond and within Nature. By Hellenistic times, a new god arose, owing much to the Egyptian dying and resurrecting god *Osiris* who was identified with *Dionysos*. This was *Aion*, who became the latest mythic embodiment of *Zoe*, infinite time. His name meant time, eternity, age, which becomes aeons in English through Latin – immeasurable time. Plato described the eternal world of ideas as *aeon*, which was beyond or behind the phenomenal world. Eternity was not a continual series of moments in time which never ended - that was perpetuity, an infinite multiplication. Eternity was of a different order, an unimaginable plenitude beyond time which time could only serve through *mimesis*, imitation. *Aion* was often drawn as a young man standing within the circle of the zodiac, often lion-headed with a serpent, that same serpent who sloughed his skin as the Moon shed her shadow in the eternal round.

Both *Chronos* and *Aion*, being mythic figures, placed time as *Mythos*, to be understood gnostically as well as epistemologically. The decisive change in the western view of time came with Christianity. Christ, the anointed one, was originally called *Aeons* by the early Gnostics who were later excluded from the official Roman Church. But the Church, as it were, ‘withdrew’ the latest incarnation of the dying and resurrected god who had existed for several thousands of years in the Mystery Religions from the *cyclical* eternity of Nature and placed him in the *linear* idea of human history. His resurrection was still to be celebrated in spring and with the Moon – Easter is still timed to the first Full Moon after the Spring Equinox – but Christ was to be resurrected once for all time, losing (or sacrificing?) the relation between Eternity and Nature. So, to sum up briefly, linear time was

the time of Logos, human-centered rational time, epistemological time. And Time was (for the first time) given an ending: Time would end when Christ returned to the (now less sacred) world, as his Second Coming.

But, as Einstein said,

*“With the splitting of the atom
everything has changed apart from
our mode of thinking and thus we drift towards
unparalleled catastrophes.”*
(Einstein, 2000 p. 184)

To assist us in changing our mode of thinking he reminds us that our way of viewing ourselves as separate and superior is a delusion:

“A human being is part of the whole called by us ‘the universe’, a part limited in time and space. We experience ourselves, our thoughts and feelings, as something separate from the rest – a kind of optical illusion of our consciousness. This delusion is a kind of prison for us, restricting us to our personal desires and affection for a few persons nearest to us. Our task must be to free ourselves from this prison by widening our circle of understanding and compassion to embrace all living creatures and the whole of Nature in its beauty.” (Einstein, 2000 p.316)

Significantly, perhaps, this would be to engage both *Mythos* - compassion for the whole - and *Logos* - understanding of the whole, so reuniting the gnostic and epistemological ways of knowing in the new mode of thinking for which he calls.

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“There is a very important Buddha figure who is shown holding a flaming sword high over his head—and so what is that sword for? It is the sword of discrimination, separating the merely temporal from the eternal. It is the sword distinguishing that which is enduring from that which is merely passing. The tick-tick-tick of time shuts out eternity. We live in this field of time. But what is reflected in this field is an eternal principle made manifest.” (Joseph Campbell, Masks of Eternity, p. 20)

Manjushri is the Bodhisattva of transcendent wisdom and is the oldest and most significant Bodhisattva in Mahayana literature. In his fundamental form he sits on a lotus holding a double-edged flaming sword (to cut through illusion) in his right hand and a blooming lotus that supports the manuscript of the Prajnaparamita Sutra (to revealing the transcendent wisdom of Buddha’s teaching) in the left hand.
(<http://buddhajourney.net/?p=472>)

