The Lost Cause: A Psychoanalytic Reading of the Judeo-Christian Myth of Origin

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On June fourth of this year, I witnessed the death of my paternal grandmother. For fifteen days after she suffered a massive stroke, our family watched her body grow thin from lack of food and her consciousness shift to a reality beyond our comprehension. The last thing to go was her ferocious thirst. I was struck by the thought, as she continued to suck the water off the small moist sponge we offered her frequently, that in dying we return to a state of infancy, in which thirst, the desire for life, defines our every moment.

As our family prepared for the funeral, one of the most controversial discussions we had was whether to open the coffin for the last time at the grave, before lowering Grandma into the ground. We decided that we would like to see her outside one last time, touched by the Manitoba prairie wind and sunshine. The experience at the grave was a silent one. No one spoke. There were no words to describe the feeling of loss, the absence, the crack left in all of us that we were forced to acknowledge as we stared at the crack in the earth which gaped like a hungry mouth.

Death, according to psychoanalysis, is an "unintegrated experience." This means that it is asymbolic, or unrepresentable. It is linked to the realm of the sacred, as that which is beyond the descriptive power of language. Martin Heidegger points out that a person cannot remember either her own death or birth. In a sense, the memories of a person's life constitute only the middle of a sentence, the beginning and the end of which have been forgotten. It is understandable, then, that most of the world's religions provide a remedy for this strange amnesia, by revealing stories of the origin of the world and predictions as to how it will end. The Judeo-Christian tradition is no exception.

In this paper I will explore, from a psychoanalytic perspective, the forgetting and remembering of our mythic origins and the implications this has for language.

Symbols and Interpretations

In *Freud & Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, Paul Ricoeur explains that symbols constitute a "region of double meaning," concealing naked

reality while revealing something meaningful about it. The task of interpretation is to be an "intermediary" between this symbolic realm and reality as it is.[1] Ricoeur writes:

> Myths, rituals, and beliefs are . . . particular ways in which [a person] places him or herself in relation to fundamental reality, whatever it may be. . . . Symbols are the manifestation in the sensible – in imagination, gestures, and feelings – of a further reality, the expression of a depth which both shows and hides itself . . . [the] revelation of the sacred.[2]

He explains that the symbol is "a linguistic expression that requires an interpretation": a deciphering of what it is that a symbol reveals about sacred reality and what it conceals. He also distinguishes between the different questions phenomenology and psychoanalysis ask of the symbolic. Phenomenology asks how a symbol might be a manifestation of the sacred; psychoanalysis asks what a symbol reveals of human desire.

In *The Interpretation of Dreams*, Sigmund Freud discusses the language of dreams and its potential for analysis. He argues that dreams are "psychical productions" that reveal or give expression to repressed instincts or memories. They are "the golden road to the unconscious." Dreams speak a kind of mythic language, relating the inner dynamics of the human psyche to ancient and ongoing mythic narratives. However, they also give speech to what is speechless while subverting normative speech.

Psychoanalysis aims to reinterpret all symbols pertaining to culture: dreams, art, morality and religion, in light of their limits and what is beyond consciousness.[3] Symbols are not static but ever-changing. In the opening of his *Systematic Theology*, Paul Tillich criticizes religious fundamentalism for trying to make the symbolic fixed, to elevate what is "finite and transitory to infinite and eternal validity."[4] This elevation represents a closed, totalizing tendency that attempts to repress and exclude everything that smacks of difference.[5]

Psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan provides a helpful interpretation of the structure of culture and language. He identifies three different registers of signification: the real, the symbolic, and the imaginary. The real is that which "cannot be integrated into discourse."[6] It is not limited to a specific content of

reality but consists of anything unspeakable or unrepresentable by language. It is also that which is unincorporated into the realm of thought, because it is unknowable. Despite its unknowability, the real pushes at the limits of what is known, making its presence perceptible while remaining mysterious. The symbolic represents reality, all the while maintaining its awareness that this is all that it is: a representation. The third register, the imaginary, claims to be synonymous with the real, founding itself on the delusion that it is real, not symbolic. James DiCenso writes: "The imaginary is generally characterized by mimetic types of identification, and by fixation, narcissism, and closed, non-reflexive modes of relation. . . . Lacan associates it primarily with the narcissistic ego's orientations of control and closure."[7] The imaginary constitutes a literal reading of reality, a kind of religious fundamentalism that closes the symbolic off from future revelation.

For Lacan, desire is the motivating force that initiates the need for symbolic language in the first place. Desire seeks to retrieve what is lost: an unmediated relation to reality. Language becomes the intermediary between the real and the subject who wishes to be continuous with the real, as he or she once was in the mother's womb. Lacan claims it is impossible to satisfy desire; therefore, any imaginary representation claiming the capacity to completely satisfy the subject's desire to know reality as it is, is a false representation, an idolatry of the real.

The Genesis Myth of Origin

I will now apply these ideas to the beginning of our story: The Judeo-Christian myth of origin. I will briefly examine the text, searching for multiple meanings and attempting to reveal what has been either consciously or unconsciously concealed by the writer(s), hoping to make fresh encounters with the text possible.[8] Consider the opening of Genesis:

> In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth. Now the earth was a formless void, there was darkness over the deep, and God's spirit hovered over the water. God said "Let there be light," and there was light divided from darkness . . . and there was morning, the first day. And God said, "Let there be an expanse between the waters to separate water from water."[9]

In Genesis, the act of creation is one of separation, of differentiation. "The created order emerges when the Word of the Father tears open the sea," says Mark C. Taylor.[10] The sea, le mer, and chaos, from whose depths comes creation, is associated with the mother, la mère, whom Taylor calls the "lost cause."[11] According to various sources, including Karl Barth, the two-part Genesis creation account (chapter two written c. 1446 BCE and chapter one, c. 560 BCE) borrows in a "directly dependent" fashion from the earlier Babylonian creation myth of Enuma elish (c. 2000 BCE). This myth depicts the slaying of the mother goddess Tiamat by the god Marduk. Her split body, described as a watery chaos, then forms the foundation of heaven and earth. The Genesis account depicts the spirit of the Father-creator converting a formless watery void into form through "the word." However, Genesis fails to include the mother goddess's body in its rendering of creation. In the beginning was the Word – the Word of the Father. "Before the beginning there was separation, separation from the Mother."[12] The mother lingers beyond the boundaries of the God-Father's spoken Word.

Pamela Sue Anderson, in *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion*, discusses the tendency in dominant patriarchal narratives to push the feminine into the shadows or margins of the text. The feminine is relegated to the space occupying the real or those aspects of reality that go unrepresented. An example is seen in what Anderson calls "founding myths":

> [An] example of a founding myth [is] the Babylonian myth concerning the [world's] origin, which is earlier than the myth [of Adam]. . . . The female goddess Tiamat represents a primordial chaos out of which order, the heavens, and the earth are created. . . . Images from this Babylonian myth appear in the Hebrew scriptures. Significantly images of Tiamat include the vastness of marine waters and the power to either create or destroy. It appears that, in the earliest of mythical types constituting patriarchy, the primordial female figure represents the evil of excessive disorder and the dangers of female fluidity. The mythical killing of the primordial mother represents the symbolic act of matricide which founds the meaning of patriarchal history.[13]

Two points are particularly striking in this passage. Both are related to Anderson's account of mythic matricide. In *Group Psychology and the*

Analysis of the Ego, Freud constructs a primal myth of the killing of the horde father by his sons that is foundational to the development of his Oedipal theory.[14] This theory suggests that the ambivalent son desires to both become and annihilate the father. However, Anderson's account of the Tiamat myth describes the killing of the primal mother by the father. This killing constitutes the "meaning of patriarchal history" or the establishment of the father's law over the mother's body. Mother, as chaotic water, becomes simply an undifferentiated, unspeaking Thing.

The second point about mythic matricide is that the Hebrew telling of the myth of Adam does not even mention the mother's body as the material from which the earth is fashioned, referring only to the anonymous watery chaos or void. This forgetting of the symbolic sacrifice of the mother determines her status as the "lost cause." Karl Barth argues that over centuries the Hebrews attempted to separate themselves from the other Ancient Near Eastern cultures, including pagan goddess cultures. Subsequently, the writing of the myth of Adam, which he dates sometime during the Babylonian exile, altogether omits the role of Tiamat and consequentially the mother's active participation in the creative process.

In his *Church Dogmatics*, Barth distinguishes between "myth" and "saga." Myth is associated with pagan religions, where gods are personifications of nature. These myths, cyclical in form, were later rationalized by Plato, Socrates, and Aristotle to form the foundations of metaphysics. Saga, by contrast, is associated with Hebrew culture. As opposed to myth it is defined as *Heilsgeschichte*, sacred history. However, it relates more to prehistory. The Hebrews interpreted their later history in light of these origins. Therefore, instead of transforming myth into metaphysics, they transformed saga into history. Barth concludes that Hebrew tradition is not primarily rational but revelatory. Thus, ongoing experience, not only law, is what characterizes that tradition.[15] It is ironic that because of Barth's careful research, tracing the formative elements of the Hebrew "myth" of origins to the earlier Babylonian myth of Tiamat, we benefit from an admission that the Hebrews excluded Tiamat from *Heilsgeschichte*.

It is our project to take Barth's research into account while considering this exclusionary process and contemplating what has been both revealed and concealed in the symbolism of the Judeo-Christian narrative tradition.

Lacan also provides a helpful, if somewhat problematic, means of reading the Babylonian-Adamic creation myth. We can link his psychoanalytic construction of the origin of desire with the loss of the primordial and personal mother. Lacan argues that desire is activated when the subject is removed from its preconscious, prelingual state of union with the mother, creating what Taylor calls "a nascent tear" within both the mother and child.[16] This tear is a hole, a lack, that initiates the desire for its own filling.[17] Breastfeeding can allay the pain of separation, but eventually the child must be weaned. Here, to illustrate my point, I'll use an example from the stories my husband Mike tells of growing up on a dairy farm. He remembers lying in bed as a child listening with horror to the sound of calves crying longingly for their mothers, and of mothers crying with equal longing for their calves, after they'd been separated to different parts of the farm for weaning. Their only desire was to be reunited.

Lacan describes the phallus as a symbol of fulfillment in having the potential to fill a gap. However, it cannot fill what it proposes to fill in any lasting way. The phallus, for him, is identified with the Father, language, and the social order. The "phallic signifier" substitutes language for the desired mother's body. Symbiotic fusion with the mother is exchanged for the 'otherness' of language and culture, represented by the father.[18] The appropriation of language compensates for the infant's mother loss. Language functions as a coping mechanism, helping the growing child to forget its regressive, singular fixation with the mother and to start interacting with other aspects of the complicated world around it.

A problem in this reading is that "Mother," like Tiamat, comes to represent something unspoken, unspeaking. "She" does not participate in the father's naming of law and language, of signification, but is essentially left out. Yet Lacan to his credit does not speak essentially of "mother" but regards "her" from her symbolic position within the language of the father, the language spoken for her that she mouths when she does speak. The myth of the Babylonian mother is both appropriated and ignored by the Hebrew father. In a strange way "mother" becomes "a presence made of absence," a phrase Hegel uses to describe language.[19] Language, like the repressed mother, "harbors an absence resulting from the negation of the sensual immediacy of the here and now."[20]

Feminist philosopher and psychoanalyst Luce Irigaray, discussing the phenomenon of the "mother tongue," argues there is no adequate [religious] language for women, only "male-neutral" language claiming to speak for everyone. Without mentioning Lacan, she reiterates his claim that the mother as well as the father can serve a "phallic function" in that she can reproduce the same patriarchal history by continuing to speak the same language, the mother tongue. In this way she is the carrier or bearer of male-dominated myth, culture, and male-neutral language.[21]

In order for the male-neutral language of established myth to be broken, a "hierophany," or breakthrough of the sacred into the existing socio-linguistic order, must occur. World religions scholar Mircea Eliade writes:

> It could be said that the history of religions is constituted by a great number of hierophanies, by manifestations of sacred realities. [With each new hierophany] we are confronted by the same mysterious act – the manifestation of something of a wholly different order, a reality that does not belong to our world.[22]

A hierophanous event opens a space within the existing symbolism of a religion for transformation, for the possibility of new interpretations. The symbol thus becomes a porous body open to change rather than closed to new readings.

In *Camera Lucida* philosopher Roland Barthes distinguishes between art as literal representation and art as having the potential to break through tired forms of meaning. Literal representation is a container from which nothing comes out or leaps out of the frame.[23] This form of art cannot pierce the viewer; it lacks hierophanous qualities having the power to reconfigure symbols in a meaningful way. By contrast, art with the capacity to pierce has what Barthes calls "punctum." Without it, a piece of art is a "passive object." Punctum is what escapes the frame and transcends even the artist's purposes. "[Punctum] goes off from the scene, like cupid's arrow, and comes and pierces me."[24] The viewer is pricked by the dynamic energy of the punctum and the force of its hidden potential. The punctum gives art an unconscious, uncontrollable quality. It has the same function as a hierophany, in being a manifestation of something previously unknowable by the viewer.

The hierophanous event that pierces the established symbolic order, though seemingly a new occurrence, may not be new at all but very old, older than memory. In psychoanalytic terms a hierophany might actually be a return

of the repressed. Psychoanalysts agree that repressed contents cannot remain repressed but will inevitably surface in dreams or visions, often in monstrous or distorted form.

As we have seen, Anderson claims that images of Tiamat appear throughout Hebrew scripture. Since she does not elaborate on this assertion, I can only guess she is referring to biblical allusions to a similar creature, the Leviathan, the monster of chaos who is not killed by God but imprisoned or chained so that the order of creation can be maintained. Leviathan is not mentioned very often; it is a shadowy marine creature lurking on the outskirts of biblical representation. It is fearful because it embodies the repressed contents of the unconscious, the abyss, appearing monstrous because of its lack of conscious definition. In the biblical book of Job, Leviathan resurfaces when Job, a highly ethical man, suffers unjustly at the hand of a supposedly just God. This contradiction jeopardizes the established Hebrew understanding of God, a contradiction exhibited by Job's friends' conflicting and ultimately inadequate explanations for his misfortune. Such a monumental shift in religious understanding is often accompanied by fear of madness or chaos.

Leviathan is not the only biblical symbol we can associate with Tiamat. There is also the rarely mentioned female wisdom figure of Sophia. In Proverbs, Sophia says, "I was there when [God] marked out the horizon on the face of the deep. . . . /Then I was the [worker] at his side" (8:27-30). Likewise, the book of Jeremiah reads: "God founded the world by wisdom" (10:12). The apocryphal book of Ecclesiasticus contains this speech by Sophia: she says, "[In the beginning] it was I who covered the earth like a mist./ My dwelling place was in high heaven/. . . . Alone I made a circuit of sky/ and traversed the depths of the abyss. . . . Before time began . . . [I was created] / and until the end of time I shall endure" (24:3-9). In all three passages, wisdom is foundational to the structuring of the universe. As embodied wisdom Sophia is the other side of Leviathan, representing the ordering of creation rather than a threat to order.

Conclusion

My intentions have been to show we have the potential to renew language and myth through reflection and interpretation. I will end with a section of Canadian Mennonite poet Patrick Friesen's poem "anna (first dance)," which

is about the Russian poet Anna Akhmatova, who wrote subversive poetry during the Russian Revolution until her son was thrown into prison, after which she remained silent. Friesen writes:

> I don't love the prayer rug obedience or disobedience nothing/ that absolute I love the babylonian body and the human/ wound I love the surprising word the sinuous approach . . . I love words in the air balanced between mouths and ears/ I love the way they're smoke before they're stone/ but it's true I think there's not much a voice can say there's a/ limit I guess to art there's no end to desire.[25]

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Notes

[1] Paul Ricoeur, *Freud & Philosophy: An Essay on Interpretation*, trans. Denis Savage (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1970), 9.
[2] *Ibid.*, 7.
[3] James J. DiCenso, *The Other Freud: Religion, Culture and Psychoanalysis* (London: Routledge, 1999), 43.
[4] Paul Tillich, *Systematic Theology*, vol. 1 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 3.
[5] James J. DiCenso, "Anxiety, Risk and Transformation: Revisiting Tillich with Lacan" in *Secular Theology: American Radical Theological Thought*, ed. Clayton Crockett (New York: Routledge, 2001), 51.
[6] *The Other Freud*, 43.
[7] *Ibid*., 42.
[8] *Ibid*., 1.
[9] Verses 1-6.
[10] Mark C. Taylor, *Altarity* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987), 109.
[11] *Ibid.*, 161.
[12] Pamela Sue Anderson, *A Feminist Philosophy of Religion* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1998), 150.
[13] *Ibid.*
[14] Sigmund Freud, *Group Psychology and The Analysis of the Ego*, ed. Angela Richards and trans. James Strachey, vol. 12: Civilization, Society and Religion (London: Penguin Books, 1985).
[15] Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics*, ed. G. W. Bromiley, vol. 3:1 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1958), 87.
[16] *Altarity*, 100.
[17] The French word translated as "lack" is "manque." Lacan uses this word in a double sense, in that it means both that something wants, or is missing, and something wants, or desires.
[18] Ellie Ragland-Sullivan, *Lacan and the Subject of Language* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 271.
[19] Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1998) 58-66; 79-89.
[20] *Altarity*, 88.
[21] Luce Irigaray, *This Sex Which is Not One*, trans. Catherine Porter (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), 9-10.
[22] Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, trans. Willard R. Trask (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1957), 11.
[23] Jane Gallop, *Thinking Through the Body* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1988), 151.
[24] *Ibid.*
[25] Patrick Friesen, *Blasphemer's Wheel* (Winnipeg: Turnstone Press, 1995), 94.