

# Myth and the Possibility of Meaning

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Myths, and the dramatic rites which embody them, are essays in the relationship between sameness and difference. They employ narrative in order to direct our attention towards a transcendent story, or in other words a story about transcendence. It is hard to say what this story is; and our attempts to do so only succeed in identifying it with the narrative spelt out by the particular story we are considering – which is rather like trying to understand a forest by examining individual trees growing in it. Certainly, we can learn a good deal about this tree by measuring, penetrating, comparing; particularly the latter, because there are so many other trees to compare this one with. In fact, there are too many trees, and each one different either by species or individual variation, so that our idea of ‘a tree’ requires perpetual adjustment. Only when we perform the mental jump of considering ‘forest’, are we set free from this task of comparing and categorising.

Myth, and its dramatic representation, depends on this kind of epistemic jump, and can never really be understood by those who, for one reason or another, decline the opportunity to make it. It originates in the need to explain in another way, from a different standpoint. It is a kind of theorising used to explain the existence of differences which defy explanation. As such it constitutes a meta-cultural factor which corresponds to the way in which the mind organises its meanings. Myth is not a story, but a kind of evidence about story – its ability to point beyond itself, and to speak about the unknown in language which can be recognised. It is the narrative which cries out for explanation; hence the range of functionalist theories which attempt to make the differences between myth and myth seem reasonable, whereas in fact myths possess their own kind of logic, one which is concerned with structural principles, not ideas, events, or even personages taking part in the story itself.

What, then, is this ‘recognisable language about the unknowable’? Can we in fact call it a language? It certainly deals with the articulation of similarity and difference, as language itself does. Its central organising principle depends upon the perception of similarity within the context of difference – the primal communicatory gesture, both to self and other, in which things as yet unexpressed are included

within grammatical structures which are already familiar. At its most basic level, language aims at elucidation, bringing things 'out of darkness into light' – which of course is the purpose of the code of communication identified as myth. Myth uses ordinary, recognizable things to underline the significance of something so extraordinary that it can only be understood in terms of itself. The myth is there to promote understanding of a transcendent truthfulness, one which cannot be compared with anything else. In other words, myth defies understanding by any analysis of its constituent parts, none of which can possibly mean enough by itself, so that taken in isolation, apart from 'the whole story', every stage in it serves to increase our confusion – a fact which stands out most clearly when myths take the form of dramatic ritual, and narrative is acted out as a demonstration of the principles organising any codification of ideas once it is enfolded in the human experience from which it originally emerged. 'The play's the thing' says Hamlet: the entire play, not simply part of it. Just as the meaning of a sentence subsists in its grammatical structure of articulated similarities and oppositions rather than in the sense of individual words and phrases, so the meaning of the mythic scenario is recognised in its embodiment in the happening itself, the event as this 'comes across' in terms of a unified, indivisible, symbol of meaning.

Religious myth and the ritual action which transmits its significance present a relatedness and coordination to which human relationship aspires. The argument is certainly not a new one: Levi-Strauss, in particular, has shown how the form of myth reproduces a cognitive structure related to personal and community life by being expressed in ways of thinking and acting which differ from culture to culture but nevertheless reveal a universal way of 'shaping' meaning, thus constituting an ordering which corresponds to the mind's own – what Schneider refers to as 'an achronological modality of organisation' (1993:90), one which transcends and at the same time validates history by using a temporal sequence to communicate eternal truth. The impulse to do this proceeds, not from a particular meaning, but from the idea or awareness of meaning itself; the *possibility* of meaning. Myth is the expression of a supraliminal truthfulness which takes precedence over other kinds of truth at the same time as finding expression and historical location in them, substituting its own narrative contingency for that of ordinary events and appearances. It is truth delivered from the contingency which limits ordinary understanding.

In this way myth enables us to make contact with the ideal, using our own time-bound experience to point beyond itself. The action of dramatising events necessarily sets them at a distance from the literal. Even more than ordinary 'practical' discourse, drama depends on the logic of dissimilarity, in the sense that likelihood is used to draw attention to the unlikely. In drama and ritual – as of course in

myth – amazing things happen to ordinary people. What is really amazing, however, is the communicability of the amazement. The myth continues to awake a sense of awe in inverse proportion to our ability to see how it has been put together, the care taken by the story-teller to lull our suspicions until the moment of optimal surprise; the theatrical performance seizes our imagination afresh however many times we have actually seen the play. Art of all kinds demonstrates the inability of craftsmanship to point us to what lies beyond skill; it does more than this, because our sense of having made contact with the inexpressible is actually increased by being made conscious of the distance between the truth expressed and the means of expression. . . .

It appears that the human imagination is able to entertain this transcendent truth as a presence, because the dramatic imagination is in a sense real. Writing about the theatre, J.B.Priestley says:

Fully to appreciate a play we have to maintain a delicate balance between what is taking place apparently on two different levels of the mind. On one level we are involved in the drama, are living imaginatively with its characters. On the other level we are enjoying a performance by actors on a stage, being fully aware that we are in a theatre (1964:116)

Thus the experience of identifying with a person or a situation (or a person in a situation) directs our awareness to the circumstances in which this identification is taking place, which are obviously contrived. In fact, as Aristotle originally pointed out, it is the theatricality of the play's presentation which allows us to entertain the reality of the feelings it portrays, to take them *personally* – so personally, in fact, as to be changed by them. Just as theatre gets under our skin by disguising its emotional reality as fiction, so religious rituals disarm us for our encounter with God.

This perhaps is what Levi-Strauss means by saying that, 'Myths get thought in man unbeknown to him' (1979:3). If their cognitive function is to clear a space for the eternal they must be able to draw on the authority of eternity, its transcendent perfection of meaning, in order to do so. 'Ordinary' meaning is liberated from the conditions associated with the struggle to make satisfactory sense of life; instead we are presented with an anxiety-free experience couched in the language of symmetry and balance, so that contrast and concordance, opposition and engagement, arrival and departure, victory and defeat, order and chaos, life and death in fact, chime together through the mirroring of ideas and matching of events – an awareness which is anxiety free because of the assurance of a final meaning. From such a viewpoint individual myths are revealed as variations on the single theme of the triumph of wholeness perceived as an over-arching 'meta-story' or 'story about stories'.

The oddness of the separate stories constituting the world-wide heritage of mythology, with its bizarre combinations of logic and

absurdity, obvious sense and palpable nonsense, plus the inscrutability which characterises the genre as a whole, serves to distract attention from the formal logic and reasonableness of a storymaking in which the presence of each character and every event is - . authenticated by their arrangement around the central unifying narrative matrix, namely the journey into and out of chaos which for human beings constitutes wholeness.

So far as individual human narratives are concerned, this will necessitate a certain amount of arrangement of detail. Our own story making, if it is going to carry any kind of weight, will have to conform to this outline. Herein lies the main skill in storytelling. The project of constructing narrative always requires the rearrangement of material, if only because of the necessity to 'get to the point' of what is being recounted, and having arrived there, make sure that it is well and truly made. The story itself takes time, but its point is timeless. As such it must be led into and out of with considerable care, for what happens at the centre concerns more than the particular people present; it is, in fact, addressed to every listener everywhere. Storytellers work hard to maintain and to preserve the 'truthfulness' which Aristotle claimed is the hall-mark of a genuinely artistic structure, taking care to exclude things which would be reasonable in ordinary life, but detract from the world created by the storyteller, a world where 'possible impossibilities' actually make more sense than 'impossible possibilities' (Butcher, 1951) This is the artistic principle which underlies all genuine storytelling, however 'ad hoc' the circumstances, or trivial the subject matter. Discrimination and imagination march together to preserve the transpersonal relevance of stories worth the telling, so that storyteller and audience are brought at the same time to the pivotal climax, the place where time stops.

This way of clearing a space for the 'truth within the tale' is a cognitive technique available for a wide range of uses, from telling jokes to talking to psychotherapists and lulling children to sleep. Most characteristically of all, we use it to explain ourselves to ourselves – not by inventing the past but re-writing it in the light of new conclusions we have arrived at with regard to its significance, new ways of interpreting situations which are starting to look different. This is storytelling as discovery rather than invention (Sarbin, 1986); and even when the stories we tell are not meant to be about ourselves and are told 'for their own sake', we are liable to recognise our presence in them in ways we had not intended. As with myth, so with less ambitious stories: meanings told at an angle may be slanted in all directions.

The diversified nature of myth-making (public or private) corresponds to the inventiveness of the stories we tell about life. They are all different, and yet at a deeper level they are the same. This is

because they are anchored in the central truthfulness to which all their structuring tends. They are impossible to describe in any literal way; in fact they demonstrate the limits of description. Just as the point of a story is only understood non-thetically – so that to explain it is always to blur its outline and detract from its force – so the myth lives in and through its integrity as revelatory narrative, an event rather than a proposition. Because of its non-discursive, oblique, nature, mythology confounds attempts at understanding by analysis. Its purpose is to initiate rather than argue; to lead us to the mystery's edge and leave us there. Narratives describe what happened; they leave us to draw our own conclusions. This is the basic form of the story, which is never a lecture or a sermon; its message is communicated through artistic experience rather than literal explanation. Even if a story is believed 'because it is true' (i.e. historically accurate) the skill of the storyteller is always on hand to help us make the kind of sense for which our mythic awareness reaches out.

There is a mythic dimension to personal stories which serves to bring unity out of disorder and meaning out of chaos. This is brought out in a striking way by certain kinds of therapeutic theatre. The dramatherapy scenario, which corresponds to the characteristic shape of a play, carries with it a clear message about consummation to which our individual story-making aspires (Grainger, 1995).

When the group of patients defined as suffering from 'psychiatric thought disorder' who were members of my dramatherapy group at the local day hospital learned to make closer connections in the way they construed the things which happened to them and the people they came into contact with, it was at a deeper level than the ability to organize ideas and make logical connections within the parameters set by a psychometric test. What actually began to happen was in fact a gradual process of becoming more engaged with, and involved in, meaning itself – or our psychic archetype of it. It appeared to be the case that dramatherapy processes which had been deliberately aimed at producing an environment in which the association of ideas, events and persons could be systematically monitored merely added to people's confusion and sense of being manipulated, whereas allowing scenarios to evolve in their own way, 'at their own speed', frequently produced quite startling examples of insight, described as 'moments when things suddenly fell into place', making their own kind of sense without benefit of theory. At such junctures understanding was experienced as gift, without any necessity to interpret events in terms of specific factors within the interpersonal situation. (Grainger, 1990)

If art itself involves us in this kind of psychological process of perceptual transformation, then its implicitly narrative 'shape' will result in this non-thetic, ideographic, understanding in other settings as well. Drawing on twenty-seven independent studies of the active ingredient in psychotherapy, Ahn and Wampold (2001) demonstrated that 'treatment packages' contain components considered to be

theoretically important for producing positive psychological change were not actually more effective than ones which had no such theoretical underpinning. Whatever happened in these cases, it was not something 'theory dependent'; any understanding had to be arrived at on its own terms – that is in terms of each specific event as it happened. Might it not have been the experience of being personally involved in a narrative which carried within itself immediate recognition of a superior kind of sense. . . . ?

The best example of such narrative involvement is afforded by ritual, which is drama devoted to the expression of an awareness that is explicitly religious. Here more than anywhere else, image replaces explanation and theory proclaims its inability to mediate experience in ways that are really convincing. The journey into 'what lies beyond thought' cannot be undertaken in the language of ideas because it sets out to transcend ideation. Instead, it must be completely retranslated into another code of human communication – a use of word and gesture to express a yearning that is spiritual rather than intellectual, and which seeks to engage rather than convince, abandoning the arrogance of argument to immerse itself in a story told by the soul.

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