

David Pulak
Brandon University

AN IMAGE OF MYTH/THE MYTHIC VISION OF JOSEPH CAMPBELL

The soul Aristotle observed, never thinks without images. Likewise, the child looks and recognizes before it can speak. What we subsequently see, or choose to see, determines how we think; in turn influencing how and what we see. But there is another sense in which sight precedes speech. While language establishes an idea of what the world is, we nevertheless are surrounded by images that words cannot describe.

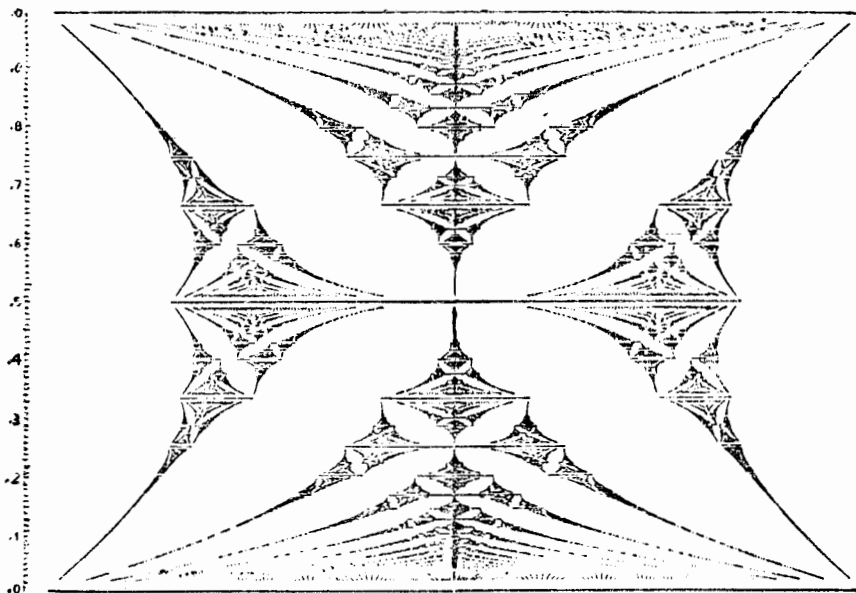
We live of course, in a world of expanded possibilities: a spectrum of light from where visible history is but one possibility. Other possibilities are seen in some other way, and to say anything of truth, we must recognize something of them. In the mythological spirit of Joseph Campbell, representations arising from the inward experience of sight are not only the models from which civilizations are built and organized, they are the implements with which private experience perceives history as a conception of its original cause. Thus the first of Campbell's four functions of myth is to reconcile what we see and what we think with the fascinating and awe-inspiring mystery of the universe (*mysterium tremendum et fascinans*), that is both within us and beyond us. As expressed in the Indian 'Kena Upanishad': "He is seen in nature in the wonder of a flash of lightning. He comes to the soul in the wonder of a flash of wisdom."¹

Campbell's 'light world modes of thought' corresponding to our realization of visual sight, were late developments in our biological pre-history; the main miracles of creation having preceded. Accordingly, through socially maintained rites in the context of traditional mythology, the pre-representational symbol of creation is communicated by the experience of certain insights, commitments, and sacrifices. In creative mythology, as relevant to contemporary history, the order is reversed. Individual experience is "communicated through signs, and if of sufficient depth

1. *The Upanishads*; in Juan Mascaro, Penguin Books, Markham Ontario Canada, 1987. p. 53.

and import, will have the value and force of living myth."² Moreover the figurations of myth are simultaneously metaphorical in bearing psychological as well as metaphysical connotations. By way of this dual focus explains Campbell, "the psychologically significant features of any social order, environment, or supposed history, can become transformed through myth into transparencies revelatory of transcendence."³

Whereas the first function of myth is to generate the mystical experience of unity between consciousness and its cause, the second function is to furnish an interpretation of that relationship as it applies to the contemporary mind. As such, the dual elements of myth (psychological/metaphysical), expose the structure of dichotomy intrinsic to all religious thought. For the dualism of eternal and temporal values is the image of thought



Cplot: a recursive graph showing energy bands for electrons in an idealized crystal in a magnetic field. α , representing magnetic field strength, runs vertically from 0 to 1. Energy runs horizontally. The horizontal line segments are bands of allowed electron energies.

4

2. Joseph Campbell, *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*; Penguin Books, Markham Ontario, 1985. p. 4.
3. Joseph Campbell, *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and Religion*; Alfred van der Marck, New York, 1986. p. 56.
4. Douglas Hofstadter, *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*; Vintage Books, New York, 1980. p. 143.

arising from the imagination; motivating and exaggerating the conflict between mind and body. This physiopsychological dilemma is however, in essence the creative nexus of any scientific revolution; the perception of order where there was once only disorder. An analogue in theoretical physics involves what is called the 'Gplot' graph, representing the allowed energies of electrons in an idealized crystal in a magnetic field. The separate questions of how electrons behave in crystals, and how they behave in magnetic fields, is apparently well understood. Their characteristic solutions however, seem almost entirely incompatible with each other. Yet when combined as a question put to nature, the resulting image is one of symmetrical harmony and esthetic richness.

Although 'Gplot' finds its physicality in the fact that it leads to the proper mathematical treatment of less idealized problems, and in that case can be considered an archetype used solely as a contribution to theoretical physics, it nevertheless is an image innovated through extensions of the imagination. "To hold as twere the mirror up to nature," Shakespeare said of his art, and the art of science can equally be of that reflection. Compare the old Germanic 'wyrd'; the inevitable pattern of all things, and the Buddhist allegory of 'Indra's Net,' or 'Net of Gems.' The threads are time and space, and at every intersection of the mesh is the crystal bead of an individual reflecting every other crystal, and every reflection of every reflection. All that should be described by science echoes the eminent physicist-philosopher Ernst Mach, is the way experiences are related to each other-myth proclaims nothing more.

Campbell's third function of mythology is the social enforcement of a moral order, from where the individual is made aware of the psychological requirements of the historical, geographical, and social group condition. And it is here Campbell warns, that a complete break with nature is likely to occur. The ensuing abuse of authority in coercing the individual into some idealized general will, is the "trademark of those immature societies who are the alpha and omega of this lesson."⁵ As such, 12th century Europe saw beliefs no longer universally held, continue to be universally enforced. The result was what Campbell calls a dissociation of professed from actual existence; a spiritual disaster depicted in the Grail Legend, and accented by T.S. Eliot in "The Hollow Men," "Mistah Kurtz-he dead:"

5. Campbell/*Metaphor*, op. cit. p. 4.

This is the way the world ends
Not with a bang but a whimper.

In a dysfunctioning myth the authorized signs are no longer working – or, are working only in producing deviant effects. The consequences says Campbell, is an inevitable sense of both “dissociation from the local social nexus and of quest, within and without, for life, which the brain will take for meaning.”⁶ Divorced from the expanded possibility, images are stripped of what they once represented, transforming in Freudian terms, what was once available through fantasy, into fantasy. Tragedy it would seem, is thus reduced to one possibility and escape as another. For where dichotomy equals alienation, Campbell asserts that events can only touch each other in destruction. The ultimate high is death itself.

Dissociated from myth, individual experience is reduced to a stereotyped expression, distorting truth into resounding dogmas that bind the hero to the world he seeks to escape. Amid the muted remains of history, the timeless landscapes of fantasy reveal only the nostalgic trivia of a future that will never arrive. Combined with an idea of power that revolves around the measurement of our sexual response, possible choices are severed from probable events; confining the evolution of an original cause to a reaction that recognizes only pre-conceived effects.

By allowing the phenomena of knowledge to drift, we have created an impersonal power that is at once confusing and compelling. Seeking to escape human control, it is a power that would tell us, if we were able to face it, the story of fearing ourselves as ourselves. We would learn that ideas come in pairs; the accomplishment of one generation to overthrow the idea, and that of the next to rediscover it, woven over time into the archetypal fabric we know as change. Finally we would be told that it is in groups that we go mad, imitating the epidemic; recovering slowly and individually over a period of time.

In the contexts of our civilizations, the extremes of faith in the metaphysical have already been encountered, and so we see its opposite in reason rapidly climaxing into its own extreme of utter absurdity. The signal to Campbell is that a new mythological frontier is approaching, for the psychological hold of the mythic images is weakening. Earlier patterns are breaking into fragments; dissolving into a disaster that signifies the

6. *Ibid.*, p. 5.

conclusion of the childhood cycle. That is, "the return or recognition of the hero, when after a long period of obscurity, his true character is revealed."⁷ The new myth, while being as difficult to predict as tonight's dream, is not an ideology in the conventional sense. It is not something projected from the brain, but "something experienced from the heart, perceiving with love a "thou" where there would have been otherwise an "it."⁸

The fourth and final function of myth revolves around Schopenhauer's 'will to live,' which when bridled gives rise to the higher and creative functions of the psyche. Revealed are the insightful qualities of mercy, empathy, and compassion; impulses launched from the eyes and catalyst to the "psychological centering and unfolding of the integral individual in accord with himself, his culture, and his universe."⁹ To know the tragic emotion of compassion, tragedy must be seen, for to see in the fullest sense, the hero must be seen. Just as words name things and then replace them wrote Elie Wiesel, whoever says "I" creates the "you," signifying both the self and rejection of the self. Whoever says "I" denies it. The self exists for those who see it - for those who do not seek it.

While recent physiopsychological experiments have demonstrated that physical expression does indeed influence emotional condition, myth, in Campbell's terms is the mental imaging system delivering not simply the idea, but a sense of participation in realizing the relationship between possibilities. Moreover, through the interaction between what we see and what we know, Wittengstein says we can determine what is true* Through the 'test of reality,' a proposition is true insofar as it directly or indirectly reflects the concept of a pre-representational sensation of an image - namely, the creative impulse. These mental concepts or pre-representations exist, according to French Neurobiologist Jean-Pierre Changeux, among others, before interaction with the outside world. Although still hypothetical, the focus of the theoretical proposition claims that the cultivation of memory images characterizing the learning process, emerge from "the re-combination of pre-existing sets of neurons or neuronal assemblies, and their diversity is thus great." Furthermore, selection follows from a test of reality. That is, "the test may involve 'resonance'

7. Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*; Bollingen Foundation Inc., Princeton University Press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1973. p. 329.

8. Campbell/*Metaphor*, op. cit. p. 16.

9. Ibid., p. 14.

* Tractatos

or, on the contrary, 'dissonance' between two neuronal assemblies."¹⁰ Accordingly in myth, insofar as the psychological element reflects its metaphysical counter part, time and space is sacralized or mythologized in the sense of participation—of a transformation of character. As a pre-existing image or archetype, the mythological motif is a symbol of the highest cause, by definition existing outside of the realm of dichotomy, and appearing as a metaphor of that which is connotatively beyond all thought. So all that can be said of it concludes Campbell, "whether as touching time or eternity, has to be in the way of an 'as if,' and mythologically in the way of a psychological image transparent to transcendence."¹¹

If information is believed to be assimilated only through physical means, then our heredity and environment must be seen behind human motivation. Upon affirmation of the scientific metaphor, the expanded possibility will be seen as an integral aspect of the human experience—one that may greatly contribute to the spectra of our social, economic, and political conceptualizations. Just as quantum mechanics violates the principle of separability, so does human activity. But by neglecting to comprehend the metaphorical images of our mythologies, we are ruled by those who abuse them.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Campbell, Joseph. *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*; Bollingen Foundation Inc., Princeton University press, Princeton, New Jersey, 1973.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Inner Reaches of Outer Space: Metaphor as Myth and as Religion*; Alfred van der Marck, New York, 1986.
- Campbell, Joseph. *The Masks of God: Creative Mythology*; Penguin Books, Markham Ont., 1985.
- Changeux, Jean-Pierre. *Neuronal Man: The Biology of Mind*; in Dr. Laurence Garey, Oxford University Press, New York, 1985.
- Hofstadter, Douglas. *Godel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid*; Vintage Books, New York, 1980.
- The Upanishads*. In Juan Mascaró, Penguin Books, Markham Ont., 1987.

10. Jean-Pierre Changeux, *Neuronal Man: The Biology of Mind*; in Dr. Laurence Garey; Oxford University Press, New York 1985. p. 139.

11. Campbell/*Metaphor*, op. cit. p. 57.