

Mythic Consciousness

by Rod Jellema

I believe there exists, in human experience and in language, a level of awareness that is beyond the beck and call of the conscious intellect. It has to do with what we imagine, with what we feel deeply that's beyond understanding, with what we dream. Even more, it has to do with the associations that come shimmering off things when we let them in—awarenesses that we don't quite know how to state. Often they seem related to a dark and distant human past. In the process of being made, poems and stories, paintings and sculptures, concerti and jazz jam sessions and symphonies, touch and use that level of awareness. I call it mythic consciousness.

Obviously I do not have in mind the media's abuse of the term myth as synonymous with untruth—"five myths about gasoline taxes." That's shameful ignorance. *The Odyssey* and *Gilgamesh* and the Hebrew creation poems called *Genesis I and II* mean to be true beyond fact and history. They are more true than bone yards and breastplates. Because they are timeless they keep on being true—they are archetypal patterns that continue to happen. The planet Earth is being created now, even as you, like Odysseus, struggle to find your way home or, like Gilgamesh, search heaven and earth for your dead friend.

But the mythic has more direct ways of reaching us than in the retelling of ancient stories. The archetypal patterns, the flashes and splinters from the deep memory of the human race, are part of the undercurrent that feeds and refreshes our thinking. The human mind, sometimes only dimly, recognizes the patterns of human experience. Our dream images, our fears, and our beliefs try to explain to us realities that cannot be grasped by emotion ("too deep for tears," says Wordsworth) or by reason ("There are more things in Heaven and Earth, Horatio, / Than are dreamt of in your philosophy," says Hamlet to his fellow grad student).

A lyrical poem written by someone this morning can recapitulate the human mind's encounter with all kinds of reality, and we do that sort of thing over and over. Language lets us into mythic consciousness easily. We only have to listen to language instead of simply using it as an archival entry or a tool. Language is neither a pliers nor a bookcase. Language is a source—the big brown

God as a river—the wondrous intensity and flow of words in which one image swirls up a related image downstream three lines later. This is not a logical, rational movement that the poet completely controls. It’s something the poet catches. And vaguely recognizes. Something a bit subterranean, an undercurrent, coursing through the poet’s worksheet just as it flows into the artist’s canvas as shapes and colors, resonating deep matters we almost remember.

In the interview that started this little essay, Christina Daub, the editor of the *Plum Review*, asked whether mythic consciousness might be pre-conscious. I’m still thinking about that! Where does the dark, warm, wet awareness of something we miss and long for, the womb, reside before it breaks the surface of consciousness and we recognize it in its artistic use? Where does the mind store its symbols? Carl Jung’s writings about our access to the half-buried memory of the human race tempts me to propose, with all the enthusiasm of an amateur, that mythic consciousness be injected into Jung’s “collective unconscious.” We could then speak with greater clarity and strength about “the mythic unconscious.”

In all these centuries since we started collecting and translating Homer and Isaiah and, much later, *Beowulf*, we can still beckon the power of what resides in us as mythic. And language will take us there. Language never makes the insistence that our high school teachers made, that a word means only one thing. Words shine to us other possibilities, such as connotations, overtones, cadences, and associations, and those other possibilities are often deeply historical and spiritual. Think about J.R.R. Tolkien’s parallel universe in *The Lord of the Rings*. Look how these lines from three great modern poems ease us into a world underlying our own:

- W.H. Auden’s opening word pulls us down to the theme of *Beowulf* in a line that echoes the sound of those centuries from under our feet:

Doom is dark and deeper than any sea dingle.

- Gerard Manley Hopkins fuses a harvest-time landscape (*sack, stooks, meal*) into a skyscape (*wind, clouds*), melding crops and physicality with the spiritual:

*Summer ends now. Now, barbarous in beauty, the stooks arise
Around; up above, what wind-walks, what lovely behavior
Of silk-sack clouds! Has willful-wavier
Meal-drift moulded ever across skies?*

- And Richard Wilbur, in his late-in-life poem “Elsewhere,” knows we need rough language for our terror of our desert places:

*In that smooth wave of cello-sound, Mojave,
We hear no ill of brittle, parch and glare.*

But then, sensing the range between *cello* and *parch* and the infinity of *other things*, he recalls

*That there is beauty bleak and far from ours,
Great reaches where the Lord’s delighting mind,
Though not inhuman, ponders other things.*

The Anglo-Saxon heart and muscle of our language—for another example, Irish poet Seamus Heaney’s hammerings of English consonants—energize our ears and tongues and remind us of a universe of sounds and images that deepen a large part of the human mind’s experience over many centuries, expanding the little grasp we have of our little *now*.

(An expanded exploration of remarks made in an interview with Christina Daub, published in *The Plum Review*, October 6, 1993.)