

MYTH, MAGIC AND THE FUTURE OF POETRY HOMECOMING

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A dozen years from now, T.S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* will be a hundred years old. This poem, which ever since its first appearance has seemed to epitomise the modern, the poem of our own immediately recognisable condition, will have been with us for a century. I find this an extraordinary thought, and I hope you do also. It seems to me that it is time to ask ourselves where poetry is going, and what it can do for us, in a world that has altered immeasurably since Eliot wrote his fractured masterpiece.

Eliot's poem was a diagnosis. It drew on myth to suggest that something was missing from the life and consciousness of the twentieth century, and that the result was an impoverishment, a spiritual desert. It was left to another twentieth-century poet, Robert Graves, to add a prognosis or prediction. In *The White Goddess*, first published in 1948, Graves not only attempted to reconstruct the goddess-worship of ancient Europe, but, in a chapter entitled 'The Return of the Goddess', predicted the breakdown of modern civilisation, which he foresaw taking place because of a neglect of the feminine consciousness and a violation of the natural environment.

'Agricultural life', he wrote, 'is rapidly becoming industrialized' ... 'the more exhausted by men's irreligious improvidence the resources of the soil and sea become, the less merciful will [the returning Goddess's] mask be, and the narrower the scope of action she grants.' The function of poetry, he announced (perhaps a little implausibly) 'was once a warning to man that he must keep in harmony with the family of living creatures among which he was born...it is now a reminder that he has disregarded the warning, turned the house upside down and brought ruin on himself

and his family. “Nowadays” is a civilization in which the primem emblems of poetry are dishonoured. In which serpent, lion and eagle belong to the circus-tent; ox, salmon and boar to the cannery; ... and the sacred grove to the saw-mill.’ Both Graves and Eliot have turned out to be remarkably prescient. But it has become clear in the past few years that we are reaching the end of an age. As surely as the people who lived in fifteenth-century Europe, we are entering the point of transition between historical periods. These things don’t happen all at once. They are messy and fuzzy processes that seem to have no single cause. But I have no doubt at all that anyone in this audience could immediately list half a dozen factors which indicate a vast alteration in the nature of the world. At the top of these lists would be climate change, which with the rise of sea levels is already altering the world’s physical map; then would come the linking of most of the world’s populations by means of the internet; followed perhaps by the returning of world economic power to the east and to China in particular; the discovery of planets outside the solar system; the popular diffusion of the ideas of quantum physics. And so on. You can extend your own list from there on. Already the first human populations have had to be moved from islands lost to the rising sea levels. Many more will follow.

If humans survive the immense transformations that lie ahead, and they surely will, then the arts will survive also in some form. And at the centre of them will be, in some form, poetry. I say ‘at the centre’ because, though the attention it gets in public may vary as time goes by, poetry is the fundamental art form because it works in language, which is the fundamental human skill. Poetry is apparently the most insubstantial of things, embodied in breath or ink, alive only at the moment it is heard or read, continuing if at all only in closed pages or the mortal memory. Yet because it

works in language, and moulds language to its purposes, poetry has a vast leverage.

We know our world above all through language, and so an art that refreshes and changes the use of language can change the way people name the world, how they view it and how they understand it.

Modern empirical science has almost no interest in the question of how poetry originates, where it comes from. In pre-modern cultures the case was very different, and the accounts that have survived of the origins of poetry tell us a great deal. In these accounts, poetry doesn't come first of all from the everyday world. It comes from somewhere else, and it comes from the gods. The earliest account of the composition of a poem in English is in Bede's *Ecclesiastical History of England*, written in about AD 731. It's the story of Caedmon, a farm worker who was unusual, in that age of oral culture, in being unable to sing and improvise verses. According to Bede's account Caedmon left a social gathering one evening to avoid being embarrassed when his turn came to sing. He went out to the stable to attend to the horses, and settled down there to sleep. Now

a person appeared to him in his sleep, and saluting him by his name, said, "Caedmon, sing some song to me." He answered, "I cannot sing; for that was the reason why I left the entertainment, and retired to this place because I could not sing." The other who talked to him, replied, "However, you shall sing." "What shall I sing?" rejoined he. "Sing the beginning of created beings," said the other.

Caedmon found himself singing verses about the creation of the world. His poem about the Creation, as it survives, has only nine lines. But Caedmon is, amazingly, the earliest English poet whose name we know and the poem, known as 'Caedmon's Hymn', is the earliest significant surviving Old English poem. We have no other evidence about the Anglo-Saxon view of poetic inspiration, pre- or post-Christian; but

the story tells us clearly that it was regarded as coming from a spiritual, superhuman source.

If we go outside the Christian world at the same period we find stories which point in the same direction, but are far more extravagant. For the Norwegians and Icelanders of Caedmon's time, one of the supreme gods was Odinn, the god of poetry and in some accounts also the creator of men. Odinn himself spoke only in poetry, and he bestowed on his favourite, the hero Starkath, the gift of being able to make verses as fast as he could talk.

But where did Odinn get poetry from? Well, when the two warring tribes of gods, the Aesir and the Vanir, made peace, they sealed the peace by each spitting into a jar. They then formed a human figure out of their spittle. This human figure was called Kvasir. he came to life, 'and he was so wise that there was no question which he could not answer'. Kvasir was killed by two dwarfs, who drained off his blood into three barrels. They mixed the blood with honey, and brewed in the three barrels 'such a mead, that everyone who drinks it becomes a poet or a man of learning.' The barrels of mead were guarded by a giantess called Gunnlöth. But how did Odinn get it? Well, Odinn slept with the giantess Gunnlöth for three nights, and she granted him three sips of the mead. By his magical powers, Odinn emptied one barrel at each sip and so drank the whole lot.

This extremely visceral story tells us that poetry is (first) the saliva of the gods; then it is (secondly) the blood of Kvasir, the man who knows everything; then (thirdly) it is the mead brewed by the dwarfs, kept by Gunnlöth and stolen by Odinn. We can take this in many directions. Remembering the use made of saliva for fermentation in nomadic cultures, and the similarity of the name Kvasir to words such

as the Russian *kvass* for beer, we have poetry as an intoxicant, a kind of alcohol. But saliva is from the mouth. If poetry is first the saliva of the gods, then it is linked to divine speech and breath, as well as to ingesting food, and both fermenting and swallowing drink. It's blood and honey – life, death and love. But remember too that Kvasir could answer any question. So poetry is universal wisdom.

Moving south-westward to Wales, we find a Celtic myth of the origin of poetry in the *Mabinogion*, in the story of Taliesin. Here, poetry originates in the Cauldron of Inspiration, which was prepared by the enchantress Ceridwen, who boiled up a cauldron of inspiration and wisdom (we notice again the pairing of poetry and knowledge, as with Kvasir). The cauldron was full of special herbs, and it had to boil continuously for a year and a day. Every day Ceridwen had to gather fresh herbs, so she would leave Little Gwion, Gwion Bach, to stir the cauldron while she was out. But one day, as the cauldron bubbled, three drops flew out and fell, boiling hot, on Gwion Bach's finger. Naturally he put his finger in his mouth, and instantly he became able to see into the future. And he saw that when the year and a day were over, Ceridwen was going to kill him. So he ran away, and once he had stopped stirring the pot it broke in two and spilled the magical liquid.

Ceridwen went after Gwion Bach, and he changed himself into a hare to escape her. But she turned herself into a greyhound and hunted him. The two of them went through a series of changes until finally Gwion Bach turned himself into a grain of wheat on the floor of a barn, and she turned herself to a hen and swallowed him. Ceridwen thought she was rid of him but she found she was pregnant and after nine months she gave birth to him as a beautiful boy. She could not bear to kill him. He became known as Taliesin or 'Shining Brow', and even as a child his poems were so

fine that he became the greatest bard of his time. He was also an enchanter, because the intoxicating drink in Ceridwen's cauldron brought magical knowledge as well as poetic inspiration.

The connection between poetry and magical powers was equally emphasised in medieval Ireland. Here the poet was known as a *fili*, a word which meant originally 'seer'. Poets in early medieval Ireland were expected to have powers of clairvoyance.

I quote from the Celtic scholar John Carey:

Various early legal sources make it clear that anyone aspiring to be recognised as a master poet or ollam, must not only be fully trained and artistically gifted but must also possess the clairvoyant faculty known as *imbas forosnai*, the 'great knowledge which illuminates'. This *imbas* could reveal the secrets of the past, present and future; and...its source...is consistently located in the native Otherworld of the hollow hills, the realm of the old gods. [Carey (ideal poet)]

Carey tells us that a master poet's job included 'warding enchantments away from the king at Hallowe'en'. In the early Irish epic the *Tain* or *Cattle-Driving of Cuailnge*, which dates from before the 6th century, Queen Medb, about to set out with her army to invade Ulster, sees a young woman approaching, driving a chariot.

She wore a speckled cloak fastened around her with a gold pin, a red-embroidered hooded tunic and sandals with gold clasps. Her brow was broad, her jaw narrow, her two eyebrows pitch black... You would think her lips were inset with Parthian scarlet. She had hair in three tresses: two wound upward on her head and the third hanging down her back, brushing her calves... Her eyes had triple irises. Two black horses drew her chariot, and she was armed.

'What is your name?' Medb said to the girl.

'I am Fedelm, and I am a woman poet of Connacht.'

'Where have you come from?' Medb said.

'From learning verse and vision in Alba,' the girl said.

'Have you the *imbas forasnai*, the Light of Foresight?' Medb said.

'Yes, I have,' the girl said.

'Then look for me and see what will become of my army.'

So the girl looked.

Medb said, Fedelm, prophetess; how seest thou the host?'

Fedelm said in reply:

'I see it crimson, I see it red.'

Since Fedelm is a poet, it is assumed that she can see the future - albeit not a future that Medb welcomes, since it means the slaughter of her army.

In India at around the same period, poetic inspiration was thought of as the milk of a goddess. In the *Saundaryalahari or Flood of Beauty*, dating from the 9th or 10th century, the poet writes:

The milk of your breasts, O daughter of the mountain,
I think is as if from your heart
there flowed an ocean of the milk of poesy;
when the Dravida child tasted this as you gave it to him in compassion,
he became the poet laureate of the master poets.

Again poetry is in the keeping of a goddess; and again it is a drink – this time of divine milk.

A similar idea prevailed also in the classical Mediterranean world of Greece and Rome. Greek poets attributed their poetry to the experience of being taken over by one or more of the Muses. The Muses were Goddesses who lived on Mount Helicon, and were in charge of a spring of divine water that gave inspiration to those who drank from it. Yet again we have the idea of poetic inspiration as a drink, and in the keeping of supernatural women.

I have recalled to us these myths because I want us to remind ourselves of the depth, the importance, of what poets do, and the fundamental part that poetry plays, whether visibly or invisibly, in a culture. And here, of course, by poetry I mean all genuinely creative use of language, all fresh metaphor, all song, all new and expressive transferring of words which enriches our consciousness and thus our world.

What would it mean for us in the present day to enter the fortress of Gunlöth and drink her mead – a brew of saliva, blood and honey which sounds to us horrifying and repellent? What would it mean for us to burn our fingers on the stew of medicinal and psychoactive plants boiled together in Ceridwen's cauldron? Looking at these myths, it is clear that what they transmit is the memories of a shamanic role, of ordeals and initiations into the depths of consciousness from which – as a dying Alaskan female shaman told the anthropologist Knud Rasmussen in the 1920s – songs 'take shape...and rise up like bubbles from the depths of the sea, bubbles seeking the air in order to burst. That is how sacred songs are made.' [Halifax, 30]

We as poets must be prepared to dive deep into that ocean of contemplation - the silence, if you like, between words and things – precisely that aporia or gap which the deconstructionists argue cannot be crossed or bridged. It is the poet who bridges that abyss, for an instant, with his or her own body and mind. And even in an age when there seems to be no specific training for poets and no vestige of the frightening shamanistic initiations which the myths seem to commemorate, such initiations can descend as if from nowhere, breaking through in dreams or in sheer inspiration. Most of us probably know Sylvia Plath's poem, 'The Hanging Man':

By the roots of my hair some god got hold of me.
I sizzled in his blue volts like a desert prophet.

The nights snapped out of sight like a lizard's eyelid:
A world of bald white days in a shadeless socket.

A vulturous boredom pinned me in this tree.
If he were I, he would do what I did.

The poem is enigmatic in its full meaning. But it manages, amazingly, to combine a personal experience with recollections of the Tarot card of the Hanged Man, the

crucifixion of Christ, and the ordeal of Odin, Norse god of poetry, who learned his wisdom and his poetry, according to one story, by hanging for nine nights upon the world-tree Yggdrasill, pierced with a spear, sacrificed as an offering, himself to himself.

Reading a poem such as this, it is easy to forget that it was written by the same Sylvia Plath who diligently attended Robert Lowell's creative writing seminars, wrote her early poems with the systematic use of a rhyming dictionary, and sent out poem after rejected poem to the magazines with the persistence of a professional secretary. The imaginative initiation was granted to one who had put in the work, and made the systematic effort.

Again, Robert Graves found himself seized, in 1944, by what he described as 'a sudden overwhelming obsession' which 'took the form of an unsolicited enlightenment on a subject I knew almost nothing about....my mind worked at such a furious rate all night, as well as all the next day, that my pen found it difficult to keep pace with the flow of my thought.' Within a very few weeks, Graves had written a 70,000-word first draft of *The White Goddess*. Graves was aware that he had undergone a spiritual initiation, and his prefatory poem to *The White Goddess* is a paean of praise:

All saints revile her, and all sober men
Ruled by the god Apollo's golden mean –
In scorn of which we sailed to find her
In distant regions likeliest to hold her
Whom we desired above all things to know,
Sister of the mirage and echo.

But, like Plath, Graves had earned his initiation. He had mastered Latin and Greek early in life, and had acquired an encyclopaedic knowledge of classical literature and

the Bible. He had fought and been seriously wounded in the First World War. He had once sold all his books simply in order to buy the complete *Oxford English Dictionary*, which he claimed to consult at least once every day. He was a careful and even obsessive reviser of his poems. Once again, the inspiration was given to the poet who had put in the groundwork.

This might remind us of the ancient Welsh triad: 'Three things that enrich the bard: Myth, poetic power, a store of ancient verse.' In a largely oral tradition, poets were expected not only to have talent – 'poetic power' but also both to have in their memories a full knowledge of the corpus of myths of their tradition, and also to have memorised the works of previous poets. Learning all this constituted a tough poetic education. Again, the dimension of shamanistic visionary experience was based on a foundation of systematic hard work and poetic training.

But why should myth be important? (And by myth, I should say that I mean a story that deals with fundamental matters, and whose date and authorship are unknown.) The answer is that we should attend to myth because the mythologies of the world – all and any of them – offer us a timeless mirror in which we can find our own problems and dilemmas reflected, freed from the pressures our personal viewpoints. Myth can be a powerfully transformative agent. To illustrate this, I should like to cite two examples, one extremely personal and the other entirely global. Both of the, I think, illustrate the huge dynamic of myth.

First, the personal instance. The story is told by the poet Myra Schneider in her book *Writing Your Self*. In 2006 Myra Schneider was diagnosed with breast cancer and underwent a mastectomy. She recalls:

I didn't give much conscious thought at first to the fact that I had lost a breast. I was too preoccupied with recovering from the operation, coping with the follow up treatment and being determined to make the most of life. Beneath the surface, though, I was acutely aware of being different. Fixed in my mind was an image of a world full of two-breasted women in which I was an oddity. This view surfaced in a poem called 'The Cave' in which a voice accused me of being 'one-breasted' and 'hardly a woman'. I confronted the voice, but this didn't dispel my image of myself.

But then a friend read the poem and wrote to Myra:

When I came to the point where the voice reproaches you with the phrases 'one-breasted,/ hardly a woman' I found myself thinking, 'Ah, but in the ancient myths the most powerful women of all were, precisely, one-breasted'; and I wondered if you had looked, or might find it fruitful to look, at the mythology surrounding the Amazons. They were a subject of fascination and a certain amount of fear to the ancient Greeks at least, and a very frequent image in graphic art, especially vase-painting. And although very martial in their doings, they were certainly not thought of as unfeminine, but rather in some odd way as *too* feminine for comfort.

There is extensive material on them in Graves's *Greek Myths*; and one recalls that Hippolyta, Theseus's queen who turns up importantly in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, was an Amazon. Possibly other important characters in myth and literature were too. No doubt there are full-length books about them. At any rate, I wonder if there is something here worth looking into? [Letter Myra.02]

Indeed there was. The name 'Amazon' actually means 'lacking a breast'. As Myra Schneider writes, '[the] words opened a door. I saw myself in a completely new light and soon afterwards I wrote [the poem] "Amazon"'. Here it is:

For four months
all those Matisse and Picasso women
draped against
plants, balconies, Mediterranean sea, skies
have taunted me
with the beautiful globes of their breasts as I've filled

my emptiness
with pages of scrawl, with fecund May, its floods
of green, its irrepressible
wedding-lace white, buttercup-gold,
but failed to cover
the image of myself as a misshapen clown

until you reminded me
that in Greek myth the most revered women
were the single-breasted
Amazons who mastered javelins and bows, rode
horses into battle,
whose fierce queens were renowned for their femininity.

Then recognising the fields I'd fought my way across
I raised my shield
of glistening words, saw it echoed the sun.

The myth had given Myra Schneider an entirely new view of her predicament. Most importantly, perhaps, she no longer felt alone; in addition, she now felt both powerful and feminine again, as if she had joined a new tribe of women. For such healing, myth is a profound resource. - one of the deepest things one can call on in troubled times. There is nothing, however terrible - blindness, suicide, incest, mutilation - which is not somewhere woven into the tapestry of myth and from which meanings still applicable in the present day cannot be not drawn forth. And I would say that the application of myth to our own situations is in itself a poetic act, an act that draws on the deep shamanic resources we looked at earlier.

Myra Schneider's discovery that she was herself an Amazon is an example of personal rediscovery through myth. I want to add a literally global example. This is the naming of the Gaia hypothesis, the theory that the earth and its biosphere form a self-regulating entity which controls its own temperature and other internal conditions. It was the novelist William Golding, a friend of the theory's proponent, James Lovelock, who proposed the name Gaia for the planetary entity Lovelock was describing. I have no hesitation in calling Golding's choice of name a poetic act, and it has led the term Gaia for the living earth to become known to millions of people

who have never heard of Golding and perhaps have hardly heard of Lovelock either. I am not of course concerned with whether or not Lovelock's theory is scientifically correct. Gaia was the primordial Earth Mother of Greek myth, and my point is that by choosing this distinctive, previously little-known, but fundamental name (it occurs in the most basic and primitive Greek creation-myths) Golding not only focused Lovelock's hypothesis around a single word, but provided the earth, seen from this standpoint, with a rediscovered aura of sacredness. Seen through this word, the earth is a goddess, she is a mother, she is powerful, she is vulnerable, above all she is alive. Do you want proof that poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world? Consider the long-term effects of the word Gaia.

But there is something else to this, something profoundly important. For by renaming the earth as a goddess, Golding has helped people to rediscover a sense of the earth's sacredness. Until quite recently, we have been living through a period when one of the principle missions of the leaders of human culture was the abolition of sacredness. The results on the whole have not been good. The last hundred years have seen experiments in the forceful reshaping of human society which may well lead future historians to dub the twentieth century The Age of Genocide. The record in the non-human world has been no better, because the same period has seen an indiscriminate and short-term application of technology which has obliterated species on earth on such a scale that scientists themselves are now calling the current loss of biodiversity 'The Sixth Great Extinction'. An essential part of these disasters has been the belief that nothing, and nobody, is sacred. The sociologist Max Weber identified this process precisely as 'the progressive disenchantment of the world' and saw it as

an essential component of modernity. It is surely exactly this that was the subject of Eliot's *Waste Land*.

Where shall we find new sources of fruitfulness? As the Buddha points out in the opening words of *The Dhammapada*, 'Mind precedes all things.' In the attitude with which we approach something, in our view of it, lies the seed of what we shall make of it. It is time for our world view to change. Some have called for 'a re-enchantment of the world'. But the world does not need 're-enchanting'. Its magic has never gone away. It is we who have developed tunnel-vision, who have learned, laboriously and painfully, to exclude respect and meaning, let alone any sense of the sacred, from our world-view.

I want to now to change scale again, from the world to the human body and body-image. The neurologist Oliver Sacks, in a remarkable memoir called *A Leg to Stand On*, recalls how he suffered an extremely serious injury to his leg, damaging the nerves, muscles and tendons. The leg healed, as far as its mechanical and biological functioning was concerned, but he found to his horror that it no longer felt a part of him. During its time immobilised in a plaster cast and with a temporary loss of sensation due to nerve damage, his mind and brain had at some deep level ceased to experience the leg as part of his body. When he touched the leg within the cast, 'The flesh beneath my fingers no longer seemed like flesh. It no longer seemed like material or matter. It no longer resembled anything....Unalive, unreal, it was no part of me – no part of my body, or anything else.' [48-9] 'The leg, objectively, externally, was still there; [but] it had disappeared subjectively, internally...I had lost the inner image, or representation, of the leg.' [50] 'What was disconnected was not merely

nerve and muscle but, in consequence of this, the natural and innate unity of body and mind.' [96]

Sacks's leg had ceased to be part of his body-image. It was fully healed, but he had forgotten how to use it. The leg was effectively paralysed because in losing the sense of it as a part of himself, he had also lost all memory of how he had been able to do things with it. It was terrifying. The turning-point for Sacks came when he listened to a recording of Mendelssohn's Violin Concerto. Listening to the music, he felt, he says, 'a hope and an intimation that life would return to my leg'. Later, when the physiotherapists insisted that he try to walk by placing one foot in front of the other, he still unable to walk until, suddenly, the memory of the music came back. 'Into the silence...came music, glorious music, Mendelssohn *fortissimo!*...and as suddenly, without intending whatsoever, I found myself walking, easily, *with* the music...and in the very moment that my motor music, my kinetic melody, my walking, came back, in the self-same moment *the leg came back...I believed in my leg, I knew* how to walk. On investigation Sacks found that this experience of limb-alienation was far from rare. Though it had never properly been documented, it was not infrequent for a perfectly-recovered limb to be experienced by patients as something dead, external, and no part of their own body. And this total psychological loss of the limb from their body-image was also felt as an impoverishment of the self.

And now I come to the point. I believe it is possible that with regard to the biosphere, perhaps with regard to the whole planet, we have suffered, culturally, a similar amnesia, a similar 'limb-alienation'. That which is seamlessly a part of our being, on which we depend for life, and with which we are entirely interwoven as it enters not only our eyes and ears but our lungs, our mouths, our skins and our

bloodstream, the living world around us, has, like Sacks's leg, been forgotten in a very deep sense. It appears to us as something separate from ourselves, an object called 'nature' or 'the environment', which we push out of the way, cynically exploit, or simply collide with, not realising that it is in fact an extended portion of our own body and mind. This is the point to which Weber's 'progressive disenchantment of reality' has led us. What is required is not a re-enchantment of the world but a recovery of the sense of our integration with it – for better and for worse. Otherwise we have little future.

And just as Sacks's recovery of the power to walk, and his recognition that his leg was truly a part of himself, was precipitated by music, I believe that poetry has a part to play in the recovery, the re-remembering of our world. And this is because, poetry works in language, and language is that which is at the source of our experience of the meaning of the world.

In arguing for a recovery of a sacred vision of the world through a poetry that draws on the language of myth, I am not of course arguing for a revival of religion as we know it. Religion – dogmatic religion – is precisely what happens when myths become rigid and are taken, falsely, as facts. When this happens, it is precisely their poetic meaning that is lost. Myth itself – true myth – is inherently tolerant, many-sided, polytheistic. It is full of multiple viewpoints and multiple gods and it invites us to constant reinterpretation. You may recall that earlier in this lecture I mentioned that Odin acquired his poetic powers by stealing the mead of inspiration from the Giantess Gunnlöth. Later I said something quite different, that he acquired his poetry by hanging as a sacrifice for nine nights on the world tree Yggdrasil. Is this a contradiction? No, these are just alternative versions, alternative stories. The ancient

writers on Greek myth are full of statements beginning ‘Some say that Zeus did this; other, however, say...’ and something quite different follows. Scientists and priests may argue over the authenticity of the Turin shroud. Poets and myth makers look at it and see a wonderful symbol around which they can weave stories and insights which reach towards a deeper truth, *many* different truths. Sacredness might almost be defined as an infinite potential for generating meanings. It is that meaningfulness of the world which it is the task of poets to bring back.

As Ovid perceived, Metamorphosis – transformation - is a fundamental characteristic of myth. As Ted Hughes sums it up in his *Tales from Ovid*, ‘to tell how bodies are changed/Into different bodies.’ This applies whether we are looking at the loving wife and husband Baucis and Philemon, who were transformed into intertwined oak and linden trees when they died, or at the African creation myths, where a god creates man or woman from a lump of clay which then comes to life and acts with free will. The central presence of metamorphosis or transformation in myth testifies to our experience that transformation is also the central fact of our own lives. We change throughout our lives: the baby transforms to the old man or woman. Our food comes from the earth and transforms into our bodies which themselves end as earth or ash. It is clear that Ted Hughes, when he wrote his *Tales from Ovid*, recognised that he was himself writing at the end of an era. He writes ‘The Greek Roman pantheon had fallen in on men’s heads. The obsolete paraphernalia of the old official religion were lying in heaps...[The *Metamorphoses*] establish a rough register of what it feels like to live in the psychological gulf that opens at the end of an era...We certainly recognise this.’ [Hughes, 11]

In recent British and Irish poetry, the signs are that our sense of the end of an era is leading us to rediscover not only the mythology we think of as ‘classical’ – that is, from the ancient Mediterranean region – but also the myths of the North. The twenty-first century began with Seamus Heaney’s masterly version of *Beowulf*, and not far behind it, in 2007, came two translations of *Sir Gawain and the Green Knight*, by two leading poets, Simon Armitage and Bernard O’Donoghue. None of these versions has any difficulty at all in making us feel the human relevance of the stories they tell. Surely one reason for this is that the world has grown more dangerous. Monsters, apparitions and the darkness of the unknown are all around us. The future is uncertain, and human community more important than ever.

In contemporary poetry, the versatility and richness of myth as a vocabulary for newly envisioning our situation continues to be as prominent as ever. Dreaming of return to a lost lover, Carol Anne Duffy in *Rapture* takes the image of Ithaca, the long-sought homeland, from the Homer’s *Odyssey*:

And when I returned,
I pulled off my stiff and salty sailor’s clothes,
slipped on the dress of the girl I was,
and slid overboard.
A mile from Ithaca, I anchored the boat.

The evening softened and spread,
the turquoise water mentioning its silver fish,
the sky stooping to hear.
My hands moved in the water, moved on the air,
the lover I was, tracing your skin, your hair,

and Ithaca there, the bronze mountains
shouldered like rough shields,
the caves, where dolphins his,
dark pouches for jewels,
the olive trees ripening their tears in our pale fields...

The late and much-missed Mick Imlah, whose warm and humorous voice I still miss, calling me from the *TLS* to commission a review of some new biography, significantly took as the epigraph of his final book Edwin Muir's remark that 'no poet in Scotland now can take as his inspiration the folk impulse that created the ballads...' Imlah's point, of course, was absolutely to disagree with Muir and to show that the folk-memory, the ballad, the legend had once again become possible. Imlah treats them with wit, farce and parody but also often with pathos, as in the poem 'Michael Scot', about the legendary Scottish wizard who

spurned his shepherd's birthright, and rode south
on a grey mare, after the star of knowledge...

- travelled to Palermo to become an alchemist,

[and] went upstairs at night to play with fumes
and phosphor, and many a weird and future thing
halloooed from the pink mist of his magicking.

Michael Scot renounced his magic, but still ended up in Dante's Hell, with his head screwed round backwards on his body as one of the diviners who impiously foretold the future (though not, apparently, his own).

The return and flourishing of these timeless, fantastic and yet intimately moving stories and images in recent poetry is, I think, a welcome sign, an indication of a renewed expansion and flexibility of the imagination which is connecting us beyond our time to the imaginative riches of the human inheritance as a whole. And we have of course only started in recent decades to see the riches of African, MesoAmerican, Indian and Islamic legends and mythologies entering the mainstream of British writing.

The American poet Louise Glück has spoken of ‘myth’s helpless encounter with the elemental’. This is something which we all share. In birth, death, sex, love, illness, time, whatever may happen to ourselves or to our society, we all helplessly encounter elemental forces. Myth provides us not with answers but with a way of surviving, a refreshed vision, however painful. In Louise Glück’s recent poem ‘Persephone the Wanderer’ the poet, questioning why she should be alive, and speculating that she has lived many times before, becomes Persephone herself, asking why she should return to the earth in spring. She says:

I think I can remember
being dead. Many times, in winter,
I approached Zeus. Tell me, I would ask him,
how can I endure the earth?

And he would say,
in a short time you will be here again.
And in the time between

you will forget everything:
those fields of ice will be
the meadows of Elysium. [*Avernus*, Carcanet, 2006]

Our world will always appear to us to move between these two conditions. Sometimes it will be ‘fields of ice’; at other times we shall see it as an Elysium. We have seen more than enough fields of ice during this winter just past: fields of ice, and sheets of water as well. If the scientists are right about climate change we may well see more and worse. But my hope for future decades of the twenty-first century will be that even at the worst times we shall find the myths, the timeless and fundamental stories, which will give us a language to imagine, render meaningful and reshape our predicament. Perhaps we can hope that the poems which will embody our predicament, as *The Waste Land* embodied the predicament of the twentieth century,

will be enriched by a renewed sense of the sacredness of life, of our planet, and of existence as such. That there *will* be water ‘under the shadow of this red rock’, and that the Hanged Man of self-sacrifice and transformation – evoked but absent in Eliot’s poem – may once more be present. Our world, and our lives, will always oscillate between a kind of paradise and a kind of hell, and when we find that the perspectives of our selves, and our poems, are rendered helpless or powerless, it is to the timeless and implacable yet infinitely forgiving world of the myths that we shall have to turn.

I recall once again, and find a curious kind of comfort in, Louise Glück’s phrase about ‘myth’s helpless encounter with the elemental’. Whatever happens there will be hard times ahead. And it will be the task of poets to hang like Odin on the tree of sacrifice, to steal the mead of the giantess, to climb to the spring of the Muses, or simply to listen like Caedmon to the angels – bringing the new words, and the new songs, which will enable humanity, like Glück’s Persephone, once more to ‘endure the earth’; and perhaps even to love it.

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