
ART AND THE MYTH

A Study of the Significance
of the Symbolic Descent into Hades
in Art, Myth and Ritual

by

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ART AND THE NEKYIA

CHAPTER 1. INTRODUCTION: THE RITUAL JOURNEY TO THE UNDERWORLD

Art has very little to do with the dead. Death alone is the negation of creation, while art is a vital force, a deeply instinctive, everlasting, continual revitalisation. Art is life and nature and it lives in the realms of imagination, magic and mystery. Its language is the language of myth, and its aim is Truth. Art is action and reaction and is reached in silence by the artist alone and individually - its climate is solitude and its paths are as devious and labyrinthine as any the soul can follow in search of self-knowledge and the divine.

"There is nothing more important for a man to receive or a god to grant than Truth - a reception of things sacred, which promises communication and understanding of That Which Is, if we enter with intelligence and piously the sacred rites." Though the Mysteries of Isis were being discussed here, Plutarch as priest at Delphi was steeped in the wisdom of "Know Thyself" of Apollo. Art, like Truth

does not reveal itself easily, and the mere stirring of the surface and appearance of things will only serve to blur and obscure the Truth, though the effect may be charming.

Thus the ritual Descent into Hades is not the journey of the dead to the land of no return, to enter the Asphodel Meadows, to remain in the eternal punishment field of Tartarus or to recline forever in Elysium if sufficiently virtuous. It is instead the last trial of the hero, the final stage of initiation into the Mysteries, the temporary confinement of the god "in the mountain"² before his resurrection and rebirth with the bursting forth into the light of the growing things that were planted in the dark. It is a challenge, a journey, an exploration, a return to the cave and the womb, and a confrontation with the monsters and demons that lurk in the labyrinth of the mind. Every work of the artist should be a journey out of the self into the Beyond, and enlightened return. The development of the artist must be a perpetual renewal and growth and a continual search and finding of Nature, his own nature and super-nature, for they are all one, and then the rendering of this vision in a way uniquely his. This search is an adventure, a journey of discovery, made for the most part

alone, though the deities and demons encountered on the way may be as helpful or as destructive as those encountered by Odysseus. The journey is equivalent to the initiation rites practised in all cultures and religions, for according to Jung, "Rebirth must be counted among the primordial affirmations of mankind."³

Art enables immediate and total knowledge described by the inner eye - not thought, but an ineffable knowing that exists before the birth of the intellect. Artistic knowledge is a recognition, not a learning of formulae by heart. Glimmers of knowledge may shine through from time to time in most minds in flashes of intuition and telepathic knowledge, but a more constant glow occurs chiefly in a mind awake and sensitive to this recognition.

It is not suggested that the art student consciously thinks: "It is time I became an artist - I must prepare for this ordeal," in the same way that a young Khosa asks his boss for a month off to go into the bush, having a pretty shrewd idea of what is ahead of him when he gets there. Each artist and each work of art is by its nature an individual, and there are as many heavens and hells as there are individuals. The paths they choose to reach them are hacked by their own hands through the primaeval growth of the unconscious.

The Unconscious has a Janus-face," says Jung.⁴ One face looks back to the preconscious prehistoric world of instinct while the other potentially anticipates the future. Art looks back to the cave of birth, death and rebirth and also carries in it the seeds of prophecy. The vapour that inspired the Pythia rose from the underground cavern. Prophetic frenzy was the outcome of possession by the god, and was the state in which the god's will was made known. "I think that every poet, painter or philosopher worth the name has in his composition a large proportion of Future as well as of past..... all living art is the history of the future."⁵ In primitive times deities could often be approached merely by entering caves, as in the sanctuary of Osiris.⁶ "The Art-instinct is permanently primitive."⁷ In the religious mysteries there was always a tendency to fusion and ecstasy - "great art is out of the same wild material."

The finest works of art in the caves of the Dordogne are in the most remote and inaccessible sanctuaries, miles underground, far from the living quarters and the preparations for hunting and eating at the mouth of the cave. A dangerous pilgrimage through the labyrinth was necessary to

reach the holy of holies, superhuman strength and vision to execute the works in terrifying darkness, and the divine intervention in the paintings themselves is testimony to the descent into the Underworld of those earliest artists and their consequent rebirth.

CHAPTER 2. MYTHS OF THE OTHER WORLD

Mythologies in all cultures include the themes of the dying god, the lost god, the confinement of the god in the underworld and the search for him by his wife or mother, or his death and dismembering followed by the gathering together of his fragments, with rebirth and renewal as a result of this reconstitution.

Joseph L. Henderson¹ suggests that Christ's crucifixion on Good Friday seems to belong to this pattern of rituals of fertility gods and saviours such as Osiris, Tammuz and Orpheus where the death of the god-king was an eternally recurring myth. But Christ's resurrection occurs once and for all, and is therefore less satisfying, and the Last Judgement is a similarly "closed" theme.

The conception of the Underworld and the beings that inhabit it differ from culture to culture. In Egypt, where the safe passage of the deceased to the other world was the concern of the living, Isis's search for the body of Osiris did not actually take her to the Underworld, and it was her patient gathering, reconstitution and then embalment of the murdered god that restored him to eternal life.² Osiris enjoyed his greatest popularity as god of the dead, where he represented the hope of eternal bliss. His

descent into the Underworld was thus perhaps less of an ordeal than a reward for the trials he had suffered on earth.

³In Mesopotamian myth Ishtar, the mother-goddess whose love was "insatiable, consuming and even fatal" is associated with Tammuz, the dying and rising god of vegetation, whom she seeks in the Underworld in the season of his recession - a theme repeated in Canaan with Anat's search for Baal and in Greece in Demeter's search for Kore. The Mesopotamian Underworld is a gloomy, insubstantial and presumably damp place as a result of the goddess Ninhursag's curse of her fickle consort, Enki, the god of waters - a recognition of the fact that water belongs to the dark underground.

Ishtar descends through seven gates, at each of which she is divested of all that symbolises her divine authority, until she is at the end naked at the mercy of Queen Erēshkigal who inflicts on her various disabilities, with dire repercussions in the land of the living. As Zeus intervenes in Kore's abduction for the same reason, the god Ea contrives to trick Erēshkigal with the help of a eunuch. Ishtar's regalia is restored to her and she returns with Tammuz.

Baal is a less passive deity than Tammuz and Osiris and his sojourn in the Underworld is not unnoticed. He eventually

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returns having first wrought havoc and desolation and apparently dethroned Mot, though this dethronement has only seasonal significance. Mot emerges every seventh year to challenge Baal in a critical conflict.

Odysseus's descent into Hades was painted by Polygnotos to decorate the Club House dedicated by the Knidians at Delphi and is fully described by Pausanias.⁴ Polygnotos's source evidently was not Homer. Charon, painted as an old man, Eurynome, the flesh-eating daemon whose flesh is between blue and black, and the eternal punishments of those who offended the gods like Sisyphus and Tantalus are depicted together with such deities and heroes as Ariadne, Orpheus and Hektor to remind those who saw the painting that journeys to the land across the Styx were not to be lightly undertaken. The purpose of Odysseus's visit was to obtain prophecy from Teiresias regarding his return home. To achieve this and to ensure their return to the world of the living, Circe laid down the correct ritual and procedure to be adhered to exactly. She then "proved her powers as a goddess by sending us the friendly escort of a favourable breezeAll we had to do was sit still."⁵

Few visited Tartarus and returned. The fierce unbending sternness of Hades himself was slightly softened by Persephone, who could be both gracious and merciful.⁶ Dionysus,

for example, was able to bribe her with a gift of myrtle to release his dead mother, Semele. Persephone preferred the company of Hecate to Hades' - Kore, Persephone and Hecate were goddess in Triad as Maiden, Nymph and Crone - Hecate herself has a triple aspect with the three bodies and three heads of lion, dog and mare and incorporates Cerberus. Transformations and metamorphoses are the stuff of spiritual journeys and the very substance of art - the adventure of moving oneself out of oneself.

⁷The Other world of the Celts is a land of perpetual youth - many of the oldest myths were connected with rebirth. "Within a sidh a whole supernatural world could be encompassed"⁸ The Irish gods were chthonic gods most commonly associated with tumuli and springs. There was a frequent crossing of the boundaries between natural and supernatural, and sometimes a human entered the burial mound either in his own form or as a bird. Gods usually approached across the sea or lake. Return to the land of the living was usually difficult for mortals who visited the abode of the dead, which contained little that was ugly. There was an absence of guilt and punishment in Celtic mythology - monsters and demons were comic rather than terrifying. However, the Celtic heroes and even the gods had ordeals to undergo, and for this

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purpose there existed an otherworld of fear, a domain of giants surrounded by phantoms and horrors. Ci Chulainn fought the hound of Culann; Bran the Blessed, whose enormous cauldron would restore to life the dead, but without the power of speech, sacrificed himself for his people; and the Dagda underwent a ritual ordeal of a gargantuan meal of porridge, presumably to ensure the fertility of the land and the well-being of the people.

Birth and rebirth - the new-born child and the resurrected hero know the secrets beyond the visible world, for they have been there. The artist must go there too, and his otherworld will be different from anyone else's because it lies within him.

"Burn thyself in thine own flame; how couldst thou become new if thou have not first become ashes?"⁸

CHAPTER 3. RITES OF INITIATION IN THE MYSTERIES

"Some men need to be aroused, and experience their initiation in the violence of a Dionysiac "thunder-rite". Others need to be subdued, and are brought to submission in the ordered design of a temple precinct or sacred cave, suggestive of Apollonian religion."¹

"Something holy, that's it," says Picasso. "It's a word something like that we should be able to use.....you ought to be able to say that a painting is as it is, with its capacity to move us, because it is as though it were touched by God. But people would think it a sham..."²

"...by some liaison between the man-creator and what is highest in the human spirit, something happens which gives this power to the painted reality."³

"...while it is being done it changes as one's thoughts change. And when it is finished it still goes on changing..."⁴

Metamorphosis is both art and initiation, and man in the process of both must change and go on changing and growing, for if he stops to look back, like Orpheus, he will lose what he went into the Underworld to find. In art, to search means nothing - to find is the thing.

(a) Apuleius.

One of the most complete descriptions of initiation into the ancient mysteries is given by Apuleius, whose "Golden Ass" illustrates on at least two levels the classic Nekyia as rite of passage from youthful folly to receptive maturity.

Lucius is transformed from well-meaning but foolish young man into an ass, described by Isis as "for me the most hateful beast in the universe" - presumably referring to its association with Set, the murderer of Osiris. In this guise he has to face such physical and mental torments at the hands of the masters he acquires in the course of his wanderings, that he gives up all hope of even remaining alive, let alone ever returning to his former human shape. This state of despair or resignation to death after voluntarily undertaking the journey is a vital part of the initiation process - the willing sacrifice of the hero or god-king. (Lucius was very willing to undergo metamorphosis into an owl, but something went wrong with Fotis's magic.)

He is eventually rescued by Queen Isis herself, rising in majesty from the middle of the sea:- "I am Nature, the universal Mother, mistress of all the elements, primordial child of time, sovereign of all things spiritual, queen of

the dead, queen also of the immortals; the single manifestation of all gods and goddesses that are."⁵

The ass is returned to human shape in the course of the procession in Corinth to honour Isis. Lucius is again rebuked: "Neither your noble blood and rank nor your education sufficed to keep you from falling a slave to pleasure"⁶ yet Isis demands no ascetic denial of the world from her worshippers and priests. Lucius is promised happiness and fame in his profession at the Bar.

A man again, but a very changed one, in profound gratitude and adoration he spends many days and nights in contemplation of the Goddess. She orders him to be initiated into her sacred mysteries. "I was anxious to obey, but religious awe held me back to take orders was to bind oneself to a very difficult life."⁷ This doubt and resistance in the face of overpowering pressure is characteristic of the eternal struggle between the rational and the irrational, particularly when the latter is of a divine nature. The elect whimpers: "Why me?"

Isis wins, of course, and guided by dreams and visions, Lucius beseeches the High Priest to initiate him at once, before he loses his nerve. He is admonished - the Goddess herself indicates the proper day. Whether the priest's

warning is merely to intensify the ordeal by creating the right atmosphere of terror and suspense, or whether it is an explanation of what befalls many promising but arrogant young novices in fields artistic and divine, is open to interpretation. "No single member of the brotherhood," he said, "has ever been so wrongminded and sacrilegious, in fact, so bent on his own destruction, as to partake of the mystery without direct orders from the Goddess, and so fall into deadly sin.... the rites of initiation approximate to a voluntary death from which there is only a precarious hope of resurrection."⁶ For this reason old men are usually chosen to be, by her grace, in a sense born again and restored to a new and healthy life. Many artists produce their most inspired work when other men are being retired from commerce and industry.

After the proper period of preparation the day of his initiation arrives and Lucius is led into the inner recesses of the sanctuary. Like all initiates, he may never reveal all that befalls him there, but what he can tell is awesome enough.

"I approached the very gates of death and set one foot

/ on...

on Proserpine's threshold, yet was permitted to return, rapt through all the elements. At midnight I saw the sun shining as if it were noon; I entered the presence of the gods of the Under World and the gods of the Upper World, stood near and worshipped them."⁹

After such a revelation, most initiates and artists would be forgiven for thinking themselves the most honoured of men, and being content to continue in just such a manner as to keep the memory of it comfortably in their minds. Lucius would be happy to remain with the brotherhood, but Isis evidently feels he is too young for such sheltered employment and briskly orders him to go home. On the way he stops in Rome to attend the Goddess's temple in the Field of Mars, and is again warned in dreams to prepare for a new initiation, this time into the mysteries of the Supreme Father of the Gods, the Invincible Osiris. Such a mundane consideration as money now comes into it, as he cannot afford to be initiated at once. Painters painting tolerably good works that people are willing to buy are often equally reluctant to branch out in an entirely new and almost certainly less lucrative direction. Osiris will have none of this shilly-shallying, however, and Lucius is ordered to take the robe off his back and sell it. Then

/ he...

is admitted to "the nocturnal orgies of the Great God" and becomes his illuminate.

Thereupon Osiris obligingly puts briefs in his way and he is able to make "quite a decent living as a barrister".¹⁰

Nor was this the end, and Lucius underwent a third initiation, after which he was appointed to high-ranking status in Osiris's Order and became a famous barrister - the best of both worlds!

The return to the source is not a one-day excursion, nor a celestial insurance policy. It must be made as often as is necessary to ensure permanent growth and renewal.

The story of Cupid and Psyche unfolded in the Bandit's Cave parallels the ass's progress in the eternal truth and wisdom of the myth. Psyche, whose pretty face and vital statistics attract more adulation from the simpering public than the goddess herself, earns Venus's enmity. Psyche makes big mistakes. She is so empty and gullible that, although warned by Cupid to distrust them, she prefers to believe the voices of her education and upbringing (her vicious sisters) rather than the evidence of her instincts and feelings and senses, and thus injures and loses the god-husband who loved her so much that he tricked his divine mother to marry her. Now deeply in love herself and realising what she has lost, Psyche begins the classic

/ journey....

journey to find him, even though she is by no means certain of winning him back if she succeeds. Venus's behaviour when she eventually gets her hands on her daughter-in-law is in the mould of Ereshkigal's towards Ishtar. After abusing her physically, she sets her formidable labours to perform - in which Psyche is assisted by creatures of the earth: ant, reed and eagle. Then follows the descent into Hades, where Psyche has to take a box to Queen Proserpine and return with it by evening. "Psyche saw that she was openly and undisguisedly being sent to her death",¹¹ and despairs. Help this time comes from the tower from which she is about to throw herself. It assures her that this is the last of her trials, and that while suicide is a certain way of entering Tartarus, it is also a certain way of remaining there forever. It advises her to enter through one of the ventilation holes of the Underworld at Taenarus, to take two pieces of barley bread soaked in honey water, one in each hand, and two coins in her mouth - the bread as sops to Cerberus on her entry and return, the coins for the greedy ferryman, Charon. She is, of course, not to open the box, not to eat the meal offered by Proserpine and to ignore the apparitions set as traps by Venus.

Psyche's mission is almost accomplished when a last impulse from her giddy old self surges up, and she opens

the box - to fall down in a deep sleep. But by now she has won back Cupid's love. He awakens her, puts the sleep back in the box, and leads her into the company of the immortals, of which she becomes a full member.

You should never rub out when you make a mistake - you should turn it into shading.

(b) Demeter and Eleusis

¹²After Hecate had informed Demeter of Kore's abduction by Hades - she had searched without rest for nine days and nights - she came to Eleusis where she stayed as wet-nurse to Demophoön, infant son of King Celeus and his wife Metaneira until Hecate's story had been confirmed. Then in her rage she swore that the earth must remain barren until Kore had been restored. Zeus intervened and ordered Hades to return her, but because she had nibbled a pomegranate and thereby eaten the food of the dead, he was entitled to keep her. Then Demeter swore that she would neither return to Olympus nor remove her curse from the land. With Rhea's help the compromise was reached - three months in Hades as queen of Tartarus and nine months with Demeter. Before leaving Eleusis Demeter instructed

/Triptolemus....

Triptolemus, Eumolpus and Celeus in her worship and mysteries.

Kore, Persephone and Hecate were Goddess in Triad as maiden, nymph and crone when women only practised the mysteries of agriculture. It was at Eleusis (meaning Advent) that the great Eleusinian mysteries were celebrated. Demeter's ecstatic initiates symbolically consummated her love affair with Iasius or Triptolemus or Zeus in an inner recess of the shrine - Eilythuias - "(the temple) of her who rages in a lurking place". Swineherds were soothsayers, and in classical times, though they had ceased to practise their prophetic art, swine were sacrificed to Demeter and Persephone by throwing them down natural chasms - a fate frequently threatening Apuleius's ass.

¹³The goddess of fertility was also the giver of immortality. To receive it men underwent preliminary rites of purification, initiation raising the mortal to divine estate. Demeter bestowed two gifts - the fruits of the field and initiation. In the initiation the obligation of secrecy applied only to the final rite of Beholding. The procession from Athens to Eleusis went along the Sacred Way - shouts of "Iacha!" identified with Dionysus. All candidates were purified by bathing in the sea. "Bridging" - obscene jesting and cursing - took place across the river Kepkessos,

from which even Julian the Apostate was not exempted. This was to ward off the evil eye, and also, presumably, to humiliate the candidate. In the Beholding ceremony a golden key was laid on the tongue and revelation was induced. The initiate was shown things, not required to learn them.

The artist is a Beholder. Techniques may be learnt, but revelation is a happening.

(c) Trophonius

At Lebadeia there was an oracle of the earth-god Trophonius, the consulting of whom involved a ritual literally and spiritually a descent into the underworld. With its resulting enlightenment it is closer to an initiation rite than the seeking of an answer to a specific question, though it parallels Odysseus's visit to Teiresias. Pausanias describes it:¹⁴ "I am not writing from hearsay, as I have consulted Trophonius and seen others do so..."

When a man decided "to go down to Trophonius" his preparation was elaborate. He had to spend some days in a building dedicated to Good Fortune and Good Spirit, purifying himself and bathing in the river Herkyna. Sacrifices were made and a soothsayer read the entrails to foretell whether Trophonius would receive him kindly.

"On the night a man is going down they sacrifice a ram

at a pit". The initiate was washed at the river by two thirteen-year-old boys. From there he was taken to two springs - the Water of Forgetfulness, to forget everything in his mind until then, and then the Water of Memory, by which he may remember the sights he sees in his descent. The pool of Lethe and the pool of Memory are features in the landscape of the Greek Hell.¹⁵ He then worshipped, prayed, and went to the oracle wearing strange country dress and boots. The oracle was on a mountainside above a sacred wood, surrounded by a circular platform of white stone. Inside the circle was a carefully constructed chasm, twenty feet deep. There was no way down, but when a man was going to Trophonius, a ladder was used. There was an opening between the wall and floor two feet wide and one foot high. "The man going down lies on the ground with honeycakes in his hands, pushes his feet into the opening and then tries to get his knees in."¹⁶ The rest of his body was immediately dragged through, as though by some underground current. Pausanias observed that people are not always taught the future in the same way - one man will hear, another sees as well. The initiate was returned feet first through the same mouth, whereupon the priests sat him on the throne of memory and he was made to recite what had befallen him. Then his friends picked him up and carried him back to the building.

"He is still possessed with terror and hardly knows anything. Later he comes to his senses no worse than before and can laugh again."

We live on the borderline between two worlds - the ONE is beyond thought, definition and language, beyond all categories of order.

To see one must lose consciousness of oneself and have consciousness of what is seen.

CHAPTER 4. DIONYSUS AND POSSESSION

"Woe to him who seeks to pour oil upon the waters when God has brewed them into a gale! Woe to him who seeks to please rather than appal!" - Melville: Moby Dick.¹

Apollo lived at Delphi for nine months of the year. In the winter months he ceded the shrine to Dionysus, whereupon the oreibasia was carried out in all its glory on the highest parts of Parnassos by an officially sanctioned band of maenads.

"A living religion is a stone of many facets, any of which can be turned to face the light."²

Dionysus and Apollo are united - together they make art and totality, but Dionysus is difficult for modern man to accept. His violence is ecstatic, creative, unpremeditated and non-political. We do not understand it. A dithyramb is an ecstasy of transformations and destructions - "they sing the dithyrambic song filled with sufferings and allusions to some change of state that brought with it wandering about and dispersion".³ Rouault painted dithyrambs and so did Goya, for their destructive "social" comment is universal, not political.

"... no man can submit without a struggle to the experience of having his distinctively human faculty of

reason and all that connects him with the normal world overwhelmed and submerged by those animal elements..."⁴

Said Zarathustra: "I tell you one must still have chaos in one, to give birth to a dancing star."⁵

The stirring up of conflict is a Luciferian virtue composed of combustion and creative light. "Divine curiosity yearns to be born, and does not shrink from conflict, suffering and sin. Consciousness can only exist through the continual recognition of the unconscious, just as anything that lives must pass through many deaths."⁶

Dionysus was hailed as the giver of all good gifts and feared as the eater of raw flesh and man-tearer. He is the sum of opposites, contradictions and paradox, the dismembered and scattered god incarnate. A horned child crowned with serpents, he was seized by the Titans on Hera's orders, torn into shreds and boiled in a cauldron while a pomegranate tree sprouted from the soil where his blood had fallen. He was rescued and reconstituted by his grandmother Rhea, and reared, disguised as a girl, in the women's quarters of the palace of King Athamas of Orchomenus. He underwent transformation into a kid or ram, and was reared by the nymphs of Heliconian Mount Nysa, where he invented wine. Driven mad by Hera, who recognised him despite his effeminacy, he wandered all over the world,

/ spreading.....

spreading joy and terror and establishing his mysteries.⁷

The initiate to the Dionysiac mysteries abandoned himself to his animal nature and thereby experienced the fertilizing power of the Earth Mother. The initiating agent was wine. "Wine when it rises to the head will prompt movements ... and bring into the open words and ideas till then latent and unexpressed,"⁸ "For Bacchic rites and minds in frenzy can produce much prophecy."

In time these rites became too wild and turbulent for more ascetic souls and in the worship of Orpheus religious ecstasies were experienced inwardly. Christianity finally dispelled the mysteries, though the early church was obliged to incorporate many practices into its rituals.⁹

The ritual of communion in both Dionysiac and Christian religion was the same, but the level of awareness to the participant differed. For Dionysus the participant looks back to the origin of things: "to the 'stormbirth' of the god who is blasted from the resistant womb of Mother Earth."¹⁰ The rite represented in the Villa de Misteri in Pompeii evokes the god as a mask of terror reflected in the cup of Dionysus offered to the initiate.

The participant in the Christian mystery looks forward to the ultimate hope of union with a transcendent god.

Orpheus "remembers Dionysus but looks forward to Christ."



His death and scattering were at the hands of Dionysus's maenads. These possessed handmaids also tear Dionysus in the form of the sacrificial bull, who thus sacrifices himself to himself. Agave is the "devouring, searing mother"¹¹ who also gathers the fragments of her son - the son gives birth to the mother. Images of the Great Mother and her dying son-lover touch on the innermost workings of the creative mind, where the borders between life and death, love and aggression grow dim and insubstantial.

"Formation, Transformation
Eternal Mind's eternal recreation."¹²

"The Mothers! Mothers - sound with wonder haunted...
What is this word, that I must dread to hear?"

Faust descends to the depths of creative power to recreate the beauty of Helen and Paris. There is no known way to the Unreachable "wherein lie motionless the causes, forms and original images of all things which have been and which shall be." (Plutarch)

The chief characteristic of the worship of Dionysus was possession - by the god. For a brief period of time the worshippers stepped out of their mundane selves, and the god stepped in. Anything and everything was possible. They were divine.

"The most decisive and profound of all religious dramas (is) the seizure of man by divinity."¹³ The most extreme and dramatic example of such seizure is the shaman.

Mircea Eliade points out that the specific element of shamanism is not so much his possession by spirits as the ecstasy provoked by his ascension to the sky, or by the descent to Hell - the Nekyia. Very often the way to the assumption of his vocation lies through affliction bravely borne and eventually transformed into spiritual grace. "It is very noticeable in these societies (and others!) that those whose lives flow smoothly without much difficulty or distress are rarely summoned by the spirit."¹⁴ Very often the summoning spirits begin by tormenting the person they later make a shaman - "those whom the gods call they first humble with affliction and despair....moreover... the powers involved are often both the causes of misfortune and the means of its cure." The Akawaio Indians say that a man must die before he becomes a shaman.

It is an almost universal fact that induction into the shamanistic career follows a traumatic experience - often genuine physical illness. In Western society the acquisition of psychic powers or great insight often follows severe illness or near-fatal accident. A frightening illness of

C.G. Jung's vouchsafed him glorious and iridescent visions by night and a grey desert of despair by day. After this a fruitful period of work began for him, when most of his principal works were written. Topically, Uri Geller is supposed to have developed his fork-bending powers during a long illness. Artists do not usually discover their early gifts in such a violent and dramatic fashion, but many produce their finest works after the same sort of experience. Goya "did not become the great painter we know today until he had been afflicted by an illness which left him permanently deaf and unable to communicate ... except through his painting".¹⁵ There, possibly, lies the secret - the illness or disability should not be merely an unpleasant and tiresome affliction to be endured for the sake of one's character, but something that turns the artist's eye inward and brings him face to face with the eternal questions to which he must find an answer in his medium. The initial encounter with the self casts a dark shadow ahead of time.

"A work of art is not a disease," says Jung. "Personal causes have as much or as little to do with the work of art as the soil with the plant that springs from it."¹⁶ It's special significance is that it has soared beyond the personal concerns of its creator.

The Shaman, like other mystics (e.g. St. Paul) is frequently reluctant to assume the burden of his vocation - it may be quite contrary to his own wishes and interests. This phenomenon in the creative mind can be most strongly experienced in what Jung describes as the "class of works that flow more or less complete and perfect - like Pallas Athene from the head of Zeus."¹⁷ The artist is overwhelmed by thoughts and images his own will could never have conceived; an unseen current sweeps him along. The work refuses to let the artist stop or even rest, and if for any reason it has to be broken off, severe mental and physical suffering results. Zarathustra treated Nietzsche like this.

"The unborn work in the psyche of the artist is a force of nature that achieves its ends either with tyrannical might or subtle cunning, regardless of the personal fate of the man who is its vehicle - a living thing implanted in the human psyche."¹⁸

Sometimes the shaman surrenders his soul like Faust. Gnosis means the gift of illumination in return for a surrendering of the self or part of the self - a fusing of man and divinity.

/Full...

Full possession is widely interpreted as a form of temporary death. The shaman accepts an involuntary surrender to chaos - struggle as he might, disorder eventually seizes him and marks him. But he does not remain a slave to chaos. "Out of the agony and affliction and dark night of the soul comes literally the ecstasy of spiritual victory" and he forges a new relationship with the spirit which makes him a shaman.

Shamanistic religions assume that at least on certain occasions man can rise to the level of the gods.

CHAPTER 5. SOCIAL RITES OF INITIATION

It seems that the ritual of the initiation rite, especially in "primitive" societies, took the novice back to a deeper level of the mother-child identity (Earth Mother - child) which forced him to experience a symbolic death from which he was then ceremonially rescued by a rite of the new birth. This provided him with a "rite of passage" from one stage of life to the next. Jung taught that these events are not confined to the psychology of youth, but that every new phase of development throughout an individual's life is accompanied by a repetition of the original conflict between the Self and the Ego.¹

Every existential crisis brings once again into question both the reality of the world and the presence of man in the world - which must be of a religious nature, since religious (and artistic) experience is an experience of existence in totality.²

"How can you make religious art one day and another kind of art the next?" asks Picasso.³

/Aleister....

Aleister Crowley's ordeal for the depressed and jaded Hollywood film star, Elizabeth Fox, who came to join his community at the Abbey of Theleme in Cefalù, was to order her to begin with a month's solitary meditation in a lean-to shelter on a cliff-top. Stripped, like Ishtar, of all the insignia of her status, she was completely naked and alone, except for a woollen burnoose for chilly days, and the sun, moon and stars for company. For nineteen days she wrestled with the spectres of fear, resentment and boredom until suddenly she felt "perfect calm, deep joy, renewal of strength and courage" - enough, in fact, to decide that Crowley's way of life at the Abbey was not for her, and she left.⁴

"... bear in mind that no man can hinder you from conforming each word and deed to that Nature of which you are a part."⁵

Forty days and forty nights in the wilderness is a traditional part of the prophet's awakening.

The young novice for initiation is called upon to give up (at least temporarily) wilful ambition and all desire and to submit to the ordeal. He must be willing to submit to this trial without hope of success - he must, in fact, be prepared to die. Whether the token death (tattooing, circum-

-cision, etc.) be mild or severe, the purpose is to create the symbolic mood of death from which may spring the symbolic mood of rebirth. The initiate emerges from "the bush" a man, not only new-born but informed - he knows the mysteries, he has experienced revelations.

Women's mysteries are equally profound religious experiences.⁶ The girl isolated in her dark hut learns to spin and weave as the moon spins time and weaves the lives of humanity. Her revelation is the sacredness of the feminine. Initiation ceremonies often take place in the river - water is chaos, the hut represents cosmic creation. She discovers the spiritual meaning of her own life as both real and sanctified - she does not need Woman's Lib.

Every human mother imitating the primordial act should find herself in direct contact with the Great Genetrix and let herself be guided by her in the accomplishment of the mystery. The Earth Mother is no Virgin - she's an old hand at the game.

The emphasis in this personal initiation and ordeal in real societies (and real art schools) is on the individual. The group of novices may be taught the same skills and techniques, may even undergo the same ordeals, of mutilations on the one hand, examinations on the other, but the

/ result...

result that counts in the end is the person that develops in the process. It has nothing to do with the "drink it down - down - down" and doughball-swallowing mentality - the initiate does not emerge as one of the boys. He has taken his first step on the road to becoming a man.

It is only the first step. It is fatally easy to sit back/^{after}achievement and feel that you have done your bit. You should, of course, heed Apuleius and not arrogantly storm the inner sanctum and demand that the goddess co-operate, but keep your nature in harmony with all nature by living and working with senses and instincts alert, so that when she sends her summons in a dream, you won't miss it.

After the universal descent into the dark underworld of the war there were many decorated war heroes who were unable to accept the challenge of civilian life. They simply switched off in 1945, and merely went through the motions of living after that, unless someone prepared to listen to their war exploits brought them back to their earlier vitality for an hour or two. In women, the physical and mental ordeals of the menopause coincide very often with the end of the only creative life they know - the bringing up of children. Instead of emerging from a long and difficult rite of passage welcoming the opportunity to be themselves instead of other people's mothers, and creating a new relation-

-ship and environment alone for the first time with their men, they sink back into the hell of depression and dependency and wave aside any hand that offers to pull them out.

"Before Nothingness modern man is paralysed."⁷

"Life is the important thing," says Wyndham Lewis, "But he cannot get at it except through himself.

"The finest artists ... are those men who are so trained and sensitised that they have a perpetually renewed power of DOING WHAT NATURE DOES....."⁸

Later initiatory experiences may take the form of a lonely journey or kind of spiritual pilgrimage - the familiar "wandeljahre" of the artist - on which the initiate may become acquainted with the nature of death - not as a last judgement or any initiatory trial of strength; it is a journey of release, renunciation and atonement, presided over and fostered by some spirit of compassion.

At a later stage still there is the spirit of divine discontent forcing all free men to face some new discovery or to live their lives in a new way. But no change of environment or job will serve unless there has been some inner transcendence of old values in creating, not inventing a new pattern of life.

Initiatory death is always a recommencement, never an end. One must pass from chaos to creation, for it always ends in the creation of something. "A picture is a sum of destructions," says Picasso."

CHAPTER 6. THE ARTIST AND THE NOKYIA

"Everybody who has any respect for painting feels scared when he starts a new canvas."

"A person who has never been afraid has no imagination."

"The only sensible way to regard the art life is that it is a privilege you are willing to pay for."¹

Each new drawing, each new painting should be a journey from the known to the unknown and back again. In drawing, one simple instrument is able to clarify experience and the hidden secrets of form. What really matters in art is, and always has been, the direct encounter with the work.

"It does not matter what incentive the artist has to creation," said Wyndham Lewis.² "If you do not use the shapes and colours characteristic of your environment, you will only use some others characteristic, more or less, of someone else's environment." The artist's function is to create, not to make something pretty - art is never great unless the ultimate realities lie beneath its seductive surface. It is bad to pretend, dressing up clichés with surface novelties - it is not necessary to be sensational

or strange to produce great art.

Klee said that it is the artist's mission to penetrate "as far as may be toward that secret ground where primal law feeds growth ... our beating heart drives us downward, far down to the primal ground."

We feel safe when we imitate the appearance of nature. We create scenes that are comfortable to live with - the impression of that distant thunderstorm has no kinship with Zeus, the yellow egg in the sky never seared a man's eyeballs. Ragged urchins in picturesque squalour tug our heartstrings while making a reproachful but charming picture.

Art has nothing to do with comfort. It is not the application of beauty, the expression of outer aspects, nor the imparting of moral or intellectual instruction - even the attempt to do so has nothing to do with art.

Art is discovery and knowledge. Plotinus gives great importance to the doctrine that all creativity is the result of contemplation, and in the contemplation of nature we become part of the secret soul of things.³ We must detach ourselves from what we see, but not so much as not to return. We do not need to go far afield - "...the Himalayas could not put anything real into my hands. But God ... Himself can open the whole universe to our gaze in the

narrow space of a single lane."⁴

"Roosters -" he said, "we always have roosters, but like everything else in life we must discover them."⁵

As the painting grows, so a conversation develops between the artist and his work. The medium begins to assert itself, and frustrates the painter's conscious intentions. This is the beginning of a descent to the cavern of rebirth - the rigid art student usually mistakes control of his medium for good craftsmanship and what emerges are clichés and mannerisms and dead paint. A creative artist will welcome the independent life of his medium - the work assumes a vitality of its own, and its creator must either accept or reject it.

It requires humility to come to terms with the independent life of the creature to which one has given birth. Facing up to one's work evokes intense anxiety, and sometimes outright destructiveness. The point is frequently reached where it requires a physical effort of will to resist pitching the whole horrid mess into the dirtbin.

The nightmare of sterility and emptiness haunts - the most dreaded spectre in the artistic underworld. It requires great courage to stare again and again into the abyss - and see nothing, no wisp of prophecy, no gleam of hope.

The sane artist is able to face his fear of an inner void openly - "death has do be faced absolutely without any sly anticipation of possible resurrection".⁵ Any artist who ventures into new territory risks chaos and fragmentation, for nature is disorderly.

The uncreative sterile mind cannot tolerate the genuine emotional experience of self-destruction, and will avoid the labyrinthine entrance to the Underworld. There is no material or spiritual need for this "artist" to make the descent, for today the previously underprivileged classes are the consumers of culture, and since they are in the numerical majority they control the market by demand. "While this continues the taste of the majority will be determined by the lowest common denominator and market research will feed the determinant back to the producers of cultural values."⁶ The Hades drop-out will wear the sort of clothes that will immediately proclaim him an ARTIST, and work to the accompaniment of soft background music in his tastefully decorated STUDIO at a fashionable seaside resort. He will sell outrageously overpriced seascapes to rich holiday makers, who take home not only a souvenir of their fortnight by the sea, but a gilt-edged investment as well.

There is another danger. The life of a creative person

/ cannot...

cannot be otherwise than full of conflicts, for two forces are at war in him. "Those whom the gods would destroy they first make mad." The region of the underworld, the abyss, the birthplace of images sublime, primordial, pregnant, bloodchilling, of revelations and visions of other worlds, has its victims.^o A person might pay dearly for the divine gift of creative fire - which could well consume him.

In his essay on Picasso of 1932, Jung observed the symbols in his work of Picasso's journey to the Underworld and the leave-taking from the upper world. These included the Tuat-blue of the Egyptian underworld, the warning woman with a child, the "Syphilitic tubercular adolescent prostitute" - and the change of shape into Harlequin. ("It may be remarked in passing that Harlequin is an ancient chthonic god.") He wanders like Faust through Picasso's "crude, earthly shapes".

"The Nekyia is no aimless and purely destructive fall into the abyss but ... a descent into the cave of initiation and secret knowledge. The journey through the psychic history of mankind has as its object the restoration of the whole man by awakening the memories in the blood. The Katabasis and Katalysis are followed by a recognition of the necessity of conflicting pairs of opposites. After the

/ symbols....

symbols of madness experienced during the period of disintegration, there follow images which represent the coming together of opposites. This ... is neither the end nor the goal ... It represents a broadening of his outlook."⁷

Jung warns, presumably on the evidence of his patients, that this adventure is a dangerous affair, and can lead at any moment to a standstill or a catastrophic bursting asunder of the opposites so recently and tentatively joined together. Picasso emerged triumphant despite Jung's forebodings, but the history of art is littered with casualties.

"It is what we are that creates for us the circumstances of our existence."⁸

Images of the daylife are symbols of the dark, and the world anxiety of the mid-twentieth century is reflected in the work of many men to whom the Underworld is both alluring and rewarding. They are content to remain there, forever, if necessary. Francis Bacon's standstill began with a scream.

There are too many examples of the "catastrophic bursting asunder" to attempt to analyse them on a "which came first" basis. Bankers as well as artists go mad or jump off high buildings, and presumably undergo financial Nekyias of their own. Unlike Psyche, they do not listen to the voice of the tower telling the safe route

through Hell.

De Staël, van Gogh, Soutine - as artists they are nothing but their work, and if a work of art is explained psychologically, "then either a work of art is a neurosis or a neurosis is a work of art" - a kind of thinking that is nothing but "bad taste masquerading as science".⁹

"I have indeed fought through a Hell of terrors and horrors (which none could know but myself) in a divided existence; now no longer divided nor at war with myself, I shall travel on in the strength of the Lord God, as Poor Pilgrim says." (William Blake)

Art is life - if art does let you down, you still have life. It is NOT the other way round - that is cultural art, the art of the lowest common denominator. Life in harmony with nature cannot be attained by anyone who does not know who or what he is. The painter must search as an explorer to lose and regain himself. There is a stage where one can only proceed by Dionysus, but there is a return to Apollo in the end. Art acts with the immediate certainty of intuition, the recognition of a truth that one has always known. It is this recognition that one struggles to find, the light at the end of the dark passage of the Underworld.

"It is too simple - I always knew it it is the remembering of an old forgotten secret like coming home."¹⁰

Simple and unadorned is the language of Truth.

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