

Excerpt from *The Cultic Code, The Living Books of Paul Bowles*, IV.II. 3.5-6. Cult as myth...pp.184-7.

3.5 Archetypal attributes

In order to understand myth and mythical literature as inner reality, the audience must **relate to the hero, and walk his/her path**. This relation automatically sets the order of archetypal figures, of character and plot. Through these, **morality and spirituality** become the substance of myth. As there is no self-interest involved, here there is no trace of relativity, duality, division, no place for indecision, alienation, disintegration. The values of morality and spirituality are always in the affirmative, as their negation does not exist, only their lack. The hero of a traditional myth is always sympathetic, and is always triumphant, in a metanarrative i.e moral and spiritual way.

The cult of life as a devotional axiom lies in recognising a higher production (cast, direction, screenplay) than meets the eye. Awareness of this gives Bowles's single triumphant hero, Amar the **attributes** which are **identical with the magical accessories** of mythical heroes. Perseus receives the three invaluable objects from the nymphs of the well-spring: the winged sandals, the hat of invisibility, and the sack to carry the gorgon-head. These are analogous with the sandals, hat, and caduceus of Hermes. Bowles's portrait of Amar clarifies the source and role of the three attributes. The boy primarily has the familial stigma of being Chorfa or sharif. "If his family had not been Chorfa, descendents of the Prophet, his life no doubt would have been easier." (*Spider's* 19) This shows that the mythical road to achieving virtue begins as hardship, a fate to be fulfilled. The second attribute is the talent of healing, the *baraka*, passed down in patrilineal continuity. "If someone were ill, or in a trance, or had been entered by some foreign spirit, even Amar often could set him right, by touching him with his hand and murmuring a prayer." (19) Amar's real virtue begins beyond the talent. "The secret was that he was not like anybody else; he had powers that no one else possessed. Being certain of that was like having a treasure hidden somewhere out of the world's sight, and it meant much more than merely having the *baraka*." (19) It is the contradictory nature of this third attribute which drives Amar into the conflict and thus generates the entire story. For his secret is that he knows that he is unique and universal at once, and sees the world as being the same. This is so unbelievable for other people that it cannot be voiced without being called "crazy." (20) The road which issues on this contradiction leads Amar through his adventures and finally to the fulfilment of personal virtue. When he had done all to save his local friend, the American, and the conspirator, he is crowned.

When he himself became the music ... that was the moment when the music became a bridge from his heart to other people's hearts, and when he returned to himself he knew that Allah had lifted him up out of the world for an instant and for that short space of time he had had the *h'dia*, the gift. (393)

The three mythical attributes, therefore, unfold into a passage, from fate, through stigma, to virtue. The configuration of the three not only represents but presents the reality of the gift, a real and present nuomenon, the substance of the story. The crown achieved by the hero is where the myth opens to the audience, not primarily in comprehension but in intuitive identification.

The point is that Buddhahood, Enlightenment, cannot be communicated, but only the way to Enlightenment. This doctrine of the incommunicability of the Truth which is beyond names and forms is basic to the great Oriental, as well as to the Platonic, traditions. Whereas the truths of science are communicable, being demonstrable hypothesis rationally founded

on observable facts, ritual, mythology, and metaphysics are but guides to the brink of a transcendent illumination, the final step to which must be taken by each in his own silent experience.¹

The **modern heroes of Bowles** are broken figures, and I believe this is why the author had to create montages of them, to present some kind of character totality. *Spider's* is an exception, for Amar, blessed with the divine gift of wholeness, is the absolute prince of heroes, the epitome of the precocious urchin and brilliant spirit, betrayed, scandalised, abandoned, but triumphant. He is the "natural man"² Bowles is in search of not primarily in the world but within himself. In this sense myth is a guided self-search for this natural or cosmic man, and all stories may be mythical which lead to this self-fulfilment. The religious archetypal analogy of individuation is with awakening. The heroes of the other three novels contain a couple each, perhaps signalling that the world, particularly the West, can no longer produce a single total heroic figure. Bowles's fixed character dyads and varied triads are precise depictions of the cultic organism itself. Port and Kit, Dyar and Thami, Stenham and Lee, Day and Grove must be fused in a way, in order to get the features of a mythical hero: good, pure, brave, clever, and triumphant – not in climbing to the narrative top, but in flying up to the clean and luminous air of the metanarrative field. This Amar does alone. It must be understood that all mythical characters are aspects of the reader/listener. The hero is our own most integrated aspect, and identifying with the metanarratively successful protagonist integrates the audience into their own personal inner totality of substance, and into outer analogies of the cultic organism.

3.6 Vertical order

The magic of myths is that while we do not have to physically suffer the trials of the hero, we are offered his/her moral-spiritual triumph. Through the hero's effort and suffering, the audience is directly purified, and merits the moment of bliss hidden in the tale, adventurous or gruesome. For while the hero cannot return to it from the end of the horizontal road, the reader can remain on the vertical peak. For one comes out of a myth not at its horizontal end (narrative), but the vertical (metanarrative). Liminal passages present ways of exit, primarily in terms of metanarrative, although indirectly this may also bring its fruit on the narrative plain. These places present a proper *axis mundi*, a vertical road upon which the original order, the real hierarchy as sacral law, identical to what I term metanarrative principle of substance, or natural-human-cosmic law of integration may be experienced.

If some order may be extracted from the different rites of passage presented in Bowles, a seven-graded ladder takes shape. Bowles presents an array of rites of passage which may be associated with stations of initiations such as birth (attaining presence, see Dyar), baptism (vital integration, see Kit), marriage (conjunction, see Day and Soto, Amar and Stenham), knowledge (processive, situative, and creative, see Port, Stenham, Amar), death struggle (separation, see Port), disintegration (fall, see Kit, Dyar), and epiphany (flight, see Dyar, Amar). The analogies of these are present in Christian tradition as the seven sanctities.

In the novels, apparently spatial journeys are enactments of the **move into fulfilled time**. In each novel, a certain number and combination of rites are presented in the total concealment of metanarrativity, devoid of dogmatism. But in the unity of the four books, the typology of the seven specific rites becomes discernible as birth, baptism, marriage, knowledge, death, struggle, and epiphany. It may be no coincidence that the Sufi poem *Conference of the Birds* by Attar of Nishapur the journey into fulfilment presents exactly the same seven stages are. Each of the seven types of initiations is an autonomous universal cycle, and together they form a larger cycle, the field of substance, which allows the audience a glimpse of the luminous subtle body. As the three stages of the rite of passage marks

¹ Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, 33-34 footnotes.

² Gena Dagel Caponi (ed.), "Conversations with Paul Bowles," 90.

three aspects of substance, so Attar's seven valleys along the way mark its seven stages or aspects. These are the Valley of Quest (as struggle), The Valley of Love (as epiphany), The Valley of Understanding (as knowledge), The Valley of Independence and Detachment (as birth), The Valley of Unity (as marriage), The Valley of Astonishment and Bewilderment (as baptism), and The Valley of Deprivation and Death (as death).

Bowles's enigmatic use of strong **natural** symbols as the sky, the sun, the night, wind etc. is a further sign leading from the human into the meta-human world. The "apocalyptic **imagery** of fulfilment"³ is characteristic of the quartet. The mysterious interconnection of the protagonists' psyche (interiority) and natural forces (exteriority) is decisive in the novels. This shows, on the one hand, his meta-linguistic ambition to draw meaning from the common universal source of vertical **archetypes**. On the other hand, the common organism of these entwined worlds is suggested. The metanarrative model can perhaps help to reveal their common organism, as well as suggest that their influence is mutual, and that there may be an even larger field in which the natural, the human, and the cosmic organism are differentiated but undivided aspects.

³ Paul Ricoeur, *Time and Narrative*, 2:19.