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## Was Joseph Campbell a Postmodernist?

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### INTRODUCTION

IN A RECENT essay David L. Miller develops and defends the provocative thesis that many of Joseph Campbell's academic detractors unwittingly share a common cause with many of his popular enthusiasts, namely, the erroneous belief that Campbell's approach was essentially characterized by "a certain kind of universalizing, archetypal comparativism" (6). While not denying that Campbell was interested in calling attention to certain underlying similarities among apparently diverse mythological motifs, Miller nonetheless argues that Campbell's ultimate concern was to use the comparative method in order to exhibit and illuminate key *differences* between mythologies, and, furthermore, that this accent (to borrow one of Campbell's favorite phrases) on the culturally specific and historically determined differences between particular mythological traditions was a consequence of Campbell's underlying philosophical rejection of the very idea of a timeless universal—including and especially the notion of a universal meaning. Thus, on Miller's view, "Campbell was postmodern before his time" (10), having artfully anticipated many of the themes and positions subsequently developed by such thinkers as Derrida and Lacan. Miller maintains that Campbell's true legacy to the history of religions is being carried on by those

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pluralist-minded neo-comparativists who, having adopted and applied the insights of postmodernist trends in philosophy, emphasize those features that serve to distinguish one mythology or religion from another.

While Miller's perspective may indeed serve as a useful antidote to some of the interpretive oversimplifications he so ably diagnoses, I am not at all convinced that it does justice to the full complexity of Campbell's position. For Campbell was far too astute and independent a thinker to have become unwittingly trapped in the *cul-de-sac* of postmodernism—or, indeed, in the dead end of any other academic fashion. For I wish to argue that Campbell was adamantly opposed to certain key postmodernist dogmas, even as he anticipated certain postmodernist criticisms of modernism. In other words, postmodernism in Campbell's thinking has been transcended (*aufgehoben*) in Hegel's sense: its insights have been preserved even as its errors have been abolished.

In order to make my case, I shall first have to say a bit about the meaning of "modernism" and "postmodernism," from both a philosophical and historical perspective. In the light of this brief analysis, I shall then examine certain selected aspects of what Miller himself regards as some of Campbell's most serious, scholarly—and neglected—works, including "Primitive Man as Metaphysician" (1969b[1960]) and his 1957 *Eranos* lecture on "The Symbol without Meaning" (1969a)—to which Miller has rightly drawn our attention.<sup>1</sup>

### POSTMODERNISM, REALISM, AND THE POSSIBILITY OF TRANSCENDENCE

What, then, is "postmodernism" and its relationship to 'modernism'? The philosopher Huston Smith has offered the following characterization

<sup>1</sup> It is peculiar, to say the least, that Miller places Campbell's biographers, Stephen and Robin Larsen, in the camp of those who, in Miller's words, do not attend to or take seriously Campbell's remarks in "The Symbol without Meaning." In a footnote Miller cites page 431 of their work *A Fire in the Mind: The Life of Joseph Campbell as the place where the Larsens "dismiss[ed] . . . the Eranos opening" (12n.)*. Yet what the text actually shows is that, far from ignoring, dismissing, or otherwise minimizing the importance of this opening (on p. 431 or elsewhere), the Larsens cite it at length, describing it not only as "witty and ingenious" but also as "a bold opening that showed [Campbell's] own awareness of an American tendency toward ethnocentricity and provincialism" (Larsen and Larsen: 431), such awareness having qualified Campbell—at least on Miller's own interpretation—for inclusion in the postmodernist camp. The Larsens go on to characterize the essay as a whole as "daring, erudite, and poetical" (433); they take note of Campbell's argument that symbolic forms are historically conditioned and determined rather than mere instances of a single, timeless, universal cosmological law (and they cite Campbell's discussion of the absence of the mandala image in Paleolithic forms as a key example of this thesis); they explicitly recognize that Campbell departed from the Jungian belief that the purpose of life is the search for meaning; and, finally, they (like Miller) also suggest that the *Eranos* lecture provided an early formulation of the very same principle that Campbell would reiterate thirty years later in his interview with Bill Moyers, namely, that what people are really seeking is not some intellectualized or linguistic "meaning" of life but rather a direct experience of being alive. If it is true, as Miller claims, that some of Campbell's admirers don't appreciate the significance of this 1957 essay, the Larsens clearly do not belong to this unfortunate club.

as a rough and ready guide: "Whereas the Modern Mind assumed that it knew more than its predecessors because the natural and historical sciences were flooding it with new knowledge about nature and history, the Postmodern Mind argues (paradoxically) that it knows more than others did because it has discovered how little the human mind *can* know" (xiii).

There are, of course, different forms of ignorance, just as there are different forms of knowledge. When in Plato's *Apology* Socrates identified "wisdom" as the recognition of one's own ignorance, however, Socrates did not mean to suggest, for example, that knowing that one does not know that Albany is the capital of New York state makes one wise. Socrates was not referring to ignorance about mere matters of fact; his concern was with our awareness of the inherent limitations of human cognitive powers as such. Much as we aspire to it, we cannot ever reasonably claim to have ascended to a god's-eye point of view. "Now the hour to part has come," Socrates declares to the jury which has just condemned him to death. "Which of us goes to the better lot is known to no one, except the god" (Plato 1981b: 44). Such agnosticism is echoed in many of the world's wisdom traditions. In the words of the verse from the *Kena Upanishad* (2,1,1, 3) that Campbell himself quoted so often:

It is conceived of by him by whom It is not conceived of.

He by whom It is conceived of, knows It not.

It is not understood by those who say they understand It.

It is understood by those who say they understand It not.

Yet if the touchstone of "postmodernism" was merely the recognition of the inherent limitations of human cognitive powers, then the postmodern view would amount to little more than a seemingly reactionary revision to Socraticism—a description that the postmodernists themselves would hardly accept. In fact, I want to suggest that Smith's description of postmodernism as "Socratic" is indeed somewhat misleading.

In Plato's early dialogues, Socrates is presented as in quest, along with his typically hapless interlocutor, for a universal meaning or "form" (*eidos*) of certain concepts, such as "piety" in the *Euthyphro*; yet in each instance the inquiry is incomplete and no definition is obtained. Indeed, it is precisely Euthyphro's error (a priest's conceit!) to believe that, as the official expert, he knows exactly what "piety" is. But instead of allowing the dialectic to bring his tacit, unconscious confusions to light, Euthyphro refuses to acknowledge the inconsistencies in his beliefs, and storms off indignantly at the conclusion of the dialogue. Euthyphro's problem is not that he doesn't know what "piety" really is, but that he is unwilling or unable to admit this. At the same time, Socrates also rejects the purely skeptical or relativist stance by making it quite clear that it would be an equally egregious error to suppose that this definition does not exist and that "piety" simply means whatever a given individual or community says it does. The real, objective existence of a quality of "piety," quite apart

from what we actually (or could possibly) do or think or perceive, is a necessary presupposition and regulative ideal, not only of rational moral inquiry but also of intelligent moral judgment and action. Nevertheless, it would be the height of *hubris*—and thus a sign of deep irrationality—for any human being to claim that comprehensiveness of vision which would allow one to truly say of any and every action, in any and every given time or place, that it is definitely and without qualification either pious or impious. And thus it is no accident that Plato typically portrays those who think they know as willful, self-righteous zealots: violent fanatics blindly driven by impulse, as opposed to the Socratic philosopher, who is guided by the cool, steadying hand of reason.

Thus in the *Apology* Socrates describes Meletus, his chief accuser, as “highly insolent and uncontrolled. He seems to have made this deposition out of insolence, violence and youthful zeal” (1981b: 32). Socrates, of course, met a violent end: he was condemned to death and executed by the Athenians on charges of impiety—not worshipping the gods of the city while devoting himself to his own inner oracle, his private god: the *daemon*—and corrupting the youth by teaching them to do likewise. That is to say, Socrates was executed because he encouraged the individual to pay homage to one’s own inherent inner divinity in preference to the publicly worshipped deities of the Olympian pantheon, whose reality he openly questioned. An incredulous but playful Socrates had chided Euthyphro by asking him whether he actually believed in the literal truth of the stories of the gods; and the self-righteous, humorless priest earnestly replied in the affirmative (1981a: 10).<sup>2</sup> But the religious officials of Athens could not tolerate this playful, questioning attitude: they asserted that the gods *really* existed. And as the philosopher R.G. Collingwood well understood, there is a natural and necessary connection between the linguistic act of assertion, a certain concept of objective reality, the existence of a religious cult, and the physical act of persecution. “Now assertion or the logical function of the mind is the recognition of reality as such, and reality is that which is real for all minds. If a number of minds are engaged in imagining, they have no common ground, for each man’s imaginings are his own. But if they are engaged in asserting, they at once become a society, for each asserts what he believes to be not his own but common property, objective reality. And even when their assertions are different, they are not merely different, like different works of art, but contradictory; and contradiction, even in its extreme forms of persecution and [holy] war, is a function of sociability” (116).

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<sup>2</sup> Plato’s explicit coupling of the two charges of impiety and corruption in the *Euthyphro* (1981a: 6–7) is especially noteworthy, given that Euthyphro, as a priest of the Olympian cult, is a state-appointed religious functionary whose authority derives from his political office; whereas Socrates’s authority derives from his own inward experience of the *daemon*. The confrontation between Euthyphro and Socrates in this dialogue is thus highly suggestive of what Campbell identified as the classic conflict between the priest and the shaman (1969e: 229–242).

It is, in fact, precisely these inseparably interconnected issues of realism, meaning, language, and intolerance that go to the heart of the debate between the modernist and the postmodernist. But realism is the key.

Just as postmodernism has been shaped by its rejection of modernism, so modernism was, in its previous turn, shaped by its rejection of medievalism. Still, this latter antagonism—the war between religion and science—should not blind us to the presence of deeper threads of continuity. What the classical scientific standpoint inherited from Christian theism is as important as what it rejected or refuted; and what was carried over was precisely the doctrine of metaphysical realism. As the philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre has noted, “a central project, perhaps the central project, of the natural sciences is to tell us what nature is, whether we are observing it or not. So the history of modern physical theory is in large part the history of a successful attempt to understand nature in a way that is independent of the standpoint of any particular observer” (1982: 3). To possess true positive knowledge of nature-as-it-is-in-itself, independently of our perceiving or observing it, is analogous to the medieval theologian’s claims with respect to the divine. Again, MacIntyre: “[T]heism has as its core the view that the world is what it is independently of human thinking and judging and desiring and willing. There is a single true view of the world and of its ordering, and for human judgments to be true and for human desiring and willing to be aimed at what is genuinely good they must be in conformity with that divinely created order. Hence . . . [the] repudiation of the distinction between the real and the apparent involve[s] the rejection of Christian theology” (1990: 66–67).

To be somewhat more precise: It is not merely the repudiation of the purely formal concepts of “real” and “apparent” that involves a rejection of Christian theism but also and just as importantly the rejection of the possibility of a true positive theory of God, i.e., that our image of and beliefs about God do accurately represent or correspond, in some significant way, to the divine nature. Theism—especially in its Christian versions—radically departs from Socratism in holding that the real *must* be knowable with absolute certainty. Nor could it be otherwise. “With [St.] Paul,” writes Walter Kaufmann, “specific beliefs were moved into the center as requirements for salvation: dogma became essential. The reason for the persistent Christian preoccupation with certain beliefs was that these beliefs were considered to be the gate to salvation” (294). Outside the narrow gate of faith, there is no salvation: *extra ecclesiam nulla salus*.

Of course, from the standpoint of that theistic orthodoxy that holds to the existence of an absolute ontological gulf between the divine personal Creator and the world-artifact of his creation, Spinoza’s famous phrase “God or Nature” (*Deus sive Natura*) is formally heretical. But the postmodernist sees this interchangeability of “God” and “Nature” as unintentionally ironic: it turns out that there isn’t a dime’s worth of difference between Science and Religion. Whereas postmodernism abjures the metaphysical

realism at the heart of both the medieval and the modern worldviews, it likewise rejects the more circumspect or "problematic" realism characteristic of Socrates and—albeit in a more sophisticated form—Immanuel Kant. In the "case of a problematic realism," wrote the late philosopher and Kant scholar J.N. Findlay, "something exists, and must be thought of as existing, even though we can know nothing about it, and need not have been thinking of it" (11–12). In the Kantian view, then, that which exists independently of all our conceptions, beliefs, perceptions, and thereby transcends all knowledge and experience—the very source of all phenomenal appearances—can be characterized only in a relatively empty and negative way as the Thing-in-itself, the *Noumenon*, etc. However, even this epistemologically conservative version of realism is anathema to the postmodernist. But why should this be so?

According to Richard Rorty, the doyen of postmodernism in American philosophical circles, the realist ideal of attempting to disengage from our particular, subjective points of view in order to grasp things as they objectively are, in themselves (Nagel: 208), is inextricably bound up with the shibboleth that Truth consists in a some sort of correspondence between linguistic entities (sentences, words) and some extra-linguistic reality "out there." Metaphors of seeing ("view," "discover," "apprehend") are endemic to this ideology, which holds the mind to be the undistorted mirror of an external reality insofar it obtains genuine knowledge. But what, in Rorty's opinion, unites not only Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida, Foucault, and Deleuze, but also Wittgenstein, James, and Dewey, is the recognition that the aspiration to break out of language in order to compare it with something else is impossible: we cannot jump out of our skins. Or, as Wittgenstein said, the limits of my language are the limits of my world. Hence, all worlds are those of our own (linguistic) construction; reality is made, not found—or rather, we find only that which we make with our words. What all these "prophets of the ubiquity of language" (1982a: xxx) have understood, says Rorty, is that every "attemp[t] to get back behind language to something which 'grounds' it, or which it 'expresses,' or to which it might hope to be 'adequate,' have not worked" (1982a: xx).

If, then, our knowledge is limited by the language we speak, the notion of a pure, unmediated experience, and the correlative idea of a linguistically inexpressible mode of knowing (pure intuition), are chimeras. Even, says Rorty, a mere *reference* to that which, like Kant's *Noumenon*, is totally beyond description and serves chiefly as the "ineffable touchstone of inquiry" is, along with the entire galaxy of Kantian distinctions, "purely vacuous" (1982b: 15), and therefore becomes *outré*, unintelligible. There is nothing beneath all the texts and words except more texts and other words; or, as Miller says, the central lesson of postmodernism is "that there is no *dehors texte*" (11).

The consequence of what Rorty calls "textualism" for the comparative study of religion (and also for the descriptive phenomenology of religious

experience) is, as Miller observes, the proliferation of a plethora of irreducibly unique religious meanings corresponding to the variety of distinctive and (so the argument, at least in some versions, goes) conceptually incommensurable religious forms of life. Something akin to this has been argued by Steven Katz, whose remarks on mysticism are worth citing at length:

*There are NO pure (i.e. unmediated) experiences [author's italics]. Neither mystical experience nor more ordinary forms of experience give any indication, or any grounds for believing, that they are unmediated. That is to say, all experience is processed through, organized by, and makes itself available to us in extremely complicated epistemological ways. The notion of unmediated experience seems, if not self-contradictory, at best empty. . . . A proper evaluation of this fact leads to the recognition that in order to understand mysticism it is not just a question of studying the reports of the mystic after the experiential event but of acknowledging that the experience itself as well as the form in which it is reported is shaped by concepts which the mystic brings to, and which shape, his experience. . . . for example, the Hindu mystic does not have an experience of x which he then describes in the, to him, familiar language and symbols of Hinduism, but rather he has a Hindu experience, i.e., his experience is not an unmediated experience of x but is itself the, at least partially, pre-formed anticipated Hindu experience of Brahman. Again, the Christian mystic does not experience some unidentified reality, which he then conveniently labels God, but rather has the at least partially pre-figured Christian experiences of God, or Jesus, or the like. Moreover, as one might have anticipated, it is my view based on what evidence there is, that the Hindu experience of Brahman and the Christian experience of God are not the same. (26)*

Of course, a somewhat stronger version of Katz's position would hold that the experience is not merely partially but essentially or fundamentally constituted by the mystic's conceptual choices, pre-judgments, etc. Hence the distinctive character of the Hindu and Christian experiences is something known *a priori*, independently of and prior to an empirical, case-by-case examination of the phenomenological and historical evidence.

It would seem, however, that the vanishing of the common point of reference—*x*, the unknown and unknowable (or what Campbell himself characteristically termed "the mystery dimension")—entails not merely the inadmissibility of a "universalizing, archetypal comparativism," but also the *de facto* rejection of any religiously interesting notion of transcendence. For if the experience is essentially or entirely pre-formed and, in effect, produced, rather than simply contained and shaped by one's pre-existing vocabularies and associated expectations (and never mind the difficulties this thesis would meet in trying to account for genuine religious innovations), then there is virtually nothing in the experience that cannot be explained or understood in, broadly speaking, anthropological terms (Brown: 246). That is to say, the temporal and spatial modalities have completely swallowed eternity; the sacred has been annihilated by,

or reduced to, the secular; for all languages are creatures of history and culture.

Yet the sweeping character of this claim itself suggests that despite the postmodernists' commitment to eschew all statements about the "ultimate nature of reality" or "the world as a whole," their position smacks of what philosopher Ian Hacking has aptly named "lingua-lism": the metaphysical thesis that all reality is linguistic (182). Perhaps not altogether surprisingly, then, Rorty describes the postmodernist as one who regards him- or herself as "caught in time, as an evanescent moment in a continuing conversation" (1982a: xlivii). At the level of theory, at least, this might seem to suggest the importance not only of our particular conceptual choices but also, in a more general way, of the human consciousness that frames them and has the capacity to act in accordance with them. Except that, in practice, "lingua-lism" leaves everything as it was. For given the rather pervasive view among postmodernists that all our choices and actions are ultimately determined in large measure by unconscious, pre-conscious, or other economic, political, or biological forces beyond our control, the scope of human freedom and aspiration is, practically speaking, quite limited. Indeed, in Rorty's estimate it is sheer "self-deception" for humans to think that they are, in any deep metaphysical sense, "different from inkwells or atoms" (1979: 373). And so we are back in the grips of Newtonian materialism.

Indeed, if the highest purpose of our use of language could only be, pace Rorty, the solution of practical and intellectual problems that interfere in our efforts to obtain a modicum of "ordinary human happiness," or roughly Freud's notion of enjoying one's ability to work and love well (Rorty 1982b: 16), then the upshot of "lingua-lism" may well be an unreflective, Babbitt-like conformity to the prevailing cultural ideology of secularism. Absent "reality," "appearances" cannot be deceiving; they may only be more or less entertaining. In thinking through the consequences of postmodernism, the philosopher Sam Keen has come to a strikingly similar conclusion:

Secularism—the dominance of urban, industrial, and technocratic modes of thinking and organizing life—has anchored our feet in the concrete, limited our horizon to the here and now, and denied us the hope of any transcendence of our brief moment in time. There is no soul, no spirit that transcends our biological, sociological, psychological, and political conditioning. . . . What you see is what you get. Whoever has the most toys when he dies, wins. You only go around once, so go for the gusto. Of course, in the hip postmodern era, we don't waste time arguing about or denying the existence of soul or spirit. The God in whom we trust has more to do with ensuring continued economic growth and sanctifying "the American way of life" than with providing a rationale for belief in transcendence. (250–251)

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If at this point it strikes the perspicuous reader of Campbell's works that there is nothing in common between the shallow, hedonistic "going for the gusto" and the deep level of sacrifice and self-knowledge called for in order to, as he urged, "follow your bliss,"<sup>3</sup> then it should be further evident that there is nothing in his *oeuvre* that denies the reality of transcendence. We now need to turn directly to those very works in order to ascertain precisely how and why the attribution of postmodernism breaks down.

### CAMPBELL'S VISION: RELIGION AFTER POSTMODERNISM

Mythology opens the world so that it becomes transparent to something that is beyond speech, beyond words, in short, to what we call transcendence. . . . My friend Heinrich Zimmer used to say the best things can't be said. . . . The second best are misunderstood. That's because the second best are using the objects of time and space to refer to transcendence. And they are always misunderstood by being interpreted in terms of time and space. The third best: that's conversation. We're using the third best in order to talk about the first and second best.

Joseph Campbell (1990: 40–41)

[T]he point of edifying [i.e., postmodern] philosophy is to keep the conversation going rather than to find objective truth.

Richard Rorty (1979: 377)

Joseph Campbell never doubted that a proper understanding and appreciation of mythology could serve as the cure for the family of diseases from which modernity suffers, the root cause of which is that imbalanced tendency toward the very forms of over-intellectualization of which postmodern "lingua-lism" is but the most recent symptom. Far too often, he wrote, "we let the concept swallow up the percept, and so reverse the process of revelation, thus defending ourselves from experience" (1969a: 16). This defense takes many forms, but clinging to outmoded, shopworn symbol-systems is chief among them.

Now, it is certainly true, as Miller points out, that Campbell, like Nietzsche, believed that the theistic God—as well as all of the traditional god-images—are dead; though they have been hanging onto life-support with a terrible (and socially explosive) tenacity. Like Carl Jung, Campbell regarded the traditional symbols as insulated energy conduits that, thanks

<sup>3</sup> Critic Brendan Gill used the phrase "follow your bliss" as the basis for an accusation that Campbell had sought to justify and encourage the most rapacious behavior of the "greed decade" of the 1980s. This is a clear demonstration that Gill never bothered to read any of Campbell's writings.

to the discoveries and theoretical developments of modern science and history, have lost their conductive properties and can only function now as protective insulation from the power they no longer have the capacity to convey; and, as a result, we have become disspirited and disjointed, lacking any connection to the vital source of our life-energies. But Campbell believed that this source really exists and that it can still be tapped by the brave and ingenious individual who is unafraid of surrendering the false security and comfort of defunct theologies and symbol-systems whose only remaining purpose (and purpose, function, or intention is surely one of the ways Campbell employed the term "meaning" in "The Symbol without Meaning"<sup>4</sup>) is to supply an excuse for social aggression and personal self-congratulation. We must, said Campbell, strive to emulate "the courage of the paleolithic hunter in his individualism and his willingness to face unprotected the spiritual experiences available to our race" (1969a: 189). But what sort of experiences are these?

While Campbell greatly admired the courage of the "shaman-titan" in affirming the validity of his or her own inward spiritual experiences, as opposed to the "timorous piety of the priest-guided" (1969a: 189), hierarchical, authoritarian, exoteric religious forms that came to birth in the planning cultures of the high neolithic period, it should not be supposed, for example, that he would entirely approve of today's popular "archaic revival" or "neo-shamanic" movements.<sup>5</sup> For while the shaman does succeed in penetrating the veil of everyday reality and knowledge of the world of things and their relations, the image-based, penultimate level which the shaman penetrates in vision, dream, and otherworldly visitations is only that of the relatively unknown; whereas the ultimate level "refers to no place, no time, no thing, no fact, not even wonders of such stuff as dreams are made of" (1969b: 63). It is this deeper level of the absolutely unknowable that Campbell referred to as "metaphysical." Yet, as the title of his 1960 essay "Primitive Man as Metaphysician" suggests, the historical schema he had there adumbrated holds that myth was originally created by the few individual poet-seers who correctly read its symbols metaphorically, that is, as referring past the realm of waking consciousness to the second and third levels (the relatively unknown and the absolutely unknowable); whereas mythology was subsequently corrupted by the many (including the priests) who have mistakenly read it primarily as prose, that is, as referring to the first-level, knowable facts of history, society, nature, and the cosmos. Thus, even so-called "primitives"

<sup>4</sup> On "meaning" as a function of the intrinsically inseparable qualities of significance, value, and purpose, see Bohm and Peat (245-271).

<sup>5</sup> Unlike, say, Terence McKenna (1991), Stephen Larsen has explicitly spoken of the importance of creating an ongoing dialogue between the visionary or imaginal, trans-visionary or mystical, and reflective or rational modes of consciousness. Although Larsen finds the shamanic model useful (and has great respect for the followers of the traditional shamanic ways), he envisions a new synthesis that goes beyond all the traditional forms of religion (16-45).

have experiences of depths more profound than those of the archetypal domain.

"Following Rudolf Otto," Campbell wrote in *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology*, "I shall assume the root of mythology as well as of religion to be an apprehension of the numinous" (1976a: 45). Nor in any of Campbell's writings can I detect the slightest indication that he ever believed otherwise. What this suggests is the following: Like Kant, Campbell believed that we can, and indeed in some cases must think about the numinous/noumenal (especially when we are comprehensive in reporting our experiences; for everyone has, to one degree or another, intuitions of Mystery), even though we are immediately thrust into the paradoxical predicament of talking about the "reality" of that which, just because it is (as Campbell never tired of emphasizing) necessarily transcendent of all definition, it is also beyond the concepts of reality and appearance, and being and not-being. It is not surprising, then, given his definition of "metaphysical" in "Primitive Man as Metaphysician," that it was there that Campbell first openly acknowledged his debt to Kant by giving a sympathetic exposition of Kant's "four-term analogy," which appears in the latter's *Prolegomena to Any Future Metaphysics* and which Campbell then applied to his interpretation of mythological symbols: "As many (a) proceed from one (b), so does the universe (c) from God (x). But the term x, it must be remembered [represents something 'metaphysical' and thus] remains absolutely unknown and unknowable. Oneness can no more be a quality of this x than can Love or Reason. . . . X [the Nounmenon] remaining unknown, then, the precise nature of its relationship to c must likewise remain unknown" (Campbell, 1969b: 71; 1976b: 339; 1985: 56-57).

We cannot have "knowledge" of this mysterious source and its relations in the usual sense of the term, because no marriage of concept and sense-percept can possibly take place; Campbell followed Kant on this point as well (1969a: 187). Nonetheless—and here he departed not only from Kant but also from the post-Kantian "lingua-lists"—Campbell maintained that we can enjoy an "immediate, unmitigated, perfectly direct" (1969a: 186) experience (translating from the Sanskrit *paramartha prat-yakṣa*) of the ultimate Mystery—which amounts to saying that we can have some sort of pure (non-sensuous) perception or cognitive intuition of it. And this is clearly the epistemological force of his use of the term "apprehension." It follows, of course, that this awareness, which is still not knowledge in the formal sense, cannot, as Otto said, be directly communicated or therefore taught; it is inextricably bound to the experience, which can only be evoked. And it is the proper function of the symbol (and in that it retains purpose, value, and a felt significance which, paradoxically, is at once inexpressible and yet infinitely expressible, it does not become utterly meaningless) to serve as "an energy-evoking and -directing agent" (1969a: 178). Only now the symbol must only direct the agent to

a more or less shattering experience of the numinous and not, as in the past, to a safe, comfortable identification with a limited social group and its peculiar rituals, ethical values, etc. The true import of what Campbell described as the "disengaging" function of the symbol thus has nothing to do with the sort of literary "ironic distancing through the construction of a deconstructive meta-narrative" that is fashionable in some postmodernist circles. In *The Masks of God: Oriental Mythology* Campbell had quoted Jung on this topic without dissent: "[The symbol, wrote Jung] protects a person from a direct experience of God as long as he does not mischievously expose himself. But if he leaves home and family, lives too long alone and gazes too deeply into the dark mirror, then the awful event of the meeting may befall him" (1976a: 46). Of course, as Campbell noted, what is simply awful for the unprepared individual may be awe-full for one who is ripe for the experience and has the capacity to integrate it.

For the postmodernist or "lingua-list" then, the space beyond space, time, word, and image is merely empty; for Campbell, as for the Buddhist, this space is equivalent to "the void of *sunyata*, the void that is no void but a pleroma, a fullness" (1990: 41) pregnant with all the possibilities for life and its renewal. Ludwig Wittgenstein had declared in the last lines of his *Tractatus* that, "Whereof one cannot speak, thereof one must be silent." To which one of his own (logical positivist) progeny once responded: "That's right—provided we're agreed that *there's nothing to be silent about*" (Wilson: 299). Similarly, Rorty has curtly dismissed the possibility of a nonlinguistic form of knowledge or pre-conceptual form of meaning (e.g., a more or less "apprehension of the numinous"), claiming that it would be tantamount to "drawing a line around a vacant place in the middle of a web of words and then claiming that there is something there rather than nothing" (1982a: xxxvi). But Campbell could not and did not abide this sort of crabbed dismissal of the Mystery, which, just because it is nothing, does not entail that it is merely nothing.

If what is common to the various mythologies and religions in the deepest sense—their "root" source, in Campbell's words—cannot be represented by any vocabulary of images or words, then what is objectively true in the ultimate sense cannot be trapped in any of our verbal "webs." (As David Bohm reminds us somewhere, the word "true," semantically related to "tree," signifies those beliefs that are "deeply rooted.") This recognition should function as a prophylaxis against any over-hasty cross-cultural identifications and especially against any idolatrous deification of motifs that are merely parochial—even if the relevant parish turns out to be the entire planet. Campbell readily acknowledged differences among mythic motifs, but he also recorded the similarities wrought either by historical borrowings (diffusion) or by evidently spontaneous productions of symbolic imagery among peoples where no such interchange could have or did actually take place (independent invention).

In the preface to his early but important work *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1972 [1949]), Campbell had anticipated objections to his emphasis on the correspondences between the various, historically and geographically diverse, mythological traditions by noting that "once these [similarities] are understood the differences will be found to be much less great than is popularly (and politically) supposed" (1972: viii). And even in the preface to the relatively late *Creative Mythology* (originally published in 1968), the fourth and final volume of *The Masks of God* series—the so-called "serious" works (*pace* Miller) which, on Campbell's own account, were the least Jungian of his entire *opus*, just because they focused on the numerous historical transformations and wide cultural variations of the great archetypal motifs (Campbell and Toms: 51)—he reiterated the theme initially announced in *Hero*, namely, the existence of the very sort of cross-cultural, trans-historical similarities between superficially different mythological systems that Miller's postmodernist comparativist readily abjures:

Looking back today over the twelve delightful years that I spent on this richly rewarding enterprise, I find that its main result for me has been its confirmation of a thought I have long and faithfully entertained: of the unity of the race of man, not only in its biology but also in its spiritual history, which has everywhere unfolded in the manner of a single symphony, with its themes announced, developed, amplified and turned about, distorted, reasserted, and, today, in a grand *fortissimo* of all sections sounding together, irresistibly advancing to some kind of mighty climax, out of which the next great movement will emerge. And I can see no reason why anyone should suppose that in the future the same motifs already heard will not be sounding still—in new relationships indeed, but ever the same motifs. (1976b: xx)

"But ever the same motifs." The affirmation of these constants was Campbell's bottom line even as he focused on those differences that are the primary concern of Miller's postmodernist historian of religion (Campbell 1985: 99). And clearly the intelligibility of Campbell's conclusion, in the context of such an inquiry into the variety of religious and mythological forms, is contingent upon the significance of the mystical function: that, when properly understood and interpreted, all of the various forms are ultimately seen as pointing toward a single, if unutterable, Truth. This convergence is what primarily interested Campbell. For neither differences nor similarities *per se* were of ultimate concern to him, apart from a given symbolic vehicle's possession of a genuinely metaphysical "tenor" or reference. As he never tired of emphasizing, the primary function of myth is the mystical function: the awakening of a sense of awe and gratitude before the mystery dimension that lies behind and yet grounds all forms, whether they are relatively constant or relatively changing. And so given that that which is genuinely or absolutely universal is

"transcendental," i.e., absolutely unknowable, the archetypes are at best only relatively universal, psychological functions of a continuous evolution of human consciousness that is inseparable from its primordial biological origins and ever-present base. We are all of the same stock, and we are all slated to endure those experiences and events associated with the typical stages of a human life, from birth through death—which is precisely why, in the preface to *Hero*, Campbell had compared his approach with that of the science of anatomy, "where the physiological variations of race are disregarded in the interest of a basic general understanding of the human physique" (1972: viii).

History, however, inevitably has its say; for as it turns out, neither mythology nor science can be understood or evaluated apart from an understanding of its respective historical development. Indeed, some years prior to the publication of Thomas Kuhn's epochal work *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962)—and thus, quite long before it became intellectually fashionable to talk about the historicity of scientific knowledge, or about scientific theories as temporarily useful instruments to cope with a reality that will always exceed our cognitive grasp—Campbell, in his 1957 *Eranos* lecture, gave the sort of antirealist interpretation of the natural sciences that MacIntyre's modernist proponent of orthodox scientific Naturalism could hardly endorse: "The propositions of science . . . do not pretend to be true in any final sense, do not pretend to be infallible, or even durable, but are merely working hypotheses, here today and gone tomorrow" (1969a: 190). Even absent the conception of science as an eternally enduring edifice of Truth being gradually but cumulatively erected, brick by brick, with every new discovery and confirmation of its theories, the scientific method has still managed to overthrow not only the general habits of mind associated with the imperative of unquestioning obedience to authority but also the concrete reading of symbols like the Garden of Eden, which is not located, as even Columbus supposed, in the hinterlands of South America or anywhere else on earth.

To say, then, that the symbol lacks "meaning" is to say that its significance cannot be literal, its references cannot be to transient particulars, and hence that its values and purposes, if there be such, cannot be to establish an emotionally charged identification with some in-group and its ideology. On the other hand, Campbell had also seemed to say that the symbol retains a value and purpose in the form of disengagement. But how can that which is strictly "meaningless" have value or purpose? Campbell tacitly addressed this unspoken issue in a key passage, where he made a crucial—though seemingly merely neologistic—distinction between "sense" and "meaning," or what might be called the difference between felt significance and linguistic significance:

We must distinguish, therefore, between the 'sense' and the 'meaning' of the symbol. It seems to me perfectly clear that all the great and little symbolic systems of the past functioned simultaneously on three levels: the

corporeal of waking consciousness, the spiritual of dream, and the ineffable of the absolutely unknowable. The term 'meaning' can refer only to the first two: but these, today, are in charge of science—which is the province, as we have said, not of symbols but of signs [which refer to some concept or object that is definitely known]. The ineffable, the absolutely unknowable, can only be sensed: and not more in the religious sanctuary, today, than elsewhere. It is the province of art, which is not 'expression' [of emotion, attitude, character] merely or even primarily . . . but a quest for, and formulation of, experience-evoking, energy-waking images. . . (1969a: 188–89)

It is the artist, then, on Campbell's view—surely not the priest, nor even the titanic tribal shaman, the fiercely ascetic forest yogin, or the gentle bodhisattva—who is today capable of awakening us to our own "reality-beyond-meaning" (1969a: 187) through "an evocation of the sense of the absolutely unknowable" (1969a: 188). Only the individual artist, conscious of laboring in his or her own private field of imagination rather than the public square of fact, is not wedded to the myths of the past and to the scientifically and historically discredited literalist readings of symbolic imagery.

In his 1930 novel *Narcissus and Goldmund* Hermann Hesse put into the mouth of his chief protagonist, the artist-wayfarer Goldmund, a summary of his own aesthetic. Goldmund had raised the question: Why is it that nature, with its shape-shifting, ever-changing forms affects him in the same profound way as great works art, with their precisely rendered, well-defined fixed forms? How can the beholding of nature move him in the same way as the contemplation of art? Campbell could have answered this with ease: "The French sculptor Antoine Bourdelle (1861–1929) used to say to his pupils in his studio: '*L'art fait ressortir les grandes lignes de la nature*'" (1976b: 36); which is to say, "Art finds its origins in the grand lines of nature" (Larsen and Larsen: 589). As Hesse's Goldmund goes on to explain, it is through the highly disciplined and skilled manipulation of aesthetic forms that the artist is able not merely to render a suggestion of the Source of all forms, both plastic and fixed, but to actually provide a direct experience of it. There is more to reality than meets the eye, but it is indeed only through the eye of the imagination, i.e., through one's apprehension of beauty—either the rugged, spontaneous beauty of a flower or the composed beauty of a sculpture or canvas—that this unsayable truth is revealed (181–183). "A great portrait is, then, a revelation," writes Campbell, "through the 'empirical,' of the 'intelligible' character of a being whose ground is beyond our comprehension" (1977b: 35).

As we have already seen, however, the postmodernist could never accept Campbell's distinction between "meaning" and "sense," depending, as it does, on the intelligibility of the notion of a "reality-beyond-language." Nor could many postmodernists endorse what they would

view as Campbell's Romantic conception of the autonomous, if not isolated, artist-titan. (I have deliberately used Hesse to gloss Campbell, for Romanticism comes in for especially harsh treatment by Miller.) Heidegger says somewhere that tradition conceals itself in language; and even T.S. Eliot might have added—with special reference to the creative artist and the vocabulary of images—that tradition is both concealed and revealed in technique (1975). Linguistic meanings are, by their very nature, public and sharable. Unlike a proper work of art (at least on Campbell's view), language is essentially a communal production, a creature of the folk—a point, by the way, not unrelated to Campbell's distinction between mere folklore (anonymous mass production) and myth proper (produced by the elite poet-seers).<sup>6</sup> It was Wittgenstein who said that there is no such thing as a private language, while it was Humpty Dumpty who declared that words would mean whatever he wants them to mean—and look what happened to that egghead! In short (so the argument would run), whereas Campbell's artist erroneously conceives of him- or herself in a contextless present, meaning is inescapably a function of our collective past; and, if there is no such thing as "sense" as distinct from "meaning," then there is no ultimate escape from the embrace of tradition. In fact, one conclusion to be drawn from the "lingua-list" view (though perhaps not the necessary one) is that it is not so much that we use language but rather that Language—and through it, History—uses us. We are then, as Foucault suggested, nothing but the creatures of the ideology of the age (*episteme*). (Of course, the animetaphysical postmodernist would try to evade the obvious metaphysical implications of the apparent hypostatizations of Language and History.) If humans are inescapably semiotic animals, it becomes altogether too easy and tempting to reduce the individual to a mere expression of his or her context-cum-horizon of meaning. The only open question is whether one is consciously aware of this limitation.

It should already be clear, however, that my juxtaposition of the neo-mediaevalist, Anglo-Catholic Eliot with the postmodernist (and Nazi) Heidegger is no accident; for what these political approaches share is a hatred of modern individualism. As Campbell tirelessly pointed out, traditionalist religions of both West and East have typically exhibited nothing but contempt for the idea of the autonomous individual. It is thus no accident that the ego is typically viewed either as inherently evil or else as the primary source of all evil and is variously portrayed in the world's great spiritual literature as, e.g., a servant to be beaten into submission, a burden to be surrendered, an obstacle to be overcome, a beast to be domesticated, a wart to be burned off, or an error to be erased. Even with those mysticisms which hold, with the *Upanishads*, that the

divine enters into the world as a razor in a razor-case, it is always the poor ego that is somehow exempted from the principle of the absolute ubiquity of the divine. God may be in a stick, but in the ego? How utterly scandalous!

But Campbell, for his part, would have none of this. "[T]oday," he wrote, "the mythogenic zone is the individual heart. Individualism and spontaneous pluralism—the free association of men and women of like spirit, under protection of a secular, rational state with no pretensions to divinity—are in the modern world the only honest possibilities: each the creative center of authority for himself, in [Nicholas] Cusanus's circle without circumference whose center is everywhere and where each is the focus of God's gaze" (1976b: 677). In response to the currently voguish trend by both political liberals and conservatives alike to denigrate individualism while praising "community" and "tradition," Campbell would have argued that it is not that we have had too much individualism, but rather, not enough. Our economically-driven society and status-obsessed culture are gravely infected with consumerism, which is but the latest incarnation of that horror of uniqueness exhibited by the traditionalist and tribalist mentality. As MacIntyre, in a discussion of the concept of taboo, has observed: "Primitive man acknowledges the existence of the anomaly, of the exceptional, of that which constitutes a counterexample to his conceptual generalizations, only in order to outlaw that anomaly; and he thus avoids having to revise or reformulate his prevalent beliefs. The scientist, however, accepts anomalies and exceptions as a basis for either abandoning or revising the theories which he has hitherto accepted" (MacIntyre and Ricoeur: 9). We have not yet managed to free ourselves from our pre-modern, pre-scientific habits of thought, and this has inevitably colored our experiments with autonomy. But how can we (would-be postmoderns) reject what we never really fully accepted—or lived—in the first place (i.e., modernity)?

That is most assuredly not to say, however, that Campbell endorsed the attitude of scientific naturalism towards the individual. In this respect he clearly *did* forecast some of the key concerns of the postmodern sensibility. What I mean is this: for the scientist, the unique individual (situation, event, phenomenon) is of merely instrumental importance and value; differences are interesting only insofar as they serve to confirm or disconfirm hypotheses tied to general theories; but it is the general or universal statement or condition itself that is of intrinsic significance. As Schopenhauer (one of Campbell's favorite philosophers) once observed, it is in the discipline of history, rather than those of the natural sciences, in which "we see the mind occupied with quite individual things for their own sake" (222). In other words, the key metaphysical axiom of scientific realism is: only the repeatable is real. Hence Science's obsessive concern with quantity and its language, mathematics. It follows, as Bertrand Russell, one of the great exponents of scientific philosophy, maintained, that

<sup>6</sup> Actually, Campbell regarded folklore as a reduced form of mythology and a preserver of genuinely mythological motifs (1969d).

the scientist, *qua* inquirer, is always striving to eliminate, as far as possible, everything that partakes or even smacks of "the subjective": his or her personal needs, wishes, feelings, interests, points of view, etc. But if, as many postmodernists have argued, this ideal of discounting the subjective is a monstrously inconceivable and, practically impossible task, then this is precisely where the self-deceptive, blind, unconscious, socially dangerous inflation of what is merely parochial to universal status is likely to rear its nasty head. Which is what Campbell himself had been arguing as early as his 1957 *Eranos* lecture on "The Symbol without Meaning."

Campbell took this argument one stage further by suggesting not only that we cannot run away from our subjectivity, our individuality, but that we shouldn't even make the attempt—precisely because it is, paradoxically, only in and through our voluntary embrace of, and immersion in, our uniqueness that we are able to achieve the most profound depth of mystical identification or accord with the transpersonal ground of existence. This is why he could never accept those world-denying forms of mysticism that interpret the spiritual imperative in terms of ego erasure. At the same time, it also explains the difference between Campbell's notion of the subject and that of the postmodernists. For Foucault and others, scientific objectivity is merely a mask that conceals an all-too-human will-to-power—and power of a crudely political kind: the uncontrollable impulse to dominate and control others, whether with guns, money, or (more subtly) words. The human "subject" thus redeemed from the clutches of scientific orthodoxy is merely an historical, cultural, and biological animal for whom a notion like "the transpersonal ground of existence" is nothing but another linguistic smokescreen begging for deconstruction and obliteration. Campbell, for his part, roundly criticized this rejection of the reality of what the psychologist Abraham Maslow (in a 1971 book of the same title) had termed "the farther reaches of human nature" as pure nihilism—the empty silence of the tomb, which is very far removed indeed from the pregnant silence of the mystic.

Implicit in Campbell's scheme, then, is an evolutionary view of mysticism whereby the development of the solid ego-structures of the modern western type make possible, in a dialectical fashion, an even greater and therefore novel form of mystical rapture. As he wrote movingly in *Hero*, "where we had thought to be alone, we shall be with all the world" (1972: 25). On the cultural level, what begins as a merely inward experience of the individual has a ripple effect that touches the lives and quickens the spirit of others. In metaphysical terms, the sense of the presence of the whole is a function of accepting and enjoying one's infinitely precious, irreplaceably unique perspective on it—which is surely how Campbell interpreted one of his favorite mythological images, Indra's Net of Gems (1985: 111). Thus, Campbell was foursquare in agreement with William James when the latter wrote that "it is absurd for science to

say that the egoistic elements of experience should be suppressed. The axis of reality runs solely through the egoistic places,—they are strung upon it like so many beads" (447). As Campbell affirmed, the axis mundi runs right through the center of the circle whose circumference is nowhere and center is everywhere—which is to say, "anywhere you like" (1985: 44).

The mention of James also provides an important clue as to one source of some of Campbell's deepest concerns. In his epochal work *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), James had made a point of defining religion not in terms of beliefs—which was so automatic for his Christian contemporaries, with their emphasis on the indispensable necessity of faith and creed—but in terms of an admittedly subjective and indefinable sense of the reality of an invisible world. Analogous to James's move, Campbell sought to disentangle mythology from the realm of shared—indeed hackneyed—meanings and locate it in the individual's essentially private, inward experience of the Mystery. Both thinkers were attempting to rescue the possibility of a spiritual life from the husk of Christianity before it was too late.

Too late for what? Campbell opened his 1968 essay on "The Secularization of the Sacred" by confounding certain expectations aroused by his title. To him, he said, this phrase "suggests an opening of the sense of religious awe to some sphere of secular experience, or more marvelously, to the wonder of the whole world and oneself in it" (1969c: 193). To the postmodern sensibility, however, this religious sense of awe is an illusion, a delusion, or an unfortunate habit of mind; at best, it is the target for an attitude of ironic or bemused detachment. After all, religion evaporated from the cultural scene long ago, did it not? "The issue between religion and secularism was . . . messy," writes Rorty, "but it was important that it got decided as it did" (1982a: xliii). Unlike Campbell, then, in Rorty's view secularization implies the clear absence of genuine awe or wonder. Why bother to question the absence of something the presence of which one has never actually missed?

Campbell clearly thought that *something* has been missing, even if we have failed to consciously recognize the obscure object of our longing. While he, before many, grasped that the explosion of the bounded socio-cultural horizons in which all past mythologies had been formed leaves the individual free to explore the world's mythological inheritance for clues to recovering his or her own sense of wonder (and he also knew that our many technical achievements serve both as an underlying cause of this wider breakdown and as a facilitator of the individual's explorations), Campbell could never have accepted the postmodern view that there are virtually no genuinely objective, culturally transcendent, linguistically- or conceptually-independent constraints on the (in principle) endless process of redescribing ourselves and our world, for the simple reason that he believed that human beings possess an *essential spiritual nature* whose imperative cannot be denied, except at great cost and peril

to individual and collective alike. Not even to possess a vocabulary in which that imperative can be formulated does not protect us from its power or erase its reality, though it does ensure the ever-more-morbid expression of its energies. The refusal of the Call by any other name spells the death of the spirit and the coming of the waste land.

### CONCLUSION

R.G. Collingwood once noted that the great mystics are at one and the same time saints and heresiarchs: saints, because they really do see the divine everywhere, in all things, and heresiarchs, simply because this perception deprives the particular beliefs and practices of the cult of their special status. And with that levelling vanishes the cult's *raison d'être* (127). But if the postmodernist is at best a minor heresiarch, then Campbell must be accounted a major mystic—one whose conscious iconoclasm enabled him to see the divine in everything, including and especially the much benighted human ego (surely the moral equivalent of Levantine harlots and tax-collectors!). By so doing, he provided us with a vision of a possible future for religion; a future beyond the spiritually impoverishing dogmas of both secular materialism and reactionary religious traditionalism.

No, I'm afraid that Joseph Campbell was no postmodernist. He was far too ahead of his time for that.

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