

School of Childhood and Education Sciences

MA in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred

Learning Journal

Hestia's Throne

An autoethnographic analysis of my learning journal

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"Waiting for Eros" by Howard David Johnson

Prelude

I am standing in the dim lighted temple waiting for my turn to go and speak to the channeling medium. This is a *Gira de Exú* a ritual to the chthonic gods and daimones of the African derived Brazilian traditions. *Exús* are well known to be particularly honest and ruthless entities and I am nervous because I feel my life is about to change although no one knows about it yet except my closest family.

As I get close to the channeling medium the entire room vibrates to the sound of the drums and his guttural laugh. *Exús* are well known for their powerful laughter. He is dressed in black, white and red with a top hat and a long black cloak. No one knows the name of this medium's *Exú*, but we call him *Exú Capa-Preta*, *Exú* Black-Cloak.

“You have no idea what is about to hit you.” he said to me “In a few months, you will not recognize yourself when you look at a mirror. It will hurt, but you will never be the same.” All the other things he told me, discretion forbids me to say here, but a few days after this encounter I was officially accepted in the Master's in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred.



Icon of Exú Capa-Preta

I must say that I am skeptical of narratives of change, because I feel that I change all the time. I am an eager reader and I am fascinated by new ideas, thus change, mainly ideological change, seems to be something that became so normal in my life that I can hardly attribute it any value anymore.

But now, looking at my learning journal, I realise that my approach to change was rather unsophisticated. My flux of apparent change was, above all, the reflection of a constant state of anxiety about the nature of the world, God, and mystical experience. It was, in a sense, a life-long night of the spirit that I believe is now starting to see the first rays of the morning.

In this essay I intend to analyse the learning journal I have written during my learning process in the MA in order to evidence this process of change. I will use autoethnography as my main method in this essay. Barbara Tedlock tells us that “performing ethnography produces a mimetic parallel or alternate instance through which the subjective is envisioned and made available to witnesses.” (2018, p.1475) The objective of the practice is the “examination, reflection, and shaping of human experience...” (Ibid.) Heewon Chang says that autoethnographic writings (ethnography applied to oneself) “interweave stories of the past with ongoing self-discovery in the present.” (2008, p.140) This seems to be the best way to approach a learning journal in an attempt to make my learning process relevant for a wider audience. In Chang’s typology of autoethnographic writings he describes “confessional-emotive writing” as a genre where one is “free to expose confusion, problems and dilemmas in life” (Ibid., p.145) giving as an example *Confessions* by St. Augustine. I believe this is appropriate because a learning journal moves in the fine line between objective learning and the deep impact this has in one’s approach to life. As such I will expose the effects the MA had both in my general *ethos*, but also my *pathos*. This is necessary because this Master’s relies heavily on transformative education. Transformative education aims at the change of the whole individual, instead of simply expecting them to acquire a specific set of skills. As John Dirkx says in his 1998 paper “[c]entral to our understanding of transformative learning is the emphasis on actualization of the person...” (p.8) This implies that in a certain sense, the boundaries between learning and private life will be much weaker than in other forms of education.

I have followed Chang's suggestion of "identifying recurring topics, themes or patterns by holistically reviewing the entire data" (2008, p.132) and I identified three main topics. I have written one section to each of these topics and dedicated each one of them to a specific moment and a specific tutor in the course. Each of these themes has deeply influenced the way I have interpreted the MA, and my main objective is to discuss them in a meaningful way that allows me to expose deep intellectual struggles that arose from the course material.

Ethics

I am sitting in the restaurant Bangkok House across from Geoffrey. This is the last group dinner before the Christmas intermission and we are discussing magic. Geoffrey has been described by many people, including himself, as a rather Saturnine presence. He has the power to see the tiniest breaches in your thought and calling them out with a simple word, but I do not know this yet. I am enthusiastically discussing my own mystical practices and rituals, namely the fact that I have spent the last year studying and applying techniques of the medieval Islamic grimoire the *Picatrix*. Geoffrey looks skeptical and tells me that not only these kinds of magic usually provide no way to keep one's ego in check, they can also be quite aggressive towards the spirits as well as lead to certain kinds of self-indulgence. This was the first moment where my life deeply changed since I enrolled in this Master's. I immediately put down the *Picatrix* and decided to reevaluate my own approaches to my practices, reading new authors and putting my ethics into perspective.

I came to realise that my personal approach to mystical experience was deeply grounded in epistemology and ontology ("how is this true?/is this possible?") but not so much in ethics ("should I do this?"). This simple realisation, that I believe could not have come up in a context other than one-on-one discussion, led me deeper into one of the main subjects of the MA as a whole: Platonism and Neoplatonism.

Before taking the course, Plato was a demonized figure in my philosophical background because I was fascinated with postmodernism. In the beginning of the course I was disappointed that we were going to focus so much on Plato right at the start. However, in a matter of months my opinion had changed radically. On December 6 I write "It is rare to find an author that resonates so deeply in you that you feel a vertigo when reading them." I am referring to Iamblichus, an author that I have come to consider a kind of personal master across time and space.

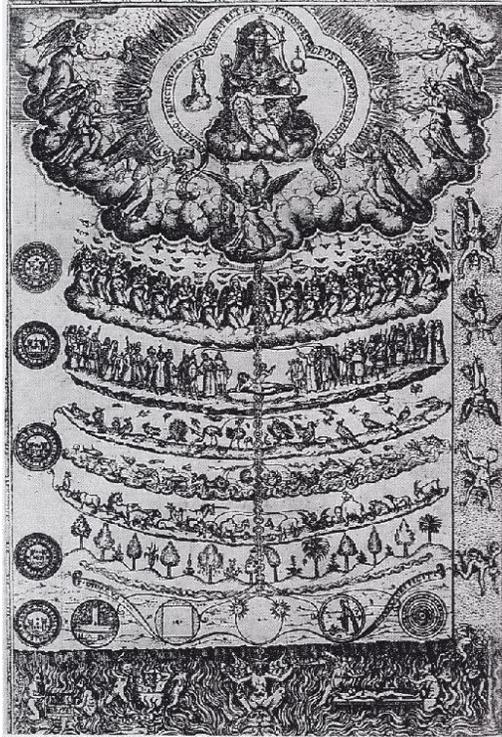
Months later, in a class about earth mysteries, Geoffrey also commented that although modern humanities tend to focus on social experience as a result of power relationships, very much in line with Foucauldian thought, it was important to realise that this is an incomplete

picture. He argued that the sacred played an important role in the way humans organize themselves as well, and that not everything is necessarily the result of power relations.

This gave me another powerful insight relating to my ethics while working with the *Picatrix*. As I said before, I was deeply interested in postmodern thought and therefore I believed that most social relations could be described in terms of power. As such, even when my mystical and magical practices were not focused mainly on epistemological and ontological questions, my ethics was based on the idea of subverting social power. Coming from a working class family, I regarded magical practice as a sort of equalizer that could allow me to achieve some power (mainly economic) in a society where I was more or less deprived of it. This, of course, completely objectifies the sacred making it in service to material life and not an end in itself. The problem was actually that I practiced mysticism and magic *without a well-defined metaphysical system* and therefore used them as a way of tipping the scales in the material world. In a Marxist framework this was actually the attempt to revert the unjust economical constraints and any other unjust relationships of power imposed on me by a society.¹ Obviously this entailed no concern for my soul. It becomes clear that the problem laid in approaching a metaphysical practice using an atheistic ethical system. This lead me to attempt to use higher tiers of the hierarchy of being² (e.g. gods and spirits) for my material gain. I now realise that what made a real difference was the introduction of a strong metaphysical system that successfully substituted my atheist ethics.

¹ In my original draft I had an interesting Freudian slip in this sentence, it read “imposed by me on a society.”

² Cf. Iamblichus, *On the Mysteries*, book I.



“ The Great Chain of Being” by Didacus Valades

Plotinus says that “evil is not in any and every lack; it is in absolute lack. What falls in some degree short of the Good is not Evil; considered in its own kind it might even be perfect, but where there is utter dearth, there we have Essential Evil, void of all share in Good...” (VIII.5), establishing that evil has no existence of itself but is the total and utter absence of the Good. The Good here is taken as the ideal Good where lower nature may or may not participate. If the mystical arts, which purpose is to bring humans closer to the divine, become devoid of the divine element through any atheistic approach, then we will have something that closely relates to Plotinus conception of evil. Furthermore, in his letter “On Music”, Iamblichus says that “great natures produce great evils when corrupted, and the greatest enterprises are in all cases the most harmful when they go to the bad.” (p.19). The corruption of the mystical works, the Great Work, would therefore produce an insurmountable evil.

It is interesting to note that on the day after I wrote this section Simon brought a strong dilemma to class that made me revisit it and expand it. In our last taught session, each of the tutors presented what for them was the greatest dilemma related to our field of study. Simon described how many of the spiritual aims we want to bring into society were actually part of the

nazi *ethos*. Geoffrey described his intervention as a “hand-grenade” and I believe he is right, however I could not stop thinking about my brief discussion of Iamblichus’ passage. If evil is in reality the void left in the place where good was supposed to be, it follows that in Platonic terms the more one particular enterprise partakes in the nature of the Platonic Good, the greater this void will be once the enterprise is corrupted. This is perhaps why Christians talk about the “anti-Christ”, the figure where all the good of the Christ figure is substituted by an immense all-devouring void. This made me realise that the fact that nazi Germany had such a strong focus on enchantment, spirituality and the building of communities around symbols and myths is actually a testimony to the importance of this work. Because if the evil of the nazi regime is nothing but the void of the good that should be there, it is easy to see the tremendous participation of enchantment and myth in the Platonic Good.

On the first day of the MA, Geoffrey said that these were no laughing matters and that the salvation of our soul may depend on this program. In my youthful condescendance I took it as a funny and witty remark, but I now realise that there is a certain level of truth in what he said. The discovery of Platonism and Neoplatonism was not merely the discovery of an interesting set of ideas that I could incorporate in my epistemological and ontological quest for the truth of the mystical arts, it was what allowed me to finally start developing an ethical framework to approach my practices. I can imagine no form of deeper change than this.

Mystery

It would be naive of me to assume that my epistemological and ontological worries disappeared because of my new found interest in ethics. I admit that unlike with the case of ethics, I leave the MA with as much ontological questions as I entered it, although I believe they are different questions. In this section I will deal with that great realm of paradox philosophers pompously call ontology, and thus this section is dedicated to Simon.

The great moment of epiphany towards what we can rather vaguely call “mystery” came to me on the creative project presentations before Christmas. It came about in a very specific context, when I was anxious because I was starting to have strong dreams and personal theophanies related to the Greek gods. This felt to me as a betrayal of the gods in my tradition, the ones I have established a covenant with and the ones I was baptized to. In the short break between presentations, Niara and I had a very important conversation with Simon that changed my perspective on the gods very deeply. The magic sentence was actually “There is the mystery, and then there are the ways we relate to the mystery”.

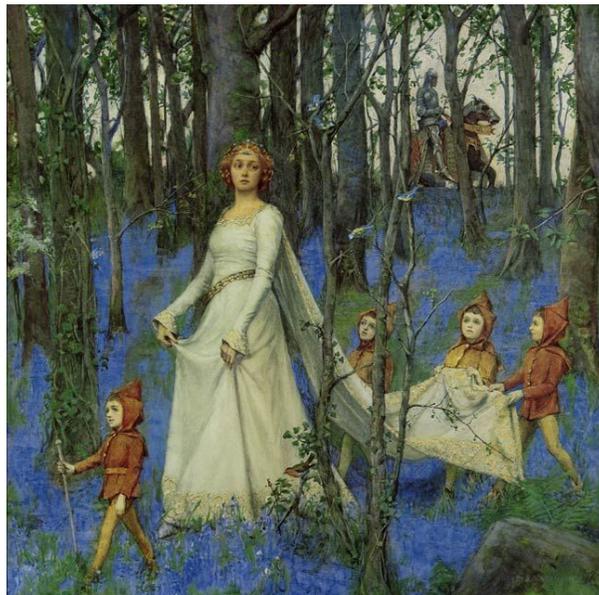
I admit this may be rather obvious for other people, but it was precisely what allowed me to later on understand what Henri Corbin means with the water and vessel metaphor saying that the divine (the water) takes the colour of the vessel (the worshipper) during theophany allowing for an interpretation where gods are both true and a social construction at the same time. (Corbin, 1997, p.130) This is the paradox that allowed me to move into what I believe might be Jeffrey Kripal’s third classroom. (2007, p.23)

In William’s session about faeries and angels, this question was brought up again. He said that “no one really wonders about the ontological status of a doctor” because that is taken for granted and is simply the wrong question. Although this remark allowed me to move into an intellectual space where it is easier to process the paradox, there is a certain discomfort that comes with it. This is one of my ongoing struggles, because when dealing with the gods and spirits in a personal practice you feel that you have created meaningful relationships (a covenant, like it was constantly referred throughout the course), and to allow such a paradox to play out feels like a betrayal of this covenant. The question is that even if I accept all reality as symbolic

(*All the World an Icon*, as Tom Cheetham called his 2012 book), I am still operating on different levels in practical terms. It is much easier to regard a faery as reductionistically metaphorical and a family member or friend as real. What bothers me is that it seems that after giving a certain intellectual step we no longer can go back to a state of literal belief in an entity, and we need to move into a deconstruction of all other things we regard as literal (mainly other people and ourselves) in order to even things out.

I think this understanding is quite poisonous if not handled carefully, and I was glad that Geoffrey brought this up in William's session. He said that these truths tend to be revealed to very advanced initiates and in a sense I have a feeling that they may have been revealed to me too early.

Platonism is supposed to solve this question because in the hierarchy of being spirits and faeries are actually subtler than the material world. Their ontology is *stronger*, they are *truer* and therefore we need to access them through symbol, but this is a hard move to make when you get the right answer before you even had the right questions. The problem is that it is hard to regard the material world as "less real" than (true) symbols, which is a premise of the Neoplatonic chain of being.



"The Fairy Woods" by Henry Meynell Rheam

The relationships I have built with certain entities in three years I have been trained at my temple are fundamental to my spiritual life. They are the source of many of my material and spiritual opportunities and I have been reminded (rather vigorously I may add) by the spirits that all knowledge I receive must be put in service either to the covenant I have established with them or to the divine in general. For this personal reason, Simon's remarks have created in me a rather important and yet difficult to manage realisation.

On the one hand, it has helped me deal with the fact that I feel attracted by different traditions. Embracing the paradox may be regarded as a path to liberation and this is quite visible in Iamblichus extensive knowledge and practice of different traditions (although I do not believe he was a great fan of paradoxes, cf. his Letter 9), in the Transpersonal psychology practices that lead practitioners into different initiations as exemplified in Elliot's talk about paradise, or even in Simon's own practice of Christianity allied to a deep interest in earth mysteries.

On the other hand this realization has created in me the need for a daily practice that reminds me that the word symbolic does not mean only metaphoric. It actually encompasses a more sophisticated view of truth than the word "literal" and this is fundamental in order for me to be able to keep the spiritual responsibilities that I have chosen to bear.

In fact, I believe that this mirrors one of my greatest worries regarding the course material, the use of the word "symbolic". It is not easy to establish what this word really means and I was surprised when on the last weekend someone brought up the theme of "non-human voices" and many people were hesitant of considering angelic or daimonic voices as non-human within the Western traditions. I realise this is a matter of personal belief but I often wonder if the use of the word symbolic does not create an intellectual space that is rather propitious to a kind of psychological reductionism. I would not say that the reason for this is any flaw in the course material, but the fact that it is so hard to make sense of worldviews where "symbolic" may be regarded as having a higher place in an ontological hierarchy than ourselves. Especially when the hierarchy itself will be regarded as symbolic, it is easy to reinterpret traditions that see the gods and spirits as at least partially other through a lens where these same gods and spirits are merely a set of complexes of a human psyche that is confined within our brains, a view actually quite

compatible with materialistic and reductionist worldviews. Spirit as hallucination instead of hallucination as spirit.

I have no answers to these dilemmas, and I believe that reading about them or discussing them is only part of the solution. As Simon so often says “you have to learn to live with the paradox”. No one ever said that moving in-between worlds would be easy.

Healing

I hesitated for a long time before applying to the MA. The reason for this is that I have had a somewhat traumatic experience in the academy. For about six years I worked at a laboratory that embodied the worst possible traits of the academic world (scientism, neoliberalism, exploitation, among others) and when I became an Astrologer I decided that I would leave the academy forever.

When I arrived here, I realised that there were some eerie synchronicities between Angela, as the course director, and the director of my ex-laboratory, therefore this sections is dedicated to Angela. They are both Capricornian women, they have thrived in a hostile environment, and my ex-boss' wife was a Cancer, a trait that mirrors Angela's partner in many ways. These coincidences scared me a bit at first, because I saw in Angela many things that I saw in my traumatic ex-boss.

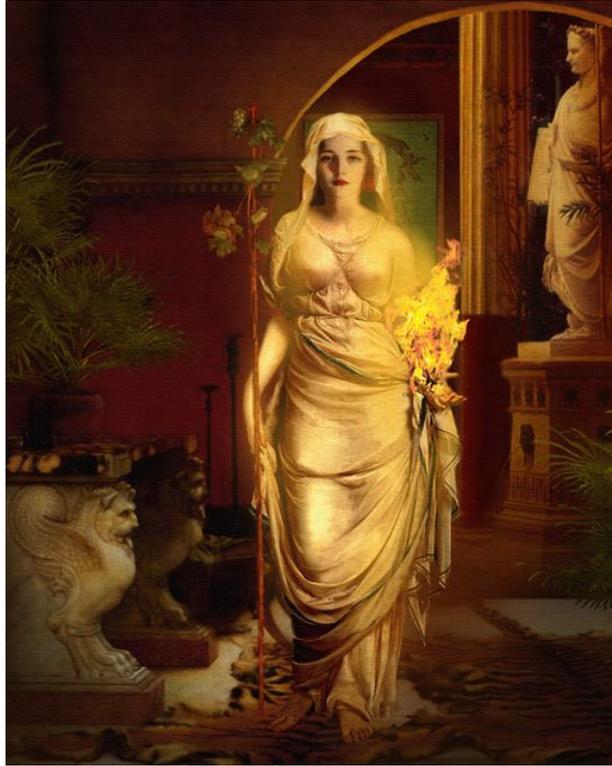
One thing that I had not realised before coming here, however, was the program's heavy focus on practical healing. Although Geoffrey has repeatedly made the point that the program is not a mystery school, it must be recognized that the boldness with which it uses transformative methods to teach studies on religion and esotericism will almost necessarily lead into the mysteries. In this lies the trickster side of the MA, the ability to remain within the academic context while creating bridges with people's deepest spiritual experiences. In this sense, it was sort of a blessing that Angela was a positive mirror of my previous experiences in the academy, synchronically mirroring what this program itself is when compared to other programs.

I do not believe that this was a coincidence either. The fact that the first module of the MA focuses mostly on the methodological challenges that we are to face as academics interested in a more phenomenological approach to mystical traditions bears witness to the kind of people teaching in the program. In a sense I understand why we are constantly told that the academic narratives that we wish to build in this MA must be challenged as any other narrative. On the other hand I suspect that after a long process of being challenged (not always fairly) one can become quite exhausted. I wonder if people working with "agnostic methodologies" or mainstream science need to have one quarter of their courses dedicated to the challenges to their

approaches. As a linguistics student I can attest that only about ten percent of my Bachelor's was dedicated to methodological discussion (both description of the methods and challenges put to them).

The fact that we have to worry almost as much about the challenges to our methodologies as about our actual ideas lead me to understand that all the people involved in this MA in one way or another must have had a similar experience to mine at a certain point of (if not throughout) their lives. This makes me wonder if this debate is as productive as I myself purport it to be. Nevertheless, we must still recognize that operating on the fringes is a way of keeping enchantment alive. Patrick Curry makes a similar point when he says that “astrology thus draws a significant part of its ability to enchant *from* its marginalization...” (Willis & Curry, 2004, p. 89)”. It is also interesting to note that the sense of community deriving from our situation may become particularly fruitful in terms of research. From what I have seen in our University, our program seems to be one of the most active programs in terms of discussion groups outside the classes, and thus one of the most academic programs within the Faculty. This leads us into another paradox, by virtue of being constantly excluded from serious scholarship, we are in a sense a force restoring scholarship outside of the university-as-training-center that has been established in our time. The mere fact that we have places outside classes where we can discuss texts, present ideas and debate relevant subjects creates a scholarship that is deeply traditional in a sense, even if occasionally permeated by mystical insights and healing.

This brings me to the third, and final moment of epiphany. A few months ago I organized a small ritual to the Sun in the Master's Lodge before classes and I invited the cohort to participate. At the end of the ritual (a rather uneventful ritual, I have to admit), I thanked Hestia, as was customary in Greek religion since she is the goddess of the fire in the offerings. Coincidentally, Angela had an altar to Hestia, goddess of the hearth and the home, set up and we put a candle in the altar. Right after this, I had a very strong sense of a presence, Hestia's presence, in the room. It was that unmistakable feeling one gets in rituals that successfully call upon the gods. The sensation was so strong that I discreetly cried for a while.



“Hestia” by Howard David Johnson

What surprised me the most was the fact that while the ritual to the Sun had produced no intense feelings at all, the small mention of Hestia had had this effect. I meditated on this for a long while and I came to believe that there is a strong Hestian quality about this MA. Naturally, during classes we tend to focus on Mercurial qualities (we study hermeneutics, we move between different worlds, we deal with mysterious knowledge), but there is also a certain sense of community building and homecoming through the research, and this enables a type of relationship between “master and student” that is perhaps unheard of in most of contemporary European academia. It is important to remember as well that Hestia is the most forgotten of the Olympians, and therefore moves on the fringes, much like us.

On that day, Laura told me a story about Hestia when we were both feeling her presence and I wish to recount it exactly as I heard it. After Dionysus was born, there was no throne for him in Mount Olympus and the gods discussed that perhaps one of them should leave. Hestia said she would not mind leaving, because as long people had fires in their homes, she would

always have a throne to sit in. Perhaps the symbolic fire that prompts us to write about the sacred can be a throne for Hestia, as much as it is for Hermes.

Conclusion

In this essay I used autoethnography as a method to discuss the main problems that arose from my learning journal. While the text has a significant amount of personal experience and even some *pathos* I believe I was able to create bridges for a wider audience to understand the kind of dilemmas that naturally arise from the program in Myth, Cosmology and the Sacred and how these dilemmas have a very strong bearing in the life of anyone who feels a divine eros or the need to be connected to religion or spirituality. The MA is a wonderful, deep and dangerous experience. Once it has been unleashed, it cannot be concealed again. I do not regret the fact that I showed no caution at all when diving into its mysteries.



“Pandora’s Box” by Howard David Johnson

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