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CREATIVE PROJECT REVIEW

STORYTELLING:

PARZIVAL AND THE QUEST FOR THE GRAIL

(AFTER *WOLFRAM VON ESCHENBACH*)



(Parsifal – Willy Pogany – Google Images)

Introduction

In this Review I am situating myself within the context of transformative learning (as this MA aims to be) as a tool in the journey towards individuation (Dirkx 2000, p.1) – an approach rooted in the work of educational psychologists Richard Boyd and James Dirkx: “a transformative education fosters the natural processes of individuation through imaginative engagement with [the] different dimensions of one’s unconscious life” (Boyd, quoted in Dirkx 2000, p.1).

What is individuation? Jung defined it as “an expression of [the] biological process...by which every living thing becomes what it was destined to become from the very beginning” (CW 11, par.144) - a concept powerfully expanded by James Hillman through his acorn theory (Hillman 1997). Crucially, for both Jung and Hillman, the individuation journey leads back to soul, something that Dirkx also emphasizes: “From the mythopoetic perspective, transformative learning leads not back to the life of the mind, as we might find with reflection and analysis, but to soul” (2000, p.1). In this process, the role of the image is paramount: “we focus on images, which are thought to represent powerful motifs that represent (sic), at an unconscious level, deep-seated emotional and spiritual issues and concerns” (ibid, p.1). Ideally this transformation leads, according to Boyd, to “a fundamental change in one’s personality involving the resolution of a personal dilemma and the expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration” (Boyd 1989).

Presumably (and hopefully), this expansion also leads to greater wisdom. This tallies with Wilma Fraser’s own search for Sophia in academia, and her conviction, despite the tyranny of quantitative targets, that wisdom spaces can be created in adult education – an education which has then to do with “educing, with releasing, with liberating” (Abbs, quoted in Fraser 2011, p.8). Storytelling in particular, Fraser says, can lead to Sophia when “placing the story within the felt experience of teaching/learning exchange” (2011, p.8).

Echoing these themes, *Parzival*¹ is itself an archetypal tale of individuation: the story of Parzival’s quest for the Grail, says Marie-Louise von Franz, “ point[s] to the

¹ Several versions of Parzival’s quest for the Grail have been written. In this Review I will be referring exclusively to Wolfram von Eschenbach’s text, written in 1210. The reasons why will be explored later on in this essay.

individuation process as being the aim and object of the way of development decreed for him” (von Franz 1998, p.172).

A double movement towards the concept of individuation, then, both in the content of the material and in its context. What I will therefore strive to do in this essay is to explore the relevance of my Creative Project to my own journey of individuation – as revealed through the impulses, both conscious and unconscious (the latter, that is, that have since been brought to consciousness), that led me to telling the story of Parzival, and through the challenges (and gifts) that marked out this process.

Storytelling

In astrological parlance I suffer from the affliction of a Saturn/Mercury conjunction. In layman’s terms, joining together Saturn (contraction) and Mercury (communication) may make oneself very uncomfortable in one’s expression. Indeed, I have always been bad at telling stories - be they jokes or life stories - always feeling that I was losing people’s attention halfway through, always having difficulties to really embody the story and own it. A cruel lack of confidence in the delivery, especially when the audience exceeds four people. The Creative Project was therefore a perfect opportunity to challenge myself and step out of my comfort zone. Tell a story and learn a little bit about yourself, I thought.

A Saturn/Mercury conjunction is also a blessing in disguise: if I was ever to engage in this project, I was going to make sure I would be *prepared* (Saturnian discipline). I therefore registered for a week-end course organised by the International School of Storytelling in the premises of the Emerson College. Greek myths were used as material for us beginners. I was allocated the story of Bellerophon, a young Greek boy who won the flying horse Pegasus with the help of Athena but who got carried away and committed the ultimate sin of hubris – not something that the Greeks ever took lightly – and fell back to Earth with a resounding thump. I hoped that this was not a sign of things to come in my own quest for Pegasus (inspiration, creativity) ...

A good storytelling, we were told in the course, involves a three-stage process:

- 'Boning' the story: extracting the bones, i.e. the elements of the story without which the story collapses – the skeleton. Every story, it was stressed, has between seven and twelve bones, even the *Odyssey*. A tall order, it seemed to me.
- Situating the story geographically. Where are located the different characters, the background, the environment, on the fictitious stage of the storyteller?
- Choosing one's own words to flesh out the skeleton, with a strong accent put on improvisation. The real art of the storyteller!

One must however qualify this improvisation, as Joseph Campbell did: "The tradition of...storytelling did not value free invention: there is what is called the 'matter', and there is what is called the 'sense'. The poet takes the matter and interprets it in his own sense" (Campbell 2015, p.133).

The above 3-stage process is worth looking at in a self-reflective manner, especially the first and last points.

1- Even if one can reasonably argue that some elements of a story cannot be circumvented (e.g. Parzival's visits to the Grail Castle), it would be a rare story where all the bones impose themselves to the storyteller, so to speak. What is meant here is that inevitably, the choice of the bones (or some of them) is subjective. A story as rich and complex as *Parzival*, with multiple layers spread over 400 pages, can be told in different ways, with the accent put on one aspect of the story rather than on others. In fact, in a 45-min storytelling format a choice has to be made by the storyteller. Which aspect of the story to emphasize and what does this choice say about the storyteller? In my own case I realised afterwards that I had emphasized the masculine side of the story: Parzival's encounters with the Red Knight, Arthur, Gurnemanz, the Knight of Munsalvaesche, the Grey Knight, Trevrizent and finally Feirefiz. The women in the story either play a victimised role (Herzeloyde –'Heart's Sorrow'), an anecdotal role (Condwiramurs) or are simply ignored (Jeschute, Sigune). The one exception is Cundrie, who is given due acknowledgement for her

crucial role in Parzival's journey of individuation, sending him first to his voluntary exile then leading him for his second visit to the Grail castle. But Cundrie has a bear's ears, a dog's nose and two enormous boar tusks – half woman, half animal really. The omission of Sigune is significant: she represents deep feminine wisdom, she in many respects is Sophia, revealing to Parzival deep secrets about himself and about the Grail. Is this unconscious bias a reflection of the fact that, according to Jungian Robert Johnson, “the Grail myth speaks of masculine psychology” (Johnson 1989, p.x) – which, he quickly adds, “does not mean it is confined to the male, for a woman participates in her own inner masculinity” (ibid, p.x)? Or is my own journey towards individuation still veering too much towards the masculine pole, eschewing the teachings of deep feminine wisdom? Am I still wandering like Parzival in the wilderness, who sent “50,000 knights as prisoners to King Arthur”, in scholar Simon Wilson's words, and who, bereft of a strong moral compass, had become a “chivalric cyborg, a repetitive and relentless robo-knight” – an “utterly modern man” (Wilson 2014, p.158), still avoiding confrontation with the anima?

2- My biggest challenge was however the ‘fleshing out’ of the story. This is where I felt the full symbolic brunt of my Saturn/Mercury conjunction. There was no way I was going to leave anything to chance and improvise. I was terrified to stumble on the words, to draw a big blank, to lose track of the story, to freeze (so Saturnian)....I therefore proceeded to write my own condensed *Parzival* and to painstakingly learn by heart its twelve pages. This, I felt, was the only way that I would be able to deliver with confidence. Probably a true crime against storytelling – the bards of old would no doubt disapprove.

There was another reason to stick to a written script. I wanted to stay as close as possible to the text so as to convey some of the rather quaint tone of this medieval story. My command of English is sorely wanting for me to achieve that feat by sheer improvisation. The process of learning by heart, despite being very time-consuming, was however a rich experience. By repeating the text over and over again, proceeding into it little by little, I felt a gradually deeper intimacy with it. I was slowly taking possession of the characters, and they were in turn increasingly possessing me. If the characters in the story can be seen to represent different archetypes, or unconscious contents, I was no doubt imaginatively engaging with

the different dimensions of my unconscious life, to paraphrase Boyd. Parzival aside (whom I will tackle further down), I felt in particular a very strong affinity with Cundrie and Feirefiz – Cundrie, the ugly creature who in truth is a messenger of the Grail, a real trickster, and Feirefiz, the dashing, noble fighter, a strong individuality who teaches Parzival compassion but who nonetheless acknowledges his younger half-brother's higher consciousness. I am still in the process of 'digesting' these two characters. They are certainly the two most unusual of this tale, and, interestingly, they are dual creatures – Cundrie half woman/half animal, Feirefiz black and white like a magpie.

Storytelling also powerfully brought home the fact that it is an endeavour that takes us back to the age of oral tradition, and that the instrument of this tradition is the *voice*. By repeating the story on a daily basis, I was increasingly conscious of my own voice and of the very words that I was uttering. We use our voice the same way we breathe – without being conscious of what we are doing. Telling a story compels attention to the voice. On some occasions, when fully present, I would often experience a bodily sensation, the sheer sensuality of hearing my own voice - a powerful exercise in mindfulness, to use a fashionable word. In the beginning was the Word.... I felt how words, when fully embodied and uttered with intent and consciousness, take on an incantational quality, how they are powerfully magical and literally life-giving. Or death-giving: curses should not be taken lightly. One does carry a big responsibility for the words that one speaks (Saturn/Mercury again). "The instrument of storytelling is voice", says Sean Kane (1998, p.187). For traditional societies, he continues, "the voice...speaks at the edge of the ordinary, carrying the listener into the unseen turbulent worlds beyond the stillness of tribal memory" (ibid). The act of storytelling rests on the storyteller's voice, who in the "intense discretion of that moment" (ibid, p.186), is "engaged in a kind of dialogue with his or her listeners" (ibid, p.187). More than that even, the storyteller, in the telling of a collective story, becomes a voice for the collective: "What makes the storytelling a performance that runs to the very edges of the body in each listener is the sympathetic resonance of the community as it listens, in effect, to its own oral voice....In this respect the storyteller is simply the one who speaks the myth on behalf of the listeners" (ibid, p.189). *Parzival* fully qualifies as a collective story. It

does invoke tribal memory. Indeed for Campbell it is no less than “the great mythos of the European world” (2015, p.23) – and as such the expression, to borrow Kerenyi’s words, of the latter’s “collective psychology” (Kerenyi 1992, p.3). Whether I achieved anything remotely approaching this mesmerising effect, this tribal invocation, is however open for debate. I have to admit that I could not keep my old demons at bay during my performance. I felt increasingly unsure of myself as I was unfolding the story. The dwindling heads of a few members of the audience did nothing to reassure me. I was thoroughly disjointed afterwards, feeling that I had bored everyone to death and back. Maybe my delivery was just not up to par. Or maybe in this age of constant electronic stimulation, keeping someone’s attention with 45 minutes of storytelling is too ambitious. Yet, why does it also seem more than ever urgent to keep that age-old tradition alive - an act of resistance?

Parzival

Let us first dispel a potential confusion in the terms employed. In this Review, ‘myth’ and ‘story’ are interchangeable, are as ‘mythology’ and ‘storytelling’. For Kerenyi,

The Greek word *mythologia* contains not only the sense of “stories” (*mythoi*) but also of “telling” (*legein*): a form of narration that originally was also echo-awakening, in that it awoke the awareness that the story personally concerned the narrator and the audience (Kerenyi 1992, p.4)

In *Aion*, Jung asserts that “cosmogonic myths are, at bottom, symbols for the coming of consciousness” (Jung 1981, p.148). Although not a cosmogonic myth, *Parzival* stands in its own right as the herald of a new consciousness, that of the modern European mind. For Campbell, *Parzival* was written at a time of a profound crisis in Christianity. While the period from 1150 to 1250 was the time of the construction of the great European cathedrals, it was also a time when “beliefs no longer universally held were universally enforced” (Campbell 2011, p.5). “The result”, says Campbell, “was a dissociation of professed from actual existence and that consequent spiritual disaster which, in the imagery of the Grail legend, is symbolised in the Waste Land

theme" (ibid, p.5). Marie-Louise von Franz concurs but also sees a simultaneous resurgence of Spirit: the Grail legends, she writes, "[are the] psychological expression of an extraordinary stirring of the unconscious, such as does happen...in periods when the religious values of a culture are beginning to change" (1998, p.25). This period saw "the intellectual movements of scholasticism, the works of secular literature, art and architecture, the founding of convents and monastic orders, the Crusades, chivalry and *Minnedienst*, [which] are eloquent witnesses to the astonishing awakening and revival of the spirit, the intensity and many-sidedness of which has been exceeded in no other epochs" (ibid, p.95). In this context, *Parzival* marks a momentous rupture in that it is "the first example in the history of world literature of a *consciously developed secular Christian myth*" (Campbell 2011, p.476, his italics). By opposition to traditional mythology, Campbell named this rupture 'creative' mythology:

In the context of a traditional mythology, the symbols are presented in socially maintained rites, through which the individual is required to experience...certain insights, sentiments and commitments. In what I am calling "creative" mythology...this order is reversed: the individual has an experience of his own - of order, horror, beauty, or even mere exhilaration - which he seeks to communicate through signs; and if his realisation has been of a certain depth and import, his communication will have the value and force of living myth" (Campbell 2011, p.4)

Crucially, continues Campbell, "creative mythology...springs not, like theology, from the dicta of authority, but from the insights, sentiments, thoughts, and visions of an adequate individual, *loyal to his own experience of value*" (ibid, p.5, my italics). The rupture announced by *Parzival* is manifold. First and foremost, it marks the beginning of Western man's estrangement from God - which would bring about several centuries later our modern secular societies: "Parzival's denunciation of God...", says Campbell, "marks a deep break in the spiritual life not only of this Christian hero...but also of the Gothic age itself and thereby Western man" (ibid, p.452). In this movement, the individual takes centre-stage:

In Wolfram the guide is within – for each, unique: and I see in this the first intentional statement of the fundamental mythology of modern Western man, the first sheerly individualistic mythology in the history of the human race: a mythology of quest inwardly motivated – directed from within – where there is no authorized way or guru to be followed or obeyed, but where, for each, all ways already found, known and proven, are wrong ways, since they are not his own” (ibid, p.553)

We are henceforth deep into Jungian territory: “[the] development of man corresponding to his nature...”, says Dominican priest and Professor of Philosophy Alfredo Moreno, paraphrasing Jung, “[occurs] only when the person becomes a psychological individual, a separable indivisible unity, a whole” (Moreno 1974, p.31). Consciousness must confront the unconscious and for Jung this confrontation led back to God: “Since, according to Jung”, Moreno says, “the unconscious is the root of religious experience and the dwelling of the God-image, individuation is ‘the life in God’, for man is obviously not a whole without God”² (ibid, p.31). The circle is complete but are we talking about the same God? Parzival himself mirrors this circular motion: he is “the questing youth”, says Campbell, who is “willing to challenge even God if the mask that he shows...rings hollow when struck” (Campbell 2011, p.554). Parzival renounces God (“I have always been His humble servitor but today I quit His service”, v.Eschenbach 1980, p.172) before returning to Him (Her), redeemed by Trevrizent (“Do penance for your misdeeds and give me your sins”, ibid, pp. 253/255). But his relationship with God is profoundly changed: no longer born of fear or social convenience, it is that of a free man willingly reengaging with Him (Her). The dragon ‘Thou Shalt’, to paraphrase Nietzsche, has been slain.

Engaging into this highly personal and individual quest is, however, no mean feat. For Campbell,

two great difficulties...confront the questing individual....the first is the difficulty of breaking through and beyond the system of delusion impressed upon and built into his very nerves by the forces...of his

² A position vigorously contested by traditionalist Rene Guenon, who attributed it to a confusion between ‘subconscious’ and ‘superconscious’ – “an illusion that results in what we have called an ‘inverse spirituality’” (Guenon 2001, pp 39-40)

youth....But then, when one has actually been vouchsafed an experience of one's own – transcending those categories written by one's people over the face of nature –...the second difficulty arises, of establishing some kind of life, in terms not of the old "collective faith", but of one's own" (Campbell 2011, pp.88/89).

Unable to rely any longer on any written script, one has to find one's own path. Therein lies the rub. Victor Frankl, who against all odds survived WW2's death camps by heroically managing to find meaning in his ordeal, has this to say: "What is demanded of man is not, as some existential philosophers teach, to endure the meaninglessness of life; but rather to bear his incapacity to grasp its meaningfulness in rational terms. *Logos* is deeper than logic" (Frankl quoted in Campbell 2011, p.424). For Rudolf Steiner, coming from a Christian mystical perspective, "what we need is a renewal of the Grail chivalry in a modern form" (2010, p.110). For Jung however, the key was for modern man to find his own myth. One without a myth "is like one uprooted, having no true link either with the past or with the ancestral life which continues within him, or yet with contemporary human society" (Jung, quoted in Shamdasani 2009, p.14). After his break with Freud, Jung realised that he was living without a myth: "I was driven to ask myself in all seriousness: 'what is the myth you are living?' I found no answer to this question, and had to admit that I was not living with a myth, or even in a myth, but rather in an uncertain cloud of theoretical possibilities which I was beginning to regard with increasing distrust" (ibid, p.15). He then undertook, continues Shamdasani, "to get to know his myth, his 'personal equation'" (ibid, p.15). An epic task, to which the *Red Book* is testament.

Which begs the personal question: what is my own myth? Do I have one? I am now into the second half of my life, a time when priorities, according to Jung, have shifted from biological and social to cultural and spiritual (Stevens 1990, p.63). "At the stroke of noon the descent begins", says Jung, using the metaphor of the course of the sun. "And the descent means the reversal of all ideals and values that were cherished in the morning. The sun falls into contradiction with itself" (Jung CW8, quoted in Stevens 1990, p.62). The entry into the third quarter of life, as Jung calls it, is a time of crisis, of profound questioning and bewilderment. For Parzival this happens at the moment of his greatest hour when, celebrated at Arthur's Court as a

member of the Table Round, he is savagely shamed by Cundrie for his lack of compassion for the Grail King's sufferings: "May your mouth be as empty – I mean of your tongue – as your heart is void of feeling" (v.Eschenbach 1980, p.165). A true mid-life crisis, which sends him into the wilderness for five long years. I have had my Cundrie moment too, at the time of my greatest hour, and it is indeed as if the sun turned back on itself. The exoteric quest ends at this point to make way for the esoteric one. Is this why I chose *Parzival*? Is this why *Parzival* chose me? With the benefit of some hindsight into my life, I can see, too, where lie my "two great sins", as Trevrizent said to Parzival ("you have two great sins", v.Eschenbach 1980, p.253). But despite his sins, Parzival finds redemption and wins the Grail. There is hope for sinners and this hope lies not in an elusive Beyond but "through action here in this mixed world (why, otherwise, be born?), where nothing is foul, nothing pure, but all, like a magpie's plumage, mixed" (Campbell 2011, p.565). For, as Campbell adds:

According to this mythology there is no fixed law, no established knowledge of God, set up by prophet or priest, that can stand against the revelation of a life lived with integrity in the spirit of its own brave truth. Every so-called "fall", or departure from the "law", is then itself a creative act in which God (to use a mythological term) participates (Campbell 2011, p.565)

Every fall is a creative act in which God participates. "It is extremely reassuring", says Johnson, "to see that it is often in his blunders that [Parzival] finds the next stage of his development" (1989, p.67). "Mythopoetic expression is moral language", say Holland and Garman. "It speaks about the rightness of good conduct and the consequences of evil action, both individual and institutional" (2016, p.20). I resonate with Parzival's morality, in his all-too-humanness. He is no superhero, and he pays the price for his errors. His way is the middle way, as his name indicates: Perceval, 'pierce-through-the middle'. Yet, as scholar Jules Cashford emphasizes, "Parzival's is not a straight path to the centre...it is to be a continuous correcting and balancing of extremes, moving from one side to the other until the way between them emerges" (2012, p. 44). A life of trial-and-errors, as all lives are, whose redemption is chiefly to be found in compassion:

The experience that dissolves the distinction between the I and the Not I...underlies the mystery of compassion and stands, in fact, for the reality of which compassion is the prime expression. That experience, therefore, must be the metaphysical ground of ethics and consist simply in this: that one individual should recognise in another, himself in his own true being...Which is the recognition for which the basic formula is the standard Sanskrit expression, 'Thou art That', Tat Tvam Asi.

(Schopenhauer, quoted in Cashford 2012, p.98).

Conclusion

Compassion. A quintessential human quality at the heart of Wolfram's novel. *Parzival* is about asking the right question and "asking the proper question is the central action of transformation", wrote Clarissa Pinkola Estes (quoted in Kastrup 2016, p.75). "Questions are the keys that cause the secret doors of the psyche to swing open", she adds (ibid, p.75). With Wolfram, the question that Parzival has to ask is not "Whom does the Grail serve?", as in Chretien de Troyes' much more Christian version, but "What ails thee, uncle?". Compassion, that is, for a fellow human being. Upon meeting the heathen, black and white Feirefiz, Parzival recognises his brother, who teaches him the unity of all life. *Tat Tvam Asi*. In these times of increasing intolerance and polarisation, of fundamentalism of all ilk, Wolfram's text is much more appealing to me and, I feel, much more relevant to our current collective predicament. For compassion is not a human prerogative: it should extend to all life forms and to planet Earth as a whole. For Jules Cashford, what is at stake is no less than the Anima Mundi, the Soul of the World:

If compassion is the impulse for which the Grail summons its future king, then the story is proposing a fundamental identity between the individual soul who has become compassionate and the Holy Grail. And what is the Holy Grail...but a symbol of the Soul of the World?" (Cashford 2012, p.100)

Have I been transformed by telling the story of *Parzival*? Have I been led back to soul, as Dirx emphasizes? Without a doubt, this archetypal story has deep

resonance with me, in the context of my life journey and in the context of my participation in our collective unfolding. It does act as a container, a template, a blueprint, an echo, and it has a healing quality, as expounded by Marie-Louise von Franz:

When a myth is enacted in a ritual performance, or, in more general, simpler and profaner fashion, when a fairy-tale is told, the healing factor within it acts on whoever has taken an interest in it and allowed himself to be moved by it in such a way that through his participation he will be brought into connection with an archetypal form of the situation and by this means enabled to put himself "into order" (v.Franz 1998, p.37).

'Into order'? Contributing, rather, to reducing the disorder, methinks. This, I take, would accord with Boyd's injunction for transformative learning to bring about "an expansion of consciousness resulting in greater personality integration". A small pebble on the road to individuation, then.

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