

*“I do remember,” he said, “only Pooh
doesn’t very well, so that’s why he
likes having it told to him again.
Because then it’s a real story and
not just a remembering.”*

A.A. Milne — *Winnie-the-Pooh*

For a while I had been wondering if the greatly inspired theologian St. Augustin thought that Adam and Eve were historical figures, who were indeed chased out of Eden for having eaten from the forbidden fruit. I must have been troubled by the assumption that the Abrahamic religions have established their faiths on historical data, reducing the importance of mythic lore which is alimented by oral tradition. Fundamentalist Christians and most Darwin-bashers still contend that the Earth was created in 4004 B.C., according to calculations made in 1650 by Bishop Ussher of Armaugh and I recall that this “fact” was even inserted in the preface of my copy of the Roman Catholic Douay translation of the Bible that my mother bought in the 1940s. Dante, the poet whose *Commedia* contains the body of medieval Christian knowledge, recorded in the 26th chapter of *Paradise* his encounter with the Ancient Father (Adam), who told him he spent 930 years on earth plus 4302 years in limbo prior to his salvation (dated from the resurrection of Christ). To submit a living experience to a dogmatically confirmed event with enforcement of belief is hardly necessary if we see the past and the future joined in the now. As T.S. Eliot wrote in the beginning of his poetry cycle *Four Quartets*:

Time present and time past
Are perhaps present in time future,
And time future contained in the past.
If all time is eternally present
All time is unredeemable....

Mircea Eliade explained how for religious man time, like space, is neither homogenous nor continuous. He lives chiefly, though not exclusively, in sacred

time, which appears circular, reversible and recoverable, regaining his history through intervals of liturgical celebrations in a “succession of eternities” within a sacred calendar. Non-religious man lives in the historical present and is concerned with temporality. For religious man, says Eliade, the festival is not merely the commemoration of a mythical event; it *reactualizes* the event. I see this as the core of the Catholic interpretation of the Eucharist, in contrast to the commemorative interpretation of the Reformation. Theological reasoning is quite different from the anthropological herein described; but the conclusions are identical. And as Wycliff summed up the controversy between nominalists and realists 150 years before the Reformation: “Let us accept the unexplained phrases of Scripture and receive this sacrament to freshen within our hearts the image of Christ”, I also see this *reactualization* in the Jewish sanctification of the Sabbath, when Elohim, being pleased with His creation, rests on the seventh day. This is in sharp contrast to many contemporary chief executive officers who demand total presence of their managers seven days a week.

Is *history as such* a product of monotheistic Judeo-Christian thinking, where at a given time and place God enters the human scene and makes His will be known in a way that requires constant and persistent analysis and reassertion? And if so, does the focus on historical events invariably take precedence over the transhistorical, soteriological intent (words of Eliade) which such events suggest?

In John Saliba’s anthropological commentary on Eliade, I read: *To primitive man “no being, no action that means anything has any effectiveness except insofar as the being has a heavenly prototype or the action reproduces a primeval cosmological one. Cosmology, therefore, is foremost in the primitive’s mind. His view of life and of the world forms a unity, an organic whole. Another characteristic of traditional man is that his thoughts are expressed primarily in symbols. Further, the archaic mind does not distinguish between myth and history and also lacks the awareness of the meaning of the rites practiced so often”*.

It is perhaps a vestige of the archaic man in me that prompted me to write a book on the cosmology of money that is neither systematic nor scientific but rich in symbolism. As for the archaic mind’s lack of distinction between myth and history, this may answer my question whether St. Augustin considered Adam and Eve as a myth or as historical individuals. That question never arose in one’s mind

at his time as it can arise in our minds except for the “creationists”, who find comfort in their adherence to historical facts and measurements.

Saliba, remarking on Eliade’s distinction in mental structures between archaic and modern man, quotes him saying: *When we use the word ‘because’ and ‘therefore’, the mind of the primitive would phrase it perhaps as ‘in the same way’*. This use of language should in my opinion be respected by astrologers, who ought to desist from seeking causation and content themselves with analogical thinking. In a sub-chapter on rites, the commentator writes: *For archaic man, entering into a ritual is leaving chronological time and going into the sacred beginnings when time stood still*. For this reason I will still attend Mass because the elevation and the Eucharist take us out of profane time where “in illo tempore” implies not “once upon a time” but “per omnia saecula saeculorum”. The Eucharist is perhaps the only timeless ritual we still have. As Raimundo Panikkar, priest and religious bridge-builder between East and West, used to say when giving the Eucharistic host: “Receive this, that you may become what you are: the body of Christ”.

Reflecting on this distinction between profane and sacred time and realizing the latter was not an attribute only of pre-literate man but also part of a personal experience that cannot be denied, I might understand that for St. Augustin it may not really have mattered if Adam and Eve were figures of speech or historical events. One tends to call such figures of speech myths; but this word has been much abused and misunderstood. It is nothing less than a shared sense of reality that has been observed and experienced in common.

Myth as I understand it, is neither a flighty invention of poets, nor an archetypal construct to fulfill a psychological need, nor an artifice to teach piety, but a sensory vernacular and guidance to experience the numinous. Myth can be articulated as allegory, symbol or metaphor but not as a didactic profession of faith. *How* I experience may be subject to critical questioning but *what* I experience cannot. But how do you reconcile myth with historical fact?

The prejudice against the mythical, calling it a so-called belief in alleged revelation that eschews testing by process interrogatory and codification by law, contradicts the fact that reality was originally understood as myth. Thus comments Kurt Hübner in *Wahrheit als Mythos (Truth as Myth)* and proceeds: “There are no

pure facts. Alone the way that objectivity is comprehended, depends on the ontological model (shared conceptualization) of life”. According to Hübner, myth is experience in the now. What is later seen as law and accident is not mutually exclusive. He regards myth as a mode of explaining the world and the mythical as an attempt to unify the material, sensual and ideal. In his *Mythocritique*, Pierre Brunel reminds us that myths fossilize to mythology only when they no longer live. And as they often survive the test of time, even in twisted or modified form, they should not be written off as scientifically unverifiable. Let us be mindful of the Jewish saying: “What is truer than truth? The story!”

In his novel *Hard Times*, Charles Dickens describes Sissy Jupe, an innocent young girl whose school teacher Mr. Choakumchild, who crams his pupils with facts and figures only, gets very irate when after eight weeks of induction in the elements of political economy she sums up the first principle of the science, saying: “To do unto others as I would that they should do unto me”. Is that the fabulation of a dreaming child that cannot calculate or a superior sense of values that makes no sense to her teacher? Being is not always beholden to rationalizing.

One morning I woke and realized in a flash that I was Adam and that it was I, just like billions of others, who face the choice between contentedly and uneventfully eating from the Tree of Life or taking risks by eating from the Tree of Knowledge and thereby engendering troubles and blessings beyond foresight or control. Thus does one understand a myth by becoming part of it rather than by rejecting it on account of its failing factuality, as today is the fashion among historians turned lawyers. Demythifying religion undermines community and leads to logolatry—engraving the word on rock, instead of following the spirit that blows freely.

My realization and, one might say, mythical reincarnation as Adam produced a sense of perennial awakening to inspired responsibility and creative calling. That which had long been questionable as historical past tense, became reality in the circular present tense of sacred time, where *In illo tempore, ab origine* is now.

Long ago
in a shower of snow
was born one who kindled our hearts to glow.

Our limbs were lame
first sharing his flame,
when he made us whole in the Father's name.

He took your hand
as he strolled through the land —
what he spoke only children could understand.

His kingdom was small —
I cannot recall
where it began, as it had no wall.

He laughed at me
in Galilee
as we hauled up fishes out of the sea.

Deep is the well
where his dark eyes dwell
as he beats at chess the powers of hell.

He taught us to heal —
but they told us to kneel;
when they charge you with heresy, there's no appeal.

Come, Spirit Life —
the word is a knife —
gather us in, Lord, the season is rife.

A myth-adverse theologian might reject such poetical imagery as lacking intrinsic value because what needs to be said cannot adequately be said, save by interpreting Scripture according to the rules of homiletics. There allegories and metaphors come short of the purity of dogmatic abstractions though the former were used by Jesus in his peregrinations, which justifies their poetical interpretations.

How do parables differ from dogma? And why not return to the vernacular of Jesus if, within the context of present time, place and culture, acceptance of

dogmatic symbols can no longer be enforced through sanctions and condemnation (“anathema sit”) for rejection? Or how would one elucidate a dogma in analogical form when the language of its formulation eludes us? Consider, for instance, the dogma of the Trinity, in which God is defined as three *persons* — Father, Son and Holy Ghost — in one *substance* (*in personis proprietas, et in essentia unitas, et in maiestate adoretur aequalitas*) If you were to translate the trinitarian concept of truth, where each word becomes relevant only in combination with two others, into a simile, you might list such random interdependencies as:

Physical — Psychic — Sensorial	(Living Being)
Width — Length — Height	(Size)
Frequency — Tension — Density	(Tone)
I — You — It	(Relationship)
Left Eye — Right Eye — Brain	(Perspective)
Thinking — Saying — Doing	(Motion)
Inhaling — Exhaling — Holding Breath	(Vivifying)
Father — Mother — Child	(Progeniture)
Cardinal — Fix — Mutable	(Qualities)
Mercury — Sulphur — Salt	(Alchemical Base)
Thesis — Antithesis — Synthesis	(Deliberation)
Procurator — Counsel — Judge	(Court of Law)
Creating — Sustaining — Destroying	(Cycle of Life)
Positive — Negative — Tension	(Magnetism)
Ingesting — Digesting — Ejecting	(Peristalsis)
Produce — Consume — Exchange	(Economy)
Substance — Form — Effect	(Essence)
Faith — Hope — Charity	(Piety)
Subject — Object — Verb	(Sentence)
Energy — Mass — Velocity	(Relativity)
Giving — Receiving — Preserving	(Circulation)
Speaking — Listening — Abiding	(Dialogue)
Common Sense — Perception — Will	(Resolution)

I digress here from Adam, because I am driven by an urge to replace conceptual abstractions with poetical figures of speech. So I try to work on later verses of our spiritual epos before reverting to the first and trust that an inner voice may

possibly call me to order. When the story of Adam and Eve is seen as a myth and not as an historical occurrence, the need to solve its riddle is greater because its logic cannot be taken for granted. What does the forbidden fruit represent? And what is original sin? Some reply: lust, which could lead us to presume that through our union in eros we can attain union with God. Another interpretation could be that the primeval couple attempted to play God and failed. Indeed this is done at all times and places. To play God is original sin and rejecting human divinity is equally so, as we thereby decline to participate in the act of creation. If we are gods, in the sense of Psalm 82, Luke 6:35 and John 10:34, we need not simulate. This is the enigma of human existence, at which Dante hinted when describing his encounter with Ulysses in Hell. Ulysses, instead of returning to his lawful wife and lands, had the brave impulse and sting of adventure to sail westwards into an unknown ocean beyond the Pillars of Hercules, urging his comrades to resist the boredom of a secure life. If this is an analogy to Adam and Eve, we find ourselves daily in their situation, striving out of pride or ambition to exceed our allotted measure or failing to do so from lack of courage and resolve. And the salvation (servition) for which Christians pray could presumably derive from a yearning to be liberated from the polar extremes of pride and cowardice and be granted grace to hold the center.

The novelty about the mythic Adam and Eve is their discovery of a conscience. Their experience of an angel with the flaming sword may have been their own conscience chasing them out of a paradise of oneness into the world of duality.

Forgive, oh my soul, the fires I laid,
the earth that I crushed, the air that I fouled,
and the water I froze. Forgive, lest I blame
my fogged and myopic vision on others
or smash the mirror reflecting my face.
Forgive, wilted heart, those cold calculations,
lukewarm soups and chewing of time,
the masquerading of borrowed power,
of mercy but crumbs and of love but a mime.
Timid ascensions and merry-go-rounds,
all failings forgive and gilded successes —
for both, being dear, debt's burden compound.

Forgive the myths and illusions I fostered
while idling Christ-given eyes, hands and feet,
the cobweb habits and visions I clustered
while proudly usurping a judgement seat,
the contagion caught by a soul that's in bloom
from a virus brewed in my fantasy's room,
for a drowned one un-rescued — I heard a cry
but sleepwalked further, nose in the sky.
Now, culprit, accuser and jury in one —
forgive my-yourself when contrition is done.
and dance anew at the Feast of the Lamb.
This confession is more than you'd tell the priest.

Lust is not even mentioned here, for it is invariably a sign of health and only its abuse is reprehensible. St. Augustine's deliberation in *The City of God* that prior to "The Fall of Man" children may have been engendered by God's will without lustful copulation, has no part in this act of contrition. Nor is disobedience an issue, for it enables us to survive unless we have observed and experienced that God provides. Nor is striving for knowledge an opprobrium, for curiosity and ingenuity have created the precondition for an exponentially surging population to inhabit the earth. (Was it not Prometheus' theft of fire from Zeus that kindled the latter's ire?) What may have been suggested here is hubris and the loss of insight for the right measure. As Dante pithily quoted Adam: „The cause of my exile was not eating from the tree but solely trespassing the mark “, This is the nature of original sin and that is why, being aware of a personal conscience that may formerly have been held in trust by some elders or by an institution but which is now the essential part of my own baggage, I wake up one morning realizing I am Adam: He is not in the past tense but meaningfully here and now.

What's the big deal? Did I not know this before? Of course, I did. But most realizations tend to be processed slowly and there is a long passage of time between the dawn of knowing and the twilight of realization. The glories of the heavens, however, or the extreme darkness of a starless night, can only be contemplated long after sunset.

