In the Beginning, Myths

Myths. Stories that reveal and establish, simultaneously, the ‘what’ and the ‘why’ of everything that matters. Stories that tell of creation: the creation of the world, if it is the world that matters, or the creation of the heavens, if the heavens matter, the creation of this particular mountain, this specific stream, this exact rock, this kind of herb – if they are what matters to those keeping the myth alive. Myths do not explain, exactly, but they establish and reveal, simultaneously, the what and the why of it all, including the what and why of different human beings. Myths tell who matters: who knows what, who does what, who is to be feared, who is to be honoured, and why. Myths give reasons, often unreasonable, but still they tell who matters.

Myths are also the original time tellers, clocks marked not with hours and minutes but with befores and afters. They reveal and establish, simultaneously, what happened In the Beginning and what will happen at The End. Myths give, to those they are given, a shared past, a collective future, and the meaningful locations of both. Incredibly, myths give to their inhabitants both temporality and spatiality – and they knit the two together, inseparable. They give to their inhabitants a present, a now woven meaningfully together out of past and future and place and space (this mountain, that rock): a present in which their lives fit, make a kind of sense, even if it is not a kind sense. Myths reveal and establish, simultaneously, how the present fits between past and future, and they tell their inhabitants how to fit in the present: who does what, who knows what, who and what needs to be feared, who and what needs to be honoured...

Myths do indeed make to seem natural and inevitable that which is historical and contingent, but they do more, I think. Myths contextualize. They carve niches out of flux and chaos and name those niches ‘home’. They proclaim, with an astonishing lack of modesty, ‘This is the way it is for us, and things are this way because this is how it has been and this is how it will be.’ The gift of myth is the gift of a
horizon of meaning, a horizon stretching out just as far as the inhabitants of that myth require meaning to extend. A myth, then, is a dwelling place, and one just as vital to human beings as any material nest. Without myth, incomprehension. Overwhelming confusion. No myth, no moorings. No myth, no compass bearings. No meaning to any when or where or who or what, just an unbearable homelessness. It is possible, sometimes, for a people to survive for generations with no single place, no fixed structure known as home, but only when their myth accompanies them on their wanderings. Only when they dwell in the filaments of their myth, its past and future knitted together into their now. Myth tells them that they matter now: that they mattered in the past, will matter in the future.

In the academic discipline of religious studies it is a commonplace that a myth must contain, that is, reveal and establish, both a cosmogony and an anthropogony. Or, a story about the beginning(s) and the future of the physical universe (loosely defined) and a story about the beginning(s) and the future of the human inhabitants of the world. A story in which the two are intimately connected. It is not too difficult to perceive the potential and the actuality, in western culture, for tension between religion and science (both loosely understood) at this point in time. Astronomers and astro-physicists, archaeologists and biologists, chemists, geologists, zoologists and who knows who all else, they are busily engaged with the telling and retelling of origin stories. The problem, perhaps, is that most scientists are not particularly good story tellers, even though they are blatant mythers. To put it bluntly, they get all caught up in the specifics and forget to contextualize. Explain explain explain they go to such great lengths to explain what and how in excruciating detail, and then, then they forget to knit it all together into a blanket for the living inhabitants of their tale. No, I am being both too harsh and not quite harsh enough.

Scientists do give us myths but their offerings, when presented in condensed form for a scientifically not so literate audience, are fairly often of the hair-shirt variety, most uncomfortable to those who, they insist, must wear them. For example, fifteen billion(ish) years ago, a
single point infinitely small and infinitely dense and infinitely hot and then it explodes and it’s still spreading out and cooling down, creating space and time as it goes. Well, it’s an answer to when and to what, but it doesn’t answer why. It is also peculiarly dependent upon violence as its founding essence. In other words, as a myth it packs quite an impressive bang; the problem is that bang is not all that matters to those who dwell here. And as for Homo sapiens appearing 150,000(ish) years ago and sharing ninety-six percent of our DNA with chimpanzees, please, by themselves these facts are meaningless. What are we to make of them, asks myth, how shall we make this story matter?

Myths may not be too fussy about facts, but by the gods they are laden with meaning, with mattering. Science has been giving us a cosmogony in which we humans have no dependable place or time, a cosmogony in which the essence of matter is to explode, and the essence of space is to increase distance, to spread apart, to drift away into nothingness. And science is providing an anthropogony characterized primarily by insignificance, in which environmental and genetic happenstance has resulted, factually, in opposable thumbs and the loss of a great deal of hair. Facts are piling up, smothering meaning; facts are piling up, but we are growing increasingly distant from our home in this universe, less and less at home with ourselves. Facts are piling up, giving us more and more reasons to feel fear, perhaps, but less and less to honour, less and less that matters, less and less that gives meaning to our presence, to our now.

For example: Science says – Bang, body due to random genetic accident, brain development facilitated by tool use: hunters more developed than hoe-ers.

Myth says – Gather ‘round and listen. In the beginning, nothing. No space, no time, no material stuff, just nothing. Nothing so tightly wrapped in on itself as to be everything all at once, everything and nothing both at once. Occupying no space, taking up no time at all, there was no distinction, no separation of past, present, future; here, there, nowhere, everywhere; something, nothing. All was one. It was nothing, yet it was. Words apply only awkwardly to the everything/nothing that was, that existed before
time and space, presence and absence had any meaning at all. There was nothing; all was one.

And then, ages and ages ago, nothing changed. Everything, which had been one, became many. Perhaps what was so utterly one became lonely, and in a single, desperate gesture stretched out its arms and sought to embrace all that was not. As this is, queerly, theology, I choose to imagine The Beginning as compelled by a wistful, extravagant love: a longing for the company of others so huge and steadfast that yearning itself became incarnate.

The physicists, when distracted from their bang, say that energy is neither created nor destroyed. Energy can take the form of matter, and matter the form of energy. The universe is simply all the energy there is and all the matter there is, and it is always one. One universe, though always shifting, moving, changing: now you see a particle, now you see a dash of energy. Though always shifting, there is a constant. The universe, they say, is composed of a fixed amount of stuff. Measure it as energy or measure it as matter, the sum remains the same: nothing ever added, nothing ever subtracted. It is now as it was in the beginning.

But now this one is no single, steady thing but everything that is ceaselessly moving, shifting, stretching, yearning. And in the beginning, can you imagine it, the shock, the unexpected speed with which one became separate from itself, had to begin to know itself as other, as many? And with time and space, and more time and space now stretching out beyond imagined bounds, twisting and spinning and racing in all directions...was there not a remnant of that extravagant love that began to mourn lost presence, lost timelessness?

Disconsolate, energy grew slower, drew in upon itself, discovered it could reunite as matter: matter seeking to gather into its arms all that might travel across its path.

Gravity attracts, the physicists tell us. There is hope for the physicists yet. Attraction. Can you feel it? It is attraction, it is desire, it is yearning, it is love, the force behind gravity, the force holding matter together. In the beginning, a wistful, extravagant love, a longing for the company of others. Come unto me, for I miss you.
But is it not the same yearning, the same longing that compels time and space and matter to wrench itself apart, to rush headlong away from all that is familiar: shifting, changing, creating new time and space and matter which to love?

I say it is; I say such wild, extravagant longing is exactly like a passionate embrace. It cannot be contained; it cannot be sustained. So I choose to imagine the nature of the universe. Now wistful, now wild: always extravagant in its gestures, with its love. A love caught now between a reaching out and a drawing in: a love pulled equally in all directions all at once.

Energy is neither created nor destroyed. Now it’s wistful, now it’s wild. Now it’s matter, now it’s not. Now it whispers, now it cries out with desire: such is the nature of all that is. 3

So says Myth, unreasonably, while Science snorts at the back of the circle, farther away from the fire than anyone else. Maybe scientists are bad story tellers simply because they are cold all the time, cold and grumpy about being so cold.

The cold, hard fact of human beings, the fact of human beings divided into basically two types, two kinds, two genres, two sexes, is an awkward, intractable fact. At this point in time Science deals with this fact in terms of X and Y, XX and XY, to be precise. And it is staggering just how devoid of meaning, devoid of mattering, devoid of any living warmth are the terms X and Y.

There seems to be a commonly held belief that in western culture the fires of myth were put thoroughly out more than two centuries ago, transformed from warm, glowing coals into cold and scattered ashes, resulting in all sorts of angst and grief. I do not share this belief, angst, or grief, at least not exactly. I would agree that there is a shared impression that once ‘whole’ myths have been, are being unravelled, their constituent elements teased or forced apart – but I cannot help but wonder just how ‘whole’ any myth ever was. Rather, I believe that myths are usually knit with large needles; they are comprised primarily of holes. Yet I would agree that there is a certain culture-wide sense of
loss or simply of nostalgia for a former mythic time (which was no doubt
dank and smelly and either too cold or too hot and did not include Sealy
Posture-Pedic mattresses or flush toilets and to which I do not believe
anyone literally wishes to return. Well, maybe some do, but they haven’t
thought about it hard enough.) I suspect, actually, that Myth is missed
in much the same way that Mother is missed. We can’t shake the feeling
that life was easier when we were, we imagine, surrounded by an
all-encompassing Meaning, a meaning that took care of all our needs,
that told us who we are and why we matter.

Perhaps before, but definitely after the rise of science, after the
‘Masculine Birth of Time’, myth was feminized, feminized in and through
theories about myth. Myth was denied, devalued, associated with
elsewhere, with primitives and the uncultured. Myth and Others became
closely linked. And yet (curiously, for a culture as putatively
unmythically-inclined as the capitalist west), as far as I can tell there
are still certain mythic figures who have not drifted elsewhere, who
still crowd our cultured and pop-cultured imaginations, populate our
dreams, glide through our theories. Yes they may be draped in sheets,
but look more closely: those sheets have been slept in, recently, and
they are marked with interesting stains. These figures are the virgin,
the mother, and the whore. These are figures feared and honoured,
figures filled with meaning, blessed and cursed with mattering. Indeed,
they are figures knitted into the very meaning of matter. Sometimes
explicitly, as with the Latin *mater*, root of matter, and as with Mother
Earth and the Virgin Islands (cheesy examples but still true), more often
implicitly, as with every mention of any overwhelming, all-encompassing
presence or of any terrifying, unknown ‘wholly other’, as with every
mention of attraction, allure, fascination, desire.

I do not know what exactly the virgin, mother, and whore meant to
those who (we imagine) dwelled in myth, whole-cloth; I do not know
how exactly these figures mattered into their lives. What I know is that,
at a minimum, they were present, present as symbols and images laden
with, most probably, different kinds of mattering, many layers of
meaning. What I know is that even in the ‘absence’ or ‘interruption’ of
myth their mythic significance is alive and well today in western
culture. I know this because I can tell, right now, a story about these
figures, a story you already know, though you may never have heard
it told. These figures still connect us, and they connect some of us more
closely than others. These figures also separate us, separate some of us
to the very back of the circle. They mark us, these figures, with an
indelible ink we cannot help but read and understand. Honour, power,
authority, knowledge, mystery, life, sex, attraction, fear, threat, danger,
death. The virgin, whore and mother still somehow mythically united,
and mythically defining: at times twisted into ropes that bind most
cruelly, at times woven into the lightest mantle.
The virgin. She of the light and innocence and purity. Healing touch,
potent sacrificial power. Fresh, young, desired, as yet unknown.
Unknown, untouched, separate somehow, wholly separate, she is the
Other just within grasp yet just beyond reach. Hidden, unexposed, yet
visible and radiant. Such blinding light, such danger. Filled, trembling
with potential with unknown possibility she must be controlled,
protected, prevented from, from, from doing whatever it is she might
soon do. She is ours, no she is mine to dispose of as I will, no, somehow,
she is not quite mine she stands alone she is the virgin because she is
not anyone’s, but not for long and who can be certain, who can be sure?
With the virgin one is never certain, she is uncertainty incarnate
knowing herself but never sharing her knowledge she could be lying
who can tell? What does she know? We don’t know but we desire.
Desire what we do not know. The virgin is the unknown wholly other,
a stranger to us all, a foreigner in our midst, a gift as yet ungiven. She
transcends us, exists amongst us yet on some other plane, unknown,
untouched. Mysterious. We fear her, fear the unknown yet we long
to be bathed in her radiance, to touch her source, but she could destroy
us then again what does she know anyway … What indeed? She could
be lying, we do not know for sure, she could be she might be in a way
we want her to be … a whore. Accessible to us, always available, always
open, a whore whom we desire to be just ‘like a virgin, touched for the
very first time’, each time, every time. Over there in the shadows we
seek her out under cover of night she is the dark, the mysterious, the alluring we know we can touch her we know we can have her but then again somehow it happens that she has us. Her touch defiles, her filth pollutes, she is somehow more powerful than … our purity cannot withstand her danger, nor can we resist her.⁶ She is unbearably desirable, unbearably close, her presence overwhelming, overwhelmingly revealing, she is too close too immanent too much, too much, we want and we want and we want sanctuary, too. Comfort, safety, soothing warm embrace desire satisfied, replete, we stir and nuzzle close, dream we are held by mother. Or perhaps imagine, in the waking hours, that this is what should be our dream though we know it as a dread. She frightens us, that fecund source, that dark abyss from whence we once emerged, oh but there our needs were met we knew only satisfaction it is her fault we were expelled, she is to blame she sent us forth too early held us back too long she gave us life damn her it leads to death.

What amazes me, in a troubling sort of way, is that even the briefest, messiest sketch of these mythic figures is so comprehensible, so intelligible. Evokes so many instances of recognition. The virgin, the whore, the mother: oh they are just used as tropes, metaphors, it could be said, old-fashioned figures of speech. They have nothing to do with us. Real live women are complicated subjects, replete with differences, and those figures are one-dimensional caricatures, stereotypes. In fact, for a feminist theorist even to write about them is highly suspect; it’s an essentialising gesture, it foregrounds gender (or sex, depending on how you define the terms ‘gender’ and ‘sex’) as the ahistorical universal-marker-with-all-unchanging-meaning and erases race, ethnicity, class, sexuality, etc.; in short, it is a sign of thoughtless privileged white western-ness to take these figures seriously. Thus could the conversation end, almost before it begins.

The issue, for me, is that I am almost daily confronted and confounded by the fact that female subjects who are neither virgins, whores, nor mothers – or, more specifically, female subjects who are not in some way associated with the virginal, the whorish, or the maternal – are
acknowledged to have precious little agency of our own. Precious little political power, precious little knowledge that matters, that would be worth sharing, and precious little moral authority – well, how could we be moral agents if we don’t really know anything worth knowing? Unlike the young virgin and the ‘good’ mother we do not occupy any moral high ground, could never save another through our sacrifice. Unlike the ‘good’ mother, we are not a source of life, a site of reverence, a font of care and nurturance. Unlike the whore, we are assumed to possess no potentially revelatory, explosive knowledge. Unlike the ‘bad’ mother, we are not perceived to be able to ruin anyone’s life. Unlike the virgin, whore and mother we are in no way perceived to be powerful or dangerous or knowledgeable enough to affect somehow anyone at the very core of their being. We are associated with neither the blinding light of the virgin nor the black night of the whore nor the dark of the mother’s womb. (Given their extremely light and deeply dark qualities, I would suggest that today the figures of the virgin, whore and mother are indeed just as racialised as they are gendered and sexed. They are also extremely malleable when it comes to being ‘classed’, and they all have the frightening potential to be fabulously queer.) In short, the issue is that I cannot shake the feeling that these mythic figures are currently somehow very much involved with ‘agency’, with the possibilities of power, knowledge, and authority afforded and denied to all sorts of different female subjects in western culture.

One serious complication with these suspicions of mine has to do with the fact that historically the virgin, whore and mother have been simultaneously sacred and everyday figures. To make matters worse, I strongly suspect that the sacred is, without them, unimaginable – just as they are, without the sacred, emptied of most meaning. To reflect on any possible affect these figures might have on real live women’s agency requires, then, imagining the sacred with them, through them. Which takes us right back to the realm of myth. There is no going around it, it would seem; we are destined to myth the point. But before we begin, a word of caution, wrested from Roland Barthes: ‘any myth with some
degree of generality is in fact ambiguous, because it represents the very humanity of those who, having nothing, have borrowed it.’

And then there is the problem of religion – traditional ‘home’ or perhaps ‘owner’ of all sacred myths and figures. Any search for the mythic figures of the virgin, the mother and the whore must travel through, or at least brush up against, that thorny entity known as ‘religion’.

**Endnotes**