Spiritual symbolism in the Grimms' tales

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Folktales as spiritual teachings

With the publication of his essay 'Primitive Mentality' Ananda Coomaraswamy put on notice those who would assess folklore without the requisite knowledge to do it justice. Due to the lack of such knowledge the spiritual dimension of folklore had been all but ignored. For our purposes the two key statements of his essay are: 'The content of folklore is metaphysical. Our failure to recognise this is primarily due to our abysmal ignorance of metaphysics and of its technical terms.'[1]

Some people will wonder about the importance of the first statement. They will admit that at least some folklore is concerned with metaphysical subjects but conclude that it should not be taken seriously for that very reason. Sadly, ever since David Hume's *Treatise of Human Nature* and *An Inquiry Concerning Human Understanding* metaphysics has been shunted aside as unimportant. According to Hume, any word which could not be tied down to a sense experience or combination of sense experiences is meaningless. But according to the traditional world view, beyond the physical and subtle sides of the world there is a formless aspect, and what is more important, there is a level of reality beyond the cosmos which forms its basis. Metaphysics is just that discipline which deals with what is beyond the cosmos (or *physis*—nature in its entirety) and hence involves the highest knowledge. So to say that the content of folklore is metaphysical is to say that it should be taken with the utmost seriousness.

Why should an essay titled 'Primitive Mentality' focus on the subject of folklore? The connection between the two is not difficult to comprehend. Broadly speaking, a primitive society is one which does not possess a written language. To quote from Coomaraswamy,

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[1] A. Coomaraswamy, 'Primitive Mentality' in *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art & Symbolism*, ed. R. Lipsey, New Jersey: Princeton, 1977, p.287.

> By "folklore" we mean that whole and consistent body of culture which has been handed down, not in books but by word of mouth and in practice, from time beyond the reach of historical research.[2]

This is not to say that it is impossible for folklore to exist in a society which possesses a written language, but in such a society the folklore component remains unwritten. By the time folklore material has found its way into books it has, generally speaking, ceased to exist as folklore, and incidentally is no longer taken seriously. But there are exceptions. If the folklore of one society has been transcribed by members of another, it may continue to function as folklore in the first. Again, if the folklore of one segment of a society has been transcribed by members of another segment, it may continue playing its original role in the former. But where written versions of folklore have received wide currency in a society, one can be sure that it has come to be taken lightly. We have seen this happen all over the Western world in the last two centuries, and considering the metaphysical content of folklore this constitutes a serious loss for Western culture.

The view of folklore just described is somewhat different from the view of contemporary folklorists like Alan Dundes and Dan Ben-Amos. In his article 'Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context,'[3] Ben-Amos identifies as folklore events featuring certain forms of communication in small (or at least not large) homogeneous group contexts. These forms would include riddles, tales, songs, games, proverbs, jokes, superstitions, works of art, and dramas. Dundes constantly published examples of current urban folklore in his *Paperwork Empire* books and articles. Tradition here is obviously unimportant; new folklore is being created (or taking place) all the time.

Folklore still exists in the world, but in a very much diminished state. There is traditional folklore and new folklore. The folklore of earlier times really did represent a world view different from the modern one. This world view is not quite dead (witness the alligator-in-the-sewer stories that surface now and then), but it is being pushed aside slowly but surely, and not just in the Western World. As a result

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[2] Ibid., p.286.

[3] D. Ben-Amos, 'Toward a Definition of Folklore in Context', *Journal of American Folklore* Vol.84, 1971, pp.3-15.

there is less folklore in the world, and what exists is mostly new folklore with no metaphysical overtones. Our current interest is in analysing traditional folklore, and all of my subsequent comments will be about folklore in this sense of the term.

Now one kind of folklore is the folktale, and if Coomaraswamy's stricture is correct then the content of folktales is metaphysical. In other words, folktales deal with the highest levels of reality. I will add that they also deal with the cosmos from the perspective of the highest levels of reality and, generally speaking, from the traditional point of view. Many commentators have noted that, as with all folklore, folktales show cross cultural similarities. Some would explain this by postulating a collective memory or collective unconscious, but there are far less speculative hypotheses, such as cultural diffusion, which will account for the facts. More important, the origin of folktales is indeed "beyond the reach of historical research." It is to be sought in the origin of the cosmos which, in the traditional view, is God. God as he reveals or manifests himself is One; hence it is not surprising that stories which are the result of the divine influence in people's lives should exhibit similarities over the whole earth.

As Coomaraswamy argues, the basis of folktales is spiritual; they were told 'not primarily to amuse but originally to instruct; the telling of stories only to amuse belongs to later ages in which the life of pleasure is preferred to that of activity or contemplation.'[4] And in his essay 'Symplegades,' he states, 'But actually, that such myths are transmitted, it may be for thousands of years, by the folk to whom they have been entrusted is no proof of their popular origin.' He states further,

> It would be superfluous to emphasise that the traditional symbols are never the inventions of the particular author in whom we happen to find them … Our scholars, who think of myths as having been invented by "literary men," overlook that traditional motifs and traditional themes are inseparably connected. The traditional raconteur's figures, which he has not invented but has received and

[4] A. Coomaraswamy, 'Literary Sympolism' in *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art & Symbolism*, p.327.

> faithfully transmits, are never figures of speech, but always figures of thought.[5]

In short, in this view the origin of these stories is divine, and the storytellers are doing their part to safeguard a spiritual tradition. Coomaraswamy talks of myths rather than folktales, but it is clear from his essay that he includes them both in his comments.

It is only because our culture as a whole is so anti-spiritual that we have difficulty accepting the view of folktales just outlined, a view which is taken for granted in the East. But in the Middle Ages a group of such tales was collected under the title *Gesta Romanorum* (*Acts of the Romans*), and each story was given a Christian symbolic interpretation. So the idea of folktales having a spiritual symbolism is not foreign to the West. This is not to suggest reading a Christian interpretation into the Grimm tales, for they transcend any such narrow exegesis. And one should not be disconcerted by the seeming immorality of the hero's actions in certain tales. Once again, I quote Coomaraswamy, this time from a footnote in 'The Loathly Bride.'

> For so long as men still understood the true nature of their myths, they were not shocked by their "immorality." The myths are never in fact, immoral, but like every other form of theory (vision), amoral. … The content of myths is intellectual, rather than moral; they must be understood.[6]

There is another way to approach the spiritual content of folktales—through their relation to myths. Most commentators on myths have found everything in them except spiritual content. Yet the sacred nature of these stories is shown by the fact that they were typically recited in ritual situations. If any one or combination of the other interpretations of myths (Freudian, Jungian, structuralist, agricultural, meteorological, etiological, and zodiacal) is the whole truth, then in what way were these stories sacred? Or better, why were they considered sacred by the people who used them? In order to answer this

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[5] A. Coomaraswamy, 'Symplegades' in *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art & Symbolism*, p.535.

[6] A. Coomaraswamy, 'On the Loathly Bride' in *Selected Papers Vol.1: Traditional Art & Symbolism*, p.354.

question we must look deeper than most interpretations do. The most profound symbolism underlying myths must be spiritual.

Linking myths, and through them folktales, to rituals should not be misconstrued. I do not hold to the view that myths and folktales are merely warmed-over rituals left over from a more primitive past. Marie Von Franz rightly rejected this idea in chapter two of *An Introduction to the Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, but unfortunately it became quite popular in the last century. We first notice this idea in a footnote to chapter six of Arnold Van Gennep's *The Rites of Passage.* Commenting on the writings of another author he states, 'He did not perceive, however, that these myths and legends are in some cases only the oral residues of rites of initiation; one should never forget that in the ceremonies of initiation in particular, the elders, instructors, or ceremonial chiefs recite what the other members of the group perform.'[7] In the 1920's Paul Saintyves (Emile Nourry) promoted this view in *Les Contes de Perrault et les Recits Paralleles*, followed by Alfred Winterstein and J. F. Grant Duff in articles which appeared in *Imago.* The 1950's brought Jan de Vries, Mircea Eliade, and Max Luthi into the fold, and in the 1980's N. J. Giradot and Leo Schneiderman expressed such ideas.

Two related but different ideas should be distinguished. In chapter eleven of his *Rites and Symbols of Initiation,* Eliade hints at the connection between the secluded forest huts of folktales and initiation rites. Indeed, for some authors, every trip of a boy or girl to a hut in the woods refers to the rite by which children were initiated into adulthood. Thus 'Snow White' would be about the initiation rites of a girl. But one would look very far to find an actual rite in which a female was sent into a forest hut with a group of males. This idea practically discredits itself, but there is another that is not quite so far-fetched. In his review of de Vries' book on folktales and myths (which is found in *Myth and Reality*) Eliade states that the tale

> …presents the structure of an infinitely serious and responsible adventure, for in the last analysis it is reducible to an initiation scenario: again and again we find initiatory ordeals. … We could almost say that the tale repeats, on another plane and by other

[7] A. Van Gennep, *The Rites Of Passage*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1960, p.92.

> means, the exemplary initiation scenario. The tale takes up and continues "initiation" on the level of the imaginary.[8]

Luthi, in chapter four of his book *Once Upon a Time*, commends Eliade's view and adds, 'The fairy tale is an initiation.'[9]

To the extent that initiation rites have a spiritual component, we can agree that folktales are a sort of substitute for them. But to think of folktales in this way is very limiting. Folktales have a significance of their own, and that significance is to a great extent independent of their cultural context. They are not a substitute for anything but rather one more means of helping people toward spiritual advancement.

I must also challenge a comment made by the Freudian psychoanalyst Bruno Bettelheim in the introduction to his *The Uses of Enchantment*. He states, 'As with all great art, the fairy tale's deepest meaning will be different for each person, and different for the same person at various moments in his life.'[10] Rather, we should say, the deepest or most profound meaning of these tales is the same for all people. However, each person, or the same person at different times, may receive different information from them depending on that person's spiritual development. The role of these tales has always been the same: to enlighten people about the true nature of the world and its origin, and to help lift them from this vale of tears to the realm of bliss.

The history of folktale interpretation is littered with casualties. Perhaps that is why so many scholars in the first half of the twentieth century considered interpretation a waste of time. W. R. Halliday is representative of this group. In the first chapter of his book *Indo-European Folktales and Greek Legend* he summarised what had gone before and gave some advice for the future. Among other views he mentions the doctrine of a fifth century BC commentator that 'all Greek legend is disguised cosmological myth and consists essentially of highly obscure talk about the weather,' and the Stoic view that the Greek gods and goddesses were really 'representations of natural phenomena.' He concludes with the following statement:

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[8] M. Eliade, *Myth And Reality*, New York: Harper & Row, 1968, p.201.
[9] M. Luthi, *Once Upon A Time*, Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1976, pp.59-60.
[10] B. Bettelheim, *The Uses Of Enchantment*, New York: Vintage Books, 1989, p.12.

> It will be generally agreed today that a legend must be approached on its own merits and not as a riddle which conceals some hidden meaning. Indeed, it is now pretty generally accepted that all those methods of interpretation are liable to lead astray which begin by assuming that everything means something other than it says, and then juggle with fanciful ingenuity until all these hidden meanings miraculously turn out to signify the same thing in the end. For this release from the allegorical method, which has a long history stretching back through the Middle Ages and the Christian fathers to later classical antiquity, we have the comparative study of mythology largely to thank. It is true that, in its initial stages, it was itself given to these ingenious and thankless pursuits, but the absurdity of supposing that our nursery tales were all sun myths, that Little Red Riding Hood represented the setting sun and the wolf the black cloud with its flashing teeth of lightning, and so on, did much to give the quietus to the allegorical method … Today at any rate no apology is needed for approaching folktales as stories and not as allegories.[11]

It may be that no apology is needed for taking folktales as mere stories, but that is hardly a reason for leaving matters there. However, before I pick up the gauntlet that Halliday so confidently threw down, I would call attention to the fact that he spoke of myths and folktales interchangeably. This was quite proper, but not for the reasons most people would think. There is a widespread view that folktales are watered-down or degenerate versions of earlier myths. This may indeed be true in some instances, but the opposite is also possible. Rhys Carpenter has shown in his book *Folktale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epics* that some of the stories told by Homer seem to be degenerate forms of folktales.[12] Thus, even though the tales collected by the Grimm brothers in the nineteenth century were committed to writing 2,500 years after the Homeric epics, we have no right to conclude that they are any younger. They may in fact be older, and they may antedate some ancient myths with similar themes. And this brings

[11] W. R. Halliday, *Indo-European Folk-Tales and Greek Legend*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1933, pp.4-5.
[12] R. Carpenter, *Folk Tale, Fiction and Saga in the Homeric Epics*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1946, pp. 18-22.

us to what really links myths and folktales. Although the two genres are obviously different, they share many of the same themes.

Cosmology and wolves

One of the most prominent themes of folktales is the swallowing up of one or more beings by another, and the eventual disgorging of same. Halliday mentions the Grimm tale 'Red Riding-Hood,'[13] but a similar tale, 'The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids,'[14] is also well known.

In 'The Wolf and the Seven Young Kids' *a wolf who has disguised himself gains entry into the goats' home while the mother goat is away. He eats up six of the seven kids, the youngest escaping by hiding in the clock case. The wolf then trots outside and lies down under a tree to sleep. The mother goat comes home and discovers what has happened. In sorrow she leaves the house with her remaining kid and soon comes to the meadow where the wolf lies snoring. She sees movement in his stomach and decides to take action. She cuts open his belly, and out come the kids. She refills the belly with stones and sews it up. The wolf awakes and goes to a well to drink. When he leans over the stones pull him into the well, and he drowns.*

It is hardly necessary to relate the story of 'Red Riding-Hood.' But the main points to keep in mind are that *a wolf devours an old woman and then waits for her grandchild, whom he also eats. A huntsman comes by and hears the wolf snoring. He cuts open the wolf, lets Red Riding-Hood and her grandmother out, and fills the wolf's belly with stones. When the wolf wakes up he tries to run off but sinks to the ground and dies*. There is another version of the story, which closely resembles the well-known tale of 'The Three Pigs,'[15] in which the wolf is led to falling into a boiling trough of water.

If the human version of the wolf story seems like a pale imitation of the other it is probably because the animal version came first. Georg Husing has shown that 'Red Riding-Hood' is derived from two

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[13] AT 333. [The Finnish folklorist Antti Aarne divided up European folktales into different types based on their plots and assigned a number to each type. The American folklorist Stith Thompson revised the listing (see *The Folktale*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977). Where possible the "Aarne-Thompson" numbers for the tales have herein been indicated.]

[14] AT 123.

[15] AT 124A.

authentic tales. One is 'The Wolf and The Seven Young Kids,' and the other is Charles Perrault's 'Little Red Riding Hood' from his seventeenth-century collection of tales. However, Perrault tampered with his sources. George Delarue has described more authentic European versions of this story which involve two sisters and a wolf, while Wolfram Eberhard has found Chinese versions about two sisters and a tiger.[16] The important thing is that, in order to fully understand the significance of any of these stories, it is necessary to delve into traditional cosmology. By "cosmology" I do not mean 'highly obscure talk about the weather,' as Halliday would have it, but a description of the source and formation of our cosmos.

As I have used the phrase "traditional cosmology" it will be necessary to explain what I mean by "tradition." Literally, the word means what is handed on. Borrowing some phrases from Jaroslav Pelikan's book *The Vindication of Tradition*, by "tradition" I mean the universal tradition of God's existence and of the knowledge of him. (God is, of course, sexless, but is conventionally referred to with masculine pronouns. For convenience I follow conventional practice.) This tradition has been handed on from generation to generation down through the millennia. It is found in the ancient Hindu Upanishads, the Buddhist Sutras, Daoist writings such as the *Dao De Jing* and the *Zhuang Zi*, the Bible of Judaism and Christianity, and the works of Plato and Aristotle. It is also found centuries later in the doctrines of Kabbalists, Sufis, and Christians with an esoteric viewpoint such as Dante and Meister Eckhart. Readings from ancient, medieval, and even modern sources are presented in books such as Aldous Huxley's *The Perennial Philosophy* and Whithall N. Perry's *A Treasury of Traditional Wisdom.* This tradition is believed to come from a divine source and it shows up throughout the world, even in so-called primitive societies such as those of the Americas, Africa, and the South Pacific. It includes an account not only of God but of God's relationship to the cosmos. Understanding that relationship, as explained below, will make the subsequent discussion of folktales much more comprehensible.

According to the traditional view, the source of our cosmos is the Ultimate Reality or Supreme Principle—God as he is in himself. There

[16] On all of these versions cf. Alan Dundes ed., *Little Red Riding Hood*, Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1989.

can be nothing outside of God, so the universe is a manifestation of God, but there are a few steps along the way. God first manifests or reveals himself as the Godhead or Being. While Being is One, it is generally understood as tripartite or "three in one." Thus in Hinduism the first manifestation of God is called *Sat Chit Ananda* or Being-Consciousness-Bliss. It is to be understood as the Universal Self inhabiting the world and constituting our real selves. (Different spiritual traditions characterise these three aspects variously, but this need not concern us.)

In order for Being, with its three aspects which are One, to manifest the multiplicity which is the world it must bifurcate or polarise, thus producing a seeming duality. So the One becomes two—the Active Pole and the Passive Pole of existence. The Passive Pole is the stuff or substance of creation. It is the *hyle* or *materia prima* of Aristotle. Before creation this Substantial Pole is totally chaotic or without form. But under the influence of the Active Pole, which is itself unmoving (and which, as it were, reflects the attributes of Being more fully), the Passive Pole takes on various forms and becomes the cosmos. In the Chinese spiritual tradition the Active Pole is called Heaven and the Passive Pole is called Earth. In the Judeo-Christian tradition they are called the wind (or spirit) and the waters (Gen.1:1).[17] But for the process to begin there must be a Divine Impulse from within Being, the Spiritual Sun, and in the Bible this Impulse is the Word (Gen.1:3): 'Let there be light.' From this Impulse comes the Celestial Ray which shines on the waters bringing form out of formlessness.

The first production of the Passive Pole is the World Spirit or Divine Spirit (also called the Cosmic Intellect, the formless realm) which is generally pictured as the World Axis cutting through the centre of the cosmos which revolves around it. The World Spirit can be understood as the reflection of Being as the Spiritual Sun on the waters or Substantial Pole of existence. Or it can be seen as the reflection of the Celestial Ray emanating from the Spiritual Sun. (The Ray and its reflection are the trunks of the two trees mentioned in the Zohar – 3.156B; the first is usually described as upright and the second as

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[17] For a fuller discussion of the polarisation of Being along with examples from different cultures cf. S. D. Fohr, *Adam and Eve: The Spiritual Symbolism of Genesis and Exodus*, Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2005, Ch.3, 'In The Beginning.'

inverted since it is a reflection of the first.) Again, it can be called the expression of the Self in the world and thus the true self of all, or the boundary of God and manifestation (at least when God is understood essentially or as beyond manifestation). From the World Spirit comes the World Soul (the subtle realm) and from the World Soul the World Body (or physical realm). Thus the World Spirit is not only, as one would suspect, the centre of divine influence in the world, but the source of the rest of the cosmos as well. Alternatively, the creation of the three realms which make up the cosmos is sometimes pictured as a rending apart of the Passive or Substantial Pole to produce the sky (formless realm), earth (physical realm), and the atmosphere (subtle realm) between them.

In a way, the birth of the cosmos means the "death" of the Passive or Substantial Pole of existence, since the latter in effect turns into the former. All transformation involves the death of one thing and the birth of another, and this case merely illustrates the general rule. With this in mind we may say that the Active Pole must slay the Passive Pole in order to produce the cosmos. The importance of this point is made clear by the large number of stories in which a hero slays a great serpent or dragon who is menacing the world. These narratives symbolise the creation of the cosmos, and many of the stories which have been identified in the past as solar myths can be seen as cosmological in nature. The so-called solar hero is really a personification of the Active Pole, and he is attempting to bring the light of creation to the chaotic darkness of the Passive Pole. Seen in this way the story of St. George and the dragon is symbolic of the process of creation.

There are many reasons why serpentine creatures have been chosen to represent the Passive Pole of existence. The stuff of the cosmos, as mentioned, has been called both earth and water. Either of these substances can take on different shapes and is thus eminently suited to symbolise the plastic principle of creation. Serpents have an obvious relationship to both earth and water as most species reside in one or the other. But serpents also move in curves that suggest furrows in the earth and waves in bodies of water. Jacqueline Simpson, in her *Folklore* article 'Fifty British Dragon Tales: An Analysis,' notes that 'There is a striking preponderance of water in various forms (river, lake, pool, swamp, well, sea), this being mentioned in no fewer than twenty-three tales.' She adds, 'the link between dragons and water can be traced back to

early stages of Near Eastern, European, and Oriental mythology.'[18] The serpentine creatures most closely connected with water are crocodilians, and among the Sepik River peoples of New Guinea, we find the belief that a crocodile brought up mud from the bottom of the primal sea to create the earth which it now supports on its back. In some cultures a turtle is cast in this role; examples are the earth-diver stories of the American Indians and the Chinese tradition that the world rests on the back of a turtle. The reason for this substitution is the special nature of a turtle: its shell consists of a curved surface above a flat surface and thus can symbolise, in Chinese terminology, Heaven and Earth with the cosmos between them.

The wavy shape that serpents take as they move is similar to the way in which sun rays are portrayed. For this reason the serpent is linked with the sun in some versions of the creation story. In a typical example the hero frees the sun from the grasp or maw of a serpent, thus allowing light to permeate the world. It is due to these versions of the story that the protagonist is called a solar hero. But there is an even better reason to refer to him in this way. As a personification of the Active Pole he is ultimately the agent of Being—often called the Spiritual Sun—who works through the aegis of the Active Pole to bring the cosmos into existence. (Thus in Ps.74:12-14 we read, 'Oh God, my king from of old, who brings deliverance throughout the land; it was You who drove back the sea with Your might, who smashed the heads of the monsters in the waters; it was You who crushed the heads of Leviathan, who left him as food for the creatures of the sea.') Being provides the spark that begins the process of creation, and the solar hero is the Divine Impulse. Those schooled in the mythology of the world can easily think of examples. Indra, slayer of the serpent Vritra in Hindu mythology, comes immediately to mind.

Greek mythology provides a peculiar twist to this story. While still in his mother Leto's womb, Apollo, a solar hero, is pursued by the serpent Python (just as in Egyptian mythology Horus, while still in the womb of Isis, is pursued by Seth). To make the solar symbolism even more obvious, Hera has decreed that Leto may not give birth anywhere the sun shines. In the end, Apollo is born and kills Python.

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[18] J. Simpson, 'Fifty British Dragon Tales: An Analysis', *Folklore* Vol.89, 1978, p.79.

One may also view the connection between the Passive Pole and the world as a mother-daughter relationship; the first gives birth to the second. Since daughters tend to resemble their mothers, it should come as no surprise that serpentine creatures also symbolise the formed world, as in the case of the serpent in the Garden of Eden and all other serpents connected with trees in world mythologies. These serpents either guard trees, preventing people from reaching them, or draw people away from them. The trees in question all symbolise the World Spirit, so we have a picture of people being kept away from God by the coils of worldliness. In actuality, not many folktales feature serpents or dragons, but they often include characters that are the equivalent of these, and that is why I have taken the time to detail their symbolism.

Returning to the description of the traditional worldview I must point out that it includes the idea of the world degenerating once it is created. All ancient traditions refer explicitly or implicitly to former ages which were superior to our own. In Greek mythology we find references to a Golden Age, Silver Age, Bronze Age (divided in two), and Iron Age, the last being our present age. (These ages have nothing to do with the various ages marked out by modern archaeologists.) In the Judeo-Christian tradition the serpent in the Garden of Eden begins this process of degeneration, but this means only that the world is subject to wearing down and hence ultimate dissolution. According to the traditional view, every cycle of ages ends in a general destruction which is merely a prelude to a new creation and new golden age. (The sand running down in an hourglass symbolises the degeneration of the cosmos and turning the hourglass over symbolises the starting of a new golden age. As we read in Matt.20:16, 'Thus will the last be first and the first last,' a phrase with other meanings as well.) With this in mind we turn to some of the Greek myths with cosmological themes.

According to Hesiod's Theogony*, we begin with Gaia, Mother Earth, who emerged from chaos and bore Uranus, the Sky. They produced many children, some of whom Uranus would not allow to be born. At the request of Gaia, her sons the Titans, led by Kronos, attacked Uranus. Kronos castrated Uranus and replaced him as the chief god. He married his sister Rhea and had children of his own, but as they were born (Hestia, Demeter, Hera, Hades, and Poseidon) he swallowed them. When Zeus, the sixth child and third son, was born, Gaia hid him and gave Kronos a stone wrapped in swaddling clothes to swallow. Zeus survived, and with*

the help of Gaia finally caused Kronos to vomit up his earlier children. All the sons then waged war on Kronos and the other Titans, and Zeus finally killed his father with a thunderbolt. In this way Zeus, in turn, replaced Kronos as the ruler of the cosmos.

The symbolism of this account is not too difficult to decipher if one is acquainted with the traditional worldview. From chaos or the Passive Pole of existence emerge earth and sky, the physical and formless realms, which must be separated for creation to develop. The separator is Kronos who castrates his father Uranus as the latter is about to engage in sexual union with Gaia. Thus Kronos separates his parents, allowing space for the subtle realm and permitting creation to proceed. Like Marduk in the Babylonian myth he symbolises the Divine Impulse. But for our purposes the important part of the story is yet to come.

Kronos swallowing his children symbolises the degeneration or destruction of the cosmos in a particular cycle of ages, a return to chaos. His disgorging the stone and five children is a symbol of recreation, the six objects being comparable to the six days of creation mentioned in Genesis. The subsequent defeat of Kronos and the other Titans represents the "defeat" of chaos which is necessary for creation to occur. It is interesting to note that the Titans, who first represented the forces of creation (the Active Pole), end up representing the forces of destruction (the Passive Pole). Now the young gods and the Titans are equivalent, respectively, to the angels and devils of the Judeo-Christian tradition, and we are taught that devils are really fallen angels. Chaos becomes cosmos but degenerates once again into chaos, and the cycle must then begin all over again. Thus what is new and conquering becomes what is old and needs to be conquered.

These stories of the generations of the Greek gods are echoed in folktales about aged kings setting themselves against young heroes. Most commentators on these tales see them as portraying the age-old societal conflict between the decaying established order and the needed forces of renewal. Perhaps they do symbolise this conflict, and perhaps the success of the young hero symbolises the renewal which is so badly needed. But these tales also symbolise the renewal of the whole cosmos, and this renewal is the paradigm of all the others.

There are striking similarities between the account of the wolf eating the kids and the myth of Kronos swallowing each of his children as they were born. The substitute stone motif is present in both stories and

even the number of items swallowed, six, is the same. Finally, where Gaia and Zeus help the latter's brothers and sisters escape from Kronos' belly, the mother goat and one of her kids play the same role in the Grimm tale. We have, then, another creation story, or rather, as in the case of Kronos and his family, a story of cosmic degeneration and re-creation. In Norse mythology there is actually a wolf figure connected with cosmic degeneration. The gods bind the wolf Fenris so that creation will not be destroyed. But he finally breaks his bonds and helps lead the destruction of the world, swallowing the sun in some versions of the myth.

An interesting detail of 'The Wolf And The Seven Young Kids' which lends credence to the view of it as a creation story is the youngest kid escaping the wolf by hiding in the clock case. Since the time of day is apparent only to those who are standing outside the clock case and thus can see the clock, hiding in a clock case is equivalent to going beyond time. In all destructions of the cosmos which precede creations there is left a seed or germ beyond space and time from which the new cosmos will develop.[19]

From the spiritual point of view, it is very important to have a grasp of traditional cosmology. Western religious doctrine tends to treat the world as the creation of God rather than his manifestation. Thus the world and every being in it are seen as separate from God. Traditional cosmology teaches us that there is nothing other than God; hence essentially we are all God. The goal of the spiritual life is to realise this essential identity. Thus the aim of spiritual life is not, as some imagine, to have special experiences. Rather it is nothing less than gaining the highest knowledge. This is a recurrent theme in most folktales which teach us how to fend off the attractions of the world and reach the spiritual goal.

Stepmothers and dwarfs

The chief culprits in most stories—along with giants, with which they share certain roles—are stepmothers and witches. The most familiar stories involving stepmothers are 'Snow White,' 'Cinderella,' and 'Hansel and Gretel.'

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[19] For more on this subject see the chapters titled 'The Symbolic Meaning of Early Biblical History' and 'The Ark and the Tower' in Fohr, *Adam and Eve.*

Any analysis of the mother-stepmother motif is complicated by some facts pointed out by John Ellis in *One Fairy Tale Too Many.*[20] He has shown that in retelling 'Snow White' and 'Hansel and Gretel,' the Grimms made what seems at first glance to be a very important change. In the original folktales the real mothers of the children turn against them. However, in the Grimms' final versions the real mothers are replaced by stepmothers. However, while this may seem like a momentous change, symbolically it is of no consequence. Instead of the shift from the mother before the birth of her children to the mother after the birth of her children, we have a symbolically equivalent shift from a real mother to a stepmother.

'Snow White'[21] begins with an interesting episode which is usually ignored. *'Once upon a time in the middle of winter when the snowflakes were falling from the sky like feathers, a queen was sitting by a window with a black ebony frame an d was sewing. As she was thus sewing and looking at the snow, she stuck the needle in her finger, and three drops of blood fell to the snow. Because the red looked so pretty in the white snow, she thought to hers elf, "If only I had a child as white as snow, as red as blood, and as black as the wood of the window frame!" Soon thereafter she had a little daughter who was as white as snow, as red as blood, and whose hair was as black as ebony. Therefore she was called Snow White, and when the child was born, the queen died. A year later the king married a second wife.'*

Compared to this beautiful opening, the symbolism of the rest of the story is practically transparent. On one level, the opening lines of 'Snow White' are a description of the creation or manifestation of the world. The queen's needle is, of course, a symbol of the Divine or World Spirit, and the drops of blood represent the essentially sacrificial character of creation. One is reminded of the blood contained in the Holy Grail and of the lance associated with it in legend. But in this story, we have something a little out of the ordinary in Western culture—the connection of creation with the colours white, red, and black. In the Sankhya tradition of Hinduism the Passive Pole or substance of creation is called *Prakriti.* It is said to be made up of the three gunas—strands or tendencies—held in equilibrium. They are

[20] J. Ellis, *One Fairy Story Too Many,* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983, Ch.2.
[21] AT 709.

called *sattva*, *rajas*, and *tamas*, and they are associated with the colours white, red, and black respectively. These tendencies are described in many Hindu scriptures including the *Bhagavad Gita* (chapter fourteen). It may seem improper to cite Hindu sources to explain the symbolism of a European folktale, but we must keep in mind that most European languages are part of the Indo-European language group which includes Sanskrit, and that there are cultural affinities between Hindus and Europeans as well. In fact, a number of so-called European tales have been traced to the East, and Hindu mythology and Greco-Roman mythology have been shown to be related.

In the chapter 'The Ark and the Tower' of my book *Adam and Eve* I characterise *sattva* as illumination or the upward tendency, *rajas* as activity or the expansive tendency, and *tamas* as darkness, inertia, or the downward tendency. But noting some interesting comments on this matter by John Dobson,[22] I wish to add the following. Dobson refers to the veiling power of *tamas*, the projecting power of *rajas*, and the revealing power of *sattva*. He also indicates that literally speaking, the term *rajas* does not mean activity but rather some impurity which obscures like smog. His idea is that this tendency in *Prakriti* obscures Reality. That is to say, *rajas* leads us to experience Reality or Being, which is really changeless and undivided, as the changing and multifarious world which seems to exist. Since the usual kind of activity people engage in when impelled by desire and anger is precisely obscuring in this way, I have no disagreement with Dobson's view.

To sum all this up, in human beings *tamas* shows up as passivity, *rajas* as activity, and the *sattva* as balance or the middle way. As the *Gita* says, this middle way involves acting without attachment to the fruits of action. Only by taking the middle way can we climb the ladder of enlightenment and see Reality or Being for what it is (*sattva* includes the word *Sat* which can mean Reality or the Real as well as Being). And seeing Reality is tantamount to seeing ourselves for what we are. The true self of each of us is this Reality. Being expresses itself as a spirit to remind it of its true nature. Being also takes on a body and a psyche or soul, which in turn create a sense of ego. But Being rests tranquilly behind all of these sheaths. As we read in the *Gita*:

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[22] J. Dobson, *Advaita Vedanta and Modern Science*, Chicago: Vivekananda Vedanta Society, 1979, Ch.1.

> But, O mighty-armed, the one who knows the truth of the distinction (of the self) from the gunas and action knows that gunas act upon gunas, and does not become attached (III.28; based on several translations).

All action is confined to *Prakriti*—the substance of creation—which is distinct from our true self. The folktales we are considering detail how *Prakriti* works to hide this truth from us.

According to Hindu tradition the Active Pole of creation, which throws the three gunas of *Prakriti* into disequilibrium, is called *Purusha.* As a result of *Purusha*'*s* action chaos becomes cosmos, and the world is born. In scholastic terms *natura naturans* (nature in her natural or formless state) becomes *natura naturata* (nature natured, or nature formed into the world), and folktales symbolise this change either by having the natural mother die, giving way to the stepmother—as in 'Cinderella'—or by having the natural mother change in character—as in 'Snow White' and 'Hansel And Gretel.' Metaphorically the birth of the formed world is the death of *Prakriti.* But in actuality the formed world is identical with *Prakriti*, which has merely changed in character. Perhaps this interchangeability accounts for the ambiguous nature of the Great Goddess (or Great Mother) found in many cultures of the ancient world. Her descriptions often seem to fall halfway between the unformed substance of the cosmos and the cosmos itself, or chaos on the way to being cosmos. The Greek goddess Gaia, mentioned earlier, is a good example of this tendency. Gaia is sometimes indistinguishable from the chaos from which she arises.

To sum up, in the Grimm stories the stepmother or changed mother symbolises the cosmos or world, and her children symbolise human beings in the world. The stepmothers' callous treatment of their children is only to be expected. Symbolically, the treatment meted out to Snow White, Cinderella, and Hansel and Gretel represents the treatment of all human beings by the world. The world uses us up and spits us out, but most of us do not realise our predicament, or do not realise it in time. It is interesting that the fathers of these children, who symbolise the Active Pole of creation, either disappear from the picture completely or seem unable to do much to counter the actions of the mother figures. This reflects the idea that the pull of the world generally overwhelms the pull of God in most people's lives.

The changed mother in 'Snow White' not only represents the world but also worldliness. Similarly, Snow White not only symbolises human beings but also the innocence or non-worldliness of youth. This interpretation is made clear in the famous mirror episodes of the story. Amusement park mirrors may be set up to confuse people, but under ordinary circumstances we believe that mirrors do not lie. Now any reference to truth in a story is also a reference to ultimate or spiritual truth—indeed, one of the Muslim names for God is "the Truth." Besides, just as a mirror remains essentially the same though it contains changing images, so too God remains essentially the same though containing all the changing phenomena of the world.

In line with the idea that the mirror in 'Snow White' represents spiritual truth is an interpretation mentioned by Maria Tatar in *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Fairy Tales.* She cites with approval the view that 'the disembodied voice in the mirror' is really 'the wicked queen's husband.'[23] Tatar sees nothing spiritual in this interpretation, only a rivalry for the love of Snow White's father. However, if the father in 'Snow White' symbolises *Purusha* or the Active Pole of creation, then Tatar's identification only confirms that we are really dealing with spiritual truth. The mirror is stating that according to the highest, most spiritual standard, innocent Snow White is "fairer" than her worldly mother.

The world responds to innocence by trying to kill it, and it usually succeeds at puberty if not earlier. (For what the fall from innocence entails I refer the reader again t o the chapter 'Adam and Eve' in my book *Adam and Eve.*) In our story, *the queen orders her huntsman to take Snow White into the woods and kill her.* The mother's jealousy begins when Snow White reaches her seventh year, and we must admit that children lose many aspects of their innocence by this age. But it is obvious from the prince's interest at the end of the story that Snow White must have reached puberty by the time her mother ordered the huntsman to kill her.

The huntsman in this story is essentially equivalent to the woodcutter of 'The Strange Minstrel.'[24] They both symbolise God who

[23] M. Tatar, *The Hard Facts of the Grimms' Faity Tales*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987, p.154.
[24] AT 151.

is ever ready to come to the aid of innocence or spirituality. The woodcutter of 'The Strange Minstrel' stands immobile (as befits God in the role of unmoved mover) listening to the fiddler (minstrel – a man on a spiritual journey) play his instrument, and by merely raising his axe he protects the fiddler from animals that have come to harm him, animals that symbolise various lower cravings. Similarly, in a manner reminiscent of the biblical story of Abraham and Isaac, the huntsman selects an animal to be killed in place of Snow White, the human being. In this case it is a wild boar, an animal that seems to play a negative role in many European stories from the time of ancient Greek civilisation. Although the boar may carry with it certain Celtic overtones, its function in European folktales is to represent the lower tendencies, especially bodily cravings. Thus instead of Snow White or innocence being killed off, innocence is preserved while the desires are killed off. Similarly, instead of Isaac being killed, God substitutes a ram, another animal which symbolises bodily cravings.

A second version of this section of 'Snow White' is found in the Grimms' 1810 manuscript.[25] According to this account, *Snow White's mother leads her out into the forest to look for roses, hoping Snow White will get lost and be eaten by wild beasts. But Snow White safely makes her way to the house of the seven dwarfs.* The mention of roses is spiritually suggestive. The rose at the top of the rosy cross of the Rosicrucians symbolises the Spiritual Sun, or God as he reveals himself. Though this is the usual meaning of the rose, the rose also symbolises the spiritually perfected state which humans can attain. The thorns on its stem symbolise hindrances that keep us from realising God or from reaching the state of perfection. These hindrances are brought out very clearly in Snow White's subsequent dealings with her mother. At any rate, in this version of the story Snow White is not saved by God's intervention (in the form of the huntsman) but by her own innocence. That is to say, her unworldliness protects her from the "wild beasts" of worldly temptations, at least until she gets to the house of the dwarfs.

We may wonder why helpers in folktales are often portrayed as dwarfs or small animals, for example, the fox which helps the youngest brother in 'The Gold Bird.'[26] (The three siblings of traditional stories

[25] J. M. Ellis, *One Fairy Story Too Many*, pp.74-77.
[26] AT 550.

represent the three parts of a person—the body, soul and spirit. The youngest represents the spirit because it is the last side to be developed.) Suppose I put the question this way: If hinderers are portrayed as giants, why are helpers portrayed as dwarfs? When asked in this way, the question practically answers itself. As in the case of the titans of Greek mythology, hinderers in folklore are often described as giants. Helpers must therefore be the opposite—dwarfs. We also find that certain beings represent *Prakriti* and others represent *Purusha* in the Hindu and Christian traditions. Thus in Hindu mythology, we have demons (*asuras*) and gods (*devas*), while in Christianity we have devils and angels. To relate these figures to my question about giants and dwarfs, in our own age the "forces of evil" or materiality seem much greater than the "forces of good" or spirituality. In other words, the forces of *Prakriti* often seem much greater than the forces of *Purusha.*

Of course, folktales such as 'Rumpelstiltskin' and the English 'Tom Tit Tot' (AT 500) feature evil little people. These stories contain the well-known motif of selling one's soul for material gain. In the first story, a woman can redeem herself, and in the second story, redeem her baby son by guessing the name of the dwarf who is her "benefactor." Naming these little devils represents recognising their true nature and hence recognising the pitfalls of greed and other cravings. Generally, emissaries of the devil, as we might call them, come in both large and small sizes, but they are always at one extreme or the other. Thus the trolls of northern European folklore may be either giants or dwarfs. But whether they play positive or negative roles in folktales, dwarfs and giants symbolise influences from above and below. In the most narrow terms, they represent the pulls of the spirit and the pulls of the body on the psyche or soul. From a wider perspective, they symbolise the pulls of the Active Pole and Passive Pole of existence on human beings.

In 'Snow White' the dwarfs represent the positive, or Active Pole. They mine gold ore, and gold is a symbol of what is everlasting, namely God. The fact that there are seven dwarfs also points to a positive interpretation, since the seventh day of the week—the Sabbath—is God's day, and seven always signifies the centre or source of creation. Is it purely coincidental that Snow White tries all the beds but does not find one that fits her until she gets to the seventh? As the story goes, 'she lay down in it, commended herself to God and fell asleep.'

The dwarfs tell Snow White that she can stay under their protection if she does certain chores around the house. In this regard the dwarfs represent spiritual masters or the teachings of spiritual masters. We are all exposed to these teachings, but few of us follow them. In fact, Snow White has difficulty following their instructions. *Although the dwarfs warn her not to open the door to anyone while they are away* (in other words, not to open herself up to worldliness) *Snow White disregards their advice and allows her disguised mother to give her things on three occasions. The first gift is bodice laces, which her mother wraps around her too tightly; the second is a poisoned comb, which her mother runs through her hair; the third is a poisoned apple, which her mother entices her to eat. In each case, Snow White falls down as if dead.* Vanity and gluttony are typical worldly temptations that spell spiritual death. In fact, people may die a thousand deaths in their lifetimes over these very matters. *The dwarfs are able to rouse Snow White from the sleep caused by the laces and the comb, but they are unable to do anything about the effects of the apple, since they do not know that a piece of it is lodged in Snow White's throat. Through the intervention of the prince, Snow White is brought back to life when the apple falls out of her mouth as he is carrying her away.* The prince—or the rescuer of Snow White—represents the call of God. This interpretation is brought out even more clearly in the Grimms' 1810 manuscript. In that version, there is no prince. Snow White's father—symbolising the Active Pole of existence—finds her and brings her back to life. Snow White's mother is punished for her cruelty by being made to wear red-hot slippers and to dance until she is dead. If Snow White is the psyche caught between the pull of God and the pull of the world, her spiritual progress can be assured only by eliminating one side of the controversy.

Snow White's repeated disregard of the dwarfs' warnings finds an echo in 'The Gold Bird.' In that story, *after the hero listens to the fox and chooses the shabby inn over the fine one he disregards everything else the fox says. To begin with, he arrives at a palace where the soldiers are asleep. When he comes to the chamber containing the gold bird, against the advice of the fox, he transfers it from its ugly wooden cage to a beautiful gold cage standing nearby. Immediately the bird utters a piercing cry, and the soldiers wake up and arrest him. The hero can avoid death only by fetching the gold horse that is swifter than the wind. He finds the palace where the horse is stabled, but against the advice of the fox, he puts*

a beautiful gold saddle on the horse instead of a mean leather and wood one. At once the horse neighs and wakes the grooms who have been sleeping. Once again the hero is caught and can avoid death only by fetching the princess in the gold castle. The hero reaches the castle and waits until everyone is asleep before he asks the princess to flee with him. Against the advice of the fox, the hero allows the princess to say good-bye to her parents. When her father wakes up, everyone else does as well, and the hero is caught once again. Now the hero can save his life and marry the princess only if he removes a mountain blocking the king's view. With the help of the fox he succeeds in this feat, and thus he obtains the hand of the princess. Finally, by following the advice of the fox and using split-second timing, the hero is able to obtain the golden horse and carry off the golden bird as well.

When we compare the choices of the hero in 'The Gold Bird' with the choices of Snow White, we find that they are based on exactly the same considerations. In accepting the laces, comb, and apple from her mother, Snow White is indicating that these items are better than the laces, comb, and food she already possesses. Similarly, in placing the bird in the gold cage, saddling the horse with the gold saddle, and allowing the princess to say good-bye, the hero of 'The Gold Bird' is indicating that certain states of affairs are better than others. This is quite usual, but it is not spiritual. It is indicative of a dualistic outlook and the desires such an outlook engenders. These desires get us into a lot of trouble and keep us from reaching our spiritual goal.

And what is this goal? We come from God and we are going back to God at death. But the spiritual goal is to get back to God in this very life (as Dante describes himself doing in the *Paradiso*). That is, the spiritual goal is to reverse in consciousness the course of events leading to our appearance in this world. There is one stepmother story which epitomises this journey from and to God, and that is 'Dame Hulda' (AT 480A). (It is related to certain versions of the 'Cinderella' story.) Here the heroine falls down a well into a world which seems very much like our own. When she follows the orders of Dame Hulda, who symbolises a spiritual teacher, she is rewarded with a heap of gold and allowed to go back up to where she came from. Gold, as I mentioned before, symbolises what is eternal, namely God. It does not take much thought to realise that the whole story symbolises our plight of being

thrust into this world and also what we can do to get back to our true home.