

The symbolic epistemological implications of the different mythological set up of the (Egyptian)-Mesopotamian culture compared to the Grecian one

“The Mesopotamian peoples were never really dominated by the reason the way we conceptualize it . It’s to the revelation as direct emanation of the divine that they ascribed the appearance of knowledge.”

Luc Bachelot

Chargè de recherches, CNRS

Paris

What we want here to sketch up is a possible brief reference to the vision of the world of the Mesopotamian people, whose cultural and symbolic richness we’re going to rediscover and – in my opinion – is of great importance as to the Jungian thought. As we are going to point out, It reveals in fact natural assonances with the epistemology implicit in Jung’s discourse, besides being a vision of the world that an ever increasing number of studies certifies as the additional matrix of our civilization, whose evolution the experts too often ascribe no doubt to the ancient Greece.

Let’s quote Semeraro on this point: *“ It’s worthwhile repeating that no man will probe deeply into the origins of the Grecian thought if he doesn’t recognize the cultural unity that in ancient times from the Fertile Crescent reaches the Jonia, integrating the Genesis biblical world, steeped in elements of Babylonian civilization...(pag.170, 2001)*

We also intend referring to the idea that the mythological structure of the Egyptian – Mesopotamian culture has its own peculiarities compared to

the Grecian structure, even the pre-Homeric one. And that not only referring to the specificity of the mythological images on formal level – which is evident for almost all mythologies – but in structural sense, meaning by structural the constituent order of the mythological complex.

We think it possible to follow this route, on the basis of the reflection we're going to express, even as regards the pre-Homeric Grecian mythology, classically considered close to the Egyptian-Mesopotamian owing to the symbolic richness of its contents and its –so to say – epistemological level. The hypothesis is that there might be some possible clarifications on the epistemological level or anyway on the level of the underlying symbolism.

Therefore, at least as regards this aspect, there aren't particular problems concerning the structure of the post-Homeric mythology. It seems in fact substantially recognized that the Platonic-Aristotelian systematization brought about by the coming of the concept gave origin to a “ quantum or- in Kuhn's sense- paradigmatic jump between Mythos and Logos. There are of course numerous grey areas between the Unus and the Many; it seems anyway to have affected even the historical cultural perception of the Myth.

Let's quote Galimberti (1984) : *“In this new light some traditional figures are reappraised, such as Sisyphus endlessly rolling a stone perpetually falling back, Ocnos interweaving a rush rope that a donkey keeps gnawing, the Danaides vainly trying to fill a holed jar, that in Plato's opinion represents their souls unable to keep their own inside due to oblivion.(....) With Parmenides the soul doesn't live any more in an ambivalent world where the contraries are complementary and the opposites attract themselves but is thrown into a dualist universe whose rigid oppositions require a choice. The way is no more at the same time up and down but the right and the left alternatively dispose the complementary pairs we knew as extremities of a stretched taut bow: such were Aletheia and Lethe to the poets, Memory and Oblivion to the initiates, Pònos and Edoné to Pitagora's followers (....)*

At this point philosophy can consider the myth as a non-truth, not only owing to the manipulation that poetry's violence operates never presenting things as they are, but because the myth has been unable to look on the whole , and therefore to exclude that other unforeseeable and unexpected universes exist beyond the chaos immensity.

The philosophical look on the whole of things is therefore an excluding one, and excluding will be the discourse to keep inside that look. “

That's a quite credible reconstruction even if it might be interesting to pose a question about the myth “being unable to look on the whole”

From Mythos to Logos then, but let us outline some characters of the Mesopotamian culture in order to arrive at the crux of the comparison between the two mythological structures, the pre-Homeric and the Egyptian-Mesopotamian.

Here's the well-known assyriologist G:Pettinato's thought: *“To understand the way of thinking of the Mesopotamian peoples we must underline that the universe was strictly interconnected in their opinion, the macrocosm wholly interacting with the microcosm: man learned from natural phenomena his immediate and future destiny, having such phenomena meaning to him too”.* (G:Pettinato: Angels and demons in Babylonia . Magic and Myth in ancient Mesopotamian civilizations, Mondadori, Milano. 2001)

Trying a general portrayal of this ancient culture, Sumerian (dating back the IV th millennium b.C.) and then Akkadian, Babylonian, Assyrian but

also the Mari, Ebla and Eshnunna civilizations, we could say that those peoples believed in a world where past and future just merged into the present, therefore the time was cyclic, eternally flowing by. Moreover, to the Mesopotamians, the past is what is ahead and the future what-'s behind, just as to the Egyptians, where the future is behind (mht) and the past ahead (dr-bah).

A fluid universe where past and present, good and evil flow and reflow together and where everything becomes in some way negotiable.

After Homer the Greeks believed in a universe that they considered finished, minor in the creation hierarchy, in comparison to its creator: a universe where prophecies had no power to negotiate.

To the Babylonians and the Assyrians on the contrary preordained or unavoidable consequences of a "prediction" don't exist: they believed in universal laws of sympathetic action and reaction which both, men and gods, might influence in some way.

The doctrine of the sympathetic action was of central importance in the Italian Renaissance and that's an idea coming directly from the ancient Babylonians and taken up for instance by Marsilio Ficino.

The different concepts of art are extremely interesting and inherent in the theme we are proposing: we can say in fact that the classical art is substantially anthropocentric in its essence, while the objective of the Mesopotamian art isn't the sensible exterior, it rather aims at perceiving what is behind, in a teleological effort to link the deep analogies among the various existing entities, as such being in a certain sense deeply modern. I wonder if this consideration couldn't identify a possible unconscious field of archetypal contiguity with the Mesopotamian artistic symbols and therefore not only with that kind of art but most of all with what such art refers to and represents.

Obviously art has a privileged relation with the common psychic sensibility of the time in which it is created, but also with the 'relative' timelessness of the underlying archetypal models.

The Mesopotamian civilization in fact seemed to live of images, images that being the very expression of reality became the reality, a symbolic world interpenetrated the same way that the images composing, feeding, caring about our psyche itself are merged.

As Jung reminds us psyche is made of images that are inextricably polymorphous, polysemous and ancestrally and teleologically tending to produce unity, to solve the tension of the opposites in the fertile ineffability of the Symbol: the history of the most ancient myths is the extraordinary evidence of it.

The artistic images of the classical Grecian world 'live' inside us as archetypal, harmoniously symmetrical, 'golden' images in their 'light of perfection'. Shouldn't we integrate them more deeply with the images of the Mesopotamian art, polymorphous, alluding, reflecting, merged, often referring to a barely perceptible mystery? "*The Mesopotamians were abstract artists ahead of time and the images of the invisible inhabited their imagination as far as its furthest limits.*" (Bachelot, 136, 2005)

Some forms of social organization are also interesting; let's think of the women's role in the cities state of Sumer: Ur, Uruk, Lagash, Nippur where a remarkably advanced women's condition is testified.

Moreover it's interesting to note that in the Sumeric and the Akkadic languages doesn't exist a term even vaguely akin to the word *nature* in its general or abstract meaning: the Sumeric word *namtar* referred to the nature of every single being. The Egyptian-Mesopotamian peoples were ingenious scientists 'ante litteram' and refined astronomers, but they didn't know either the abstract concept or the Aristotelian categorization,

not even the geometrical systematization born with Thales, to which the birth of our 'dualistic' civilization is mostly due, according to Sini. But it would be incorrect to attribute these limits to "relative inability". Their own way of looking at the world seemed to forbid the landing on the moors of "nomoteticity". Let's quote Andolfo :

"We can define as 'logocentric' both the Grecian culture (and the western one that derived from it) and the Egyptian culture as well as all the cultures of the near ancient east, from the Mesopotamian to the Judaic to the Muslim one. The fundamental difference anyway is that the former is focused on the notion of logos considered as reason, the latter on the notion of logos considered as word.

As Luisa Terzi underlines < while in the western world – starting from 'the concept' developed by the Greeks – the word concerns to the knowledge, in the ancient Mesopotamia as well as in the ancient Egypt and in the religions of the Bible the word concerns to the being.>

The logos of the Grecian philosophy is the man's subjective reason turning to the reality in order to understand it but in the meanwhile persuaded of the total intelligibility of the being, that is of its absolute transparency to the human thought. Therefore the human thought can read into the reality experienced by the senses, absolutely confident about the correspondence of the deep structure of reality to the laws of the reason, able to recognize what is true from what is false, even against the evidence of objective appearances.

That's how the Grecian philosophy centred on the logos develops into a thought working by means of concepts or logical universals based on the principle of non-contradiction. (..)

The eastern concept of logos on the contrary is anchored in the relation between the being and the word, not between the subject's thought and the being.(...)

All that is even richer in implications in the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures, in which the word, the writing and the reality are strictly interlaced. First of all the Egyptian approach to the word is of ontological character, in the sense that the word, the name, express the very essence of the mentioned reality. The pronunciation of the name and even more the writing of it aim first of all at perpetuating existence and being of the thing or the person, since the name doesn't have its origin in the individual that pronounces it but in the named thing, whose visual projection (as a written sign) and auditory (as name) it represents.

The name as a written word is a sounding word and the hieroglyphics are the pictorial sign that represent the being's essence that they name just as sounding sign-word. (...)

*The ancient thought, that was a 'creator of myths' admitted side by side different limited truths considered simultaneously valid each in its own context. Each in relation to a particular way to approach the problem. (...)
Moreover the Egyptian thought – differently from the Grecian philosophic one – doesn't intend to go beyond and sometimes even against the senses and the imagination, on the contrary it is in agreement with them.*

Parmenides had a conception of reality similar to the Egyptian, without the idea of a fallacious opinion close to the right one. Truth is in all like the reality, therefore it's composed of a plurality of true assessments all compatible, since there's no fallacy in them, just as with none of the two powers (light and night) of Parmenide's right (proper) opinion there's Nothing. In consequence for the Egyptians many solutions to a problem are better than one, so as to satisfy any possibility of answer, besides

being all true and compatible. The human reason has only to take them into account and not try to probe their non-contradiction.

There's no fallacious opinion that can introduce the contradiction and make be the non being and vice versa. So the different solutions being in agreement with the human sensations and imaginations are subjectively and objectively true : none is false.

The Egyptian-Mesopotamian vision of the world was then definitely in the mythos, just as the pre-Homeric world; in this description we discover the strength of the mythos in giving birth to unconscious symbols in individual and collective sense; we recognize the eco of Jung's descriptions about the Numinous, the archetypal and the Symbol's modus operandi, that operates a dialectic tension aiming at linking in its inexpressible the dualistic unavoidable contradiction of the reality.

Scholars who have compared the pre-Homeric and the Mesopotamian mythology have pointed out some differentiations. Therefore we can refer

- to a relative primacy of the hero on the god in the various Mesopotamian poems, even if the conclusions of the same are steeped in 'glorifications';
- to the Mesopotamian religious vision in which the magic aspect, the aspect of the foretelling, of the exorcism, of the spell and of the study of the stars is absolutely interpenetrating, most of all as regards a greater consideration of the action of the analogical powers operating in the various reality levels;
- to the lesser hierarchical structure of the Mesopotamian mythology;
- to the peculiar characteristic of the Mesopotamian myth that appears polymorphous, that is more easily interchangeable as regards the mythical characters' definite roles;

- to the fluidity by which the Mesopotamian myth, compared to the pre-Homeric, operates changes of quality, functions and virtues of the various characters;
- to the Mesopotamian characteristic to show different aspects of the same myth in a relatively more frequent way

Looking at the above list we think it possible to refer to a relative greater fluidity of the mythological Egyptian-Mesopotamian structure.

We could also underline the fruitful power to tune in – in euristic sense – to aspects that seem closer to the sensibility of the analytic psychology, among them the epistemologic possibility of the ‘tertium datur’ and the acceptance of the simultaneous validity of different symbolic interpretations.

Moreover, the Egyptian-Mesopotamian structure reveals a greater pervasiveness of elements that can be traced back to the alchemic dialectics (always emphasized by Jung); it insistently focuses on the action of powers with an analogical character – thinking of the researches on synchronicity – while the persistent and omnipresent respect for the significance of the image and the imagination recalls in some veiled way our “rational luminosity”.

Such themes seem to us akin to the epistemological soul of the Jungian culture: with reference to the epistemology of the simultaneous presence and of the complementarity in Pauli’s perspective, but even close to the epistemological correlates deriving in Jung from the concept of the Self in its relation with the Ego and from the relation among Image, Symbol and transcendent function thinking of the psychic energetic.

Does this relatively different aspect of the Mesopotamian mythology suggest the necessity of broad researches and deeper examination on this mythological structure on the analytical psychology’s part?

The symbolic content of the Mesopotamian mythology might in fact represent an integrative possibility as regards today's western psychology that seems to have its deeper and more remote interpenetration point just in this ancient mythology.

On the other side we have apparently remote evidences that the 'inflexibility' of the mythical essence of the Egyptian-Mesopotamian culture has repeatedly tried to 'emerge' among the recesses of the 'zeitgeist'; let's also underline how the philosophical Hellenization of the Egyptian theology has taken on the form of the allegoresi not to give up the richness of its fantastical universals; and finally the reappraisal of the Mesopotamian themes, both during the Italian Renaissance and from the Gnosticism.

Let's see this last interesting aspect:

"I think that the Gnosticism reacts also against the stoical allegoresi of the religious myths in terms of physical powers reintroducing in the religious thought the Mesopotamian idea of the myth as < deliberate imagination to give a religious explanation for everything (events)>.

The Mesopotamian myths explained the reality teleologically, < by means of stories, sequences of episodes, connection of material events chosen and linked so as to point out what was under discussion and to give a sufficient reason for its existence and for its condition.(...)

Mythology assumes a logic of the verisimilitude that 'keeps up appearances': it can in fact go different ways on condition that, starting from the same postulates, it reaches the same result and accounts for it in a way that satisfies the spirit ." >(pag.139,2008)