

LECTURE 3.

VISIONARY ART*

The Oxford Dictionary of Quotations lists about seventy thousand key words referring to about the same number of lines, mainly of poetry. This shows the wide range of English phrases, coined by poets, that English people can use to shape and feel their thoughts. And this is a mere fragment of the ideas we borrow from other than English poetry, and from plays, paintings and sculptures. We are much taught today to scorn borrowed ideas, as these do not express genuine convictions. But this is absurd. We cannot start discovering new ideas, without first knowing ideas which others had before us. The very idea of absolute autonomy of our thoughts is itself a traditional doctrine. It goes back to Descartes and its modern radical form, teaching us to choose our own values, is Nietzsche's doctrine of a hundred years back.

To understand how immense amounts of information can be transmitted to us in imaginative form and are accepted by us on such terms, remember that even our art is but an extension of perception. We are accustomed to regard our true perception of objects as our right response to them, but we may regard perception instead as the interpretation of the traces made in our body by external objects. The artist's vision is but another integration of experience, which, like perception, can succeed or fail, or bare success at intermediate levels. The artist himself will judge whether his product is a true response of his experience. And his reader or viewer will respond to the artist's meaning by his experience of the artist's terms and will accept it or not, depending on how deeply he responds to it.

But we have seen that, for this to happen, the artist's interpretation of experience must differ sharply from our usual perceptions. It must not represent daily experiences of current stories. But must view its subject as seen jointly, so that its message can be transmitted in the equally concise presentation. The creative individuality of the artist is cut off from his current daily existences.

This insulation of art is achieved by its artificial pattern. This infuses the work of art with peculiar qualities that distinguish it sharply from our ordinary experiences.

* Polanyi gave this lecture on 27 May 1969 at the University of Chicago. Three variants of the text can be found in the collections of the University of Chicago Library; two in Box 39, Folder 10 and one in Box 40, Folder 9. From the texts that Box 39, Folder 10 contains, we chose to publish the variant which includes corrections in handwriting. In English it appeared only in parts in the seventh and eighth chapter of Michael Polanyi and Harry Prosch, *Meaning* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1975), compiled with the text of Polanyi's lecture, to be published as the fourth hereafter, given in 1969 with the title *Myths, Ancient and Modern*.

It is in such artistic expressions that poetry, painting, sculpture and drama, convey the whole range of matters on which the current use of English poetry is a token. The artist condenses his understanding of the things men have seen and done, and when this understanding appeals to us, we make it ours and clarify our lives by it. This is how art moves our existence which would otherwise be much less. Some works of art continue to do this through the centuries, as their understanding is deep enough to grasp unchangeable aspects of human experience. This is how great art is immortal.

This is also why the acceptance of art by its public is not a suspension of unbelief (as e.g. Coleridge has taught), but is indeed a sustaint of the belief that art is meaningful. This is how we discover the joint meaning of its strangely incompatible elements. We can refute the doctrine of essential representation in the arts, by going back to its antecedents. Its first statement is in book ten of Plato's *Republic* (596) where Socrates calls the 'mimesis' – i.e., the simulation practised by painters – a falsification of the truth. These troubles about the deceptive nature of art may have started from the developments of Greek thought in the fifth century B.C. The arts had then taken a revolutionary step towards naturalism. Gombrich has called it a change from 'making' to 'matching', that is, which means the making of symbols for simulating objects, which was done when philosophy developed a sharp desire to distinguish between appearance and reality. The new imitative art was open to objection in this light. And this challenge entered into the whole heritage of western critical thought.

However, the romantic movement of the Nineteenth Century mitigated this doctrine by claiming that the content of fine art was subjective, personal. And the further sharpening of skeptical thought, leading to the wholesale challenge of all traditional values, gradually made emphatic statements of man's deeper thoughts sound naive and their expression in conventional artistic patterns sound false. Plato's critique that artistic mimesis was a falsification of the truth reappeared thus in our days as the demand that art may abandon all positive content.

Today this movement has been going on for about a century. It started in poetry as far back as Baudelaire's *Fleurs du Mal* published in 1857. It was enlarged to painting and sculpture in new kinds of post impressionism and spread to the stage with Pirandello in the period between the wars, finally including also fiction in the anti-novel that started about fifteen years ago.

In his preface to the *Fleurs du Mal* Theophile Gautier wrote that Baudelaire had banished eloquence and passion from poetry. And this is born out by Baudelaire's dedication of his volume to the reader whom he addresses as „hypocrite lecteur, mon pareil mon frère.” The refinements of poetic language, cultivated for centuries, are now brushed aside, and a sequence of hardly coherent images, including strange admixtures, is thrown into the face of a society challenged to be corrupted by its lies. The imaginative powers generated in poetry, by aligning apparently incoherent words, were developed about fifteen years later by Rimbaud. His poem, *Le Bateau Ivre*

established firmly the new conception of poetry first approximated by Baudelaire. Here is, as an example, the fifth of twenty-five quatrains composing the poem, translated into English:

Sweeter than the bite of sour apples to a child,
The green water seeped through my wooden hull,
Rinsed me of blue wine stains and vomit,
Broke apart grappling iron and rudder.

Which reads thus in the French original:

Plus douce qu'aux enfants la chaire des pommes sures,
L'eau verte pénétra ma coque de sapin
Et des taches de vins bleus, et des vomissures
Me lava, dispersant gouvernail et grapin.

The sound of the French is tempting and the sequence of images, twisted or flowing, alternately surprises and rewards our attention. Trained as we are, after a hundred years during which this poem has produced numberless successors, we have no great difficulty in avoiding the challenge to try an explanation of these verses. It was this restraint that Rimbaud had in mind, when he advised his readers to have: "... a long, intensive reasoned disordering of the senses." And when he claimed that the poet must be a seer, I think he meant that this must be capable of fusing primarily incoherent images into powerful joint meanings.

The technique of Baudelaire and Rimbaud was adopted by poets who succeeded them. This influence is reflected in the attack made against it by Tolstoy in his essay *What is Art?* published in 1897. He denounced Baudelaire, Verlaine and Mallarmé for establishing a whole decadent school of meaningless poetry. And he could have cited many more poets and other artists, especially in France, for following this school.

The influence of the new poetry, and of other similar arts, reached England and America much later, about the end of the First World War, that is about fifty years after its foundation in Paris. Eliot's *Waste Land*, published in 1922, was among its first fruits. When the poem was rejected by reviewers as unintelligible, I. A. Richards came to its rescue by an echo to Rimbaud's appeal that no point to point meaning should be in poetry. Richards blamed Middleton Murray for his intellectual approach to Eliot, that made him incapable of understanding him. He appealed to those „who still give their feelings precedence to their thoughts, who can accept and unify an experience without trying to catch it in an intellectual net or to squeeze out a doctrine," and he went on to describe Eliot's technique as a music of ideas:

„The ideas are of all kinds, abstract and concrete, general and particular, and, like the musician's phrases, they are arranged, not that they may tell us something, but that their effects in us may combine into a coherent whole of feeling and attitude

and produce a peculiar liberation of the will. They are there to be responded to, not to be pondered or worked out.”

The new poetry became known under new names. Three became widespread. One is ‘Symbolism’, another ‘Intuitionism’, and a third ‘Formalism’. The name ‘Symbolism’ may tell us that matters mentioned in the poem are not to be thought of in themselves, but metaphorically, as bearing on the poem as a whole. The term ‘Intuitionism’ says that the integration of the poem’s several parts to form a whole must be essentially spontaneous, both in the way the poet forms his work and as the reader grasps its meaning. And finally, to call such poetry ‘formal’ or ‘structural’ should tell us that the significance of its phrases is muted, and so the total structure of the poem engages the imagination.

But I would rather call such poetry ‘visionary,’ for its meaning is found by a powerful act of the imagination which comprehends all details as one visionary experience, that the poet had thus conceived. I shall call this a visionary poetry along with the arts akin to the poetry.

Since a purely visionary poem says nothing that can be expressed in a statement, no mimesis can arise here. Its affirmation is alike to that of non-representative paintings which show familiar figures in fragments or in absurd combinations, distorted and fantastically coloured. The poem asserts, like surrealist or cubist painters do, that its disparate elements have a joint meaning, a meaning which will be the more strikingly novel, exciting and moving, the more incompatible are its primary elements to the public.

The rebellious renewal of painting coincided in time and in place with the advent of visionary poetry. It started as a coherent movement in the early sixties in Paris and ran much of its course there before spreading over continental Europe by the turn of the Century. Its challenge to empty conventions was in tune with the new poetry, but its program aimed mostly in an opposite direction. Impressionism had not aimed to emancipate the artist from giving a faithful account of experience, but battled on the contrary for ways of giving a truer representation of nature, than the academics gave who ruled the high tastes of the age.

But whether it was actually more faithful to nature or not, this impressionism certainly included a novel exercise of the imagination and spread among the public a new habit (of which I spoke last time) of deliberately widening the range of its artistic vision. And I think it was this experience that opened the way at the turn of the century to the Italian Futurists, the French Fauves, the German Expressionists and to Russian Suprematists, and to various abstract painters, bent on emancipating in their visionary powers from the task of simulating nature.

I shall turn in a moment to the social subversiveness which accompanied these artistic innovations. Suffice to say now that their resolves were fiercely intensified by the experience of the First World War and the victory of the Communist Revolution in Russia.

At this stage the course of pictorial innovations caught up with the art of visionary

poetry. It was initiated during the War in Switzerland by Dadaism, but was soon formulated again in Paris by the programme of Surrealism. I have quoted in my first lecture in connection with metaphors the teaching of Andre Breton that: „to bring together two objects, as remote from one another in character as possible, and unite them in a striking and sudden fashion is the highest task to which poetry can aspire.” This declaration affiliates surrealism to the school of visionary poets, and it can be extended to cover also the practice of surrealist painting in novel grounds. Surrealist compositions are filled with incoherent pictures, and this brilliant absurdity is often reinforced by interwoven sections of widely disparate forms and angles. Surrealism has fanciful paintings which join visionary poetries as another visionary art.

The theatre and the film were later in following the principles of visionary art. Ionesco's *Rhinoceros* and Bennet's *Waiting for Godot* were pioneers on the stage; Robbe-Grillet's *Last Year in Marienbad* was among the strongest „abstract” films to a wide audience. The same author's novel, *Le Voyeur*, was an early representative of the „anti-novel.”

These kinds of visionary arts are perhaps more enigmatic even than their precursors in poetry and painting. For plays, films and novels commonly speak to us in the language of strait communications and so we expect them to grip our attention without an effort of our own. So we find their visionary form unintelligible until we recognise that we must not try to understand them as representing a sequence of coherent events. In an essay *Objectivity and Subjectivity* in the *Nouveau Roman* Robbe-Grillet has explained the difference. „...in the novels of Balzac and his contemporaries ... the order of events presented to the reader took place in chronological succession ... In the modern novel time has ceased to exist. Or rather it is a time without temporality, it is an instantaneous time which never creates a past ... never accumulating to form either a memory or things past to which one can refer one day; it is a present that has no value save in the present.”

To understand such plays, films or novels, we must follow the visionary precepts of Rimbaud – not to ask questions to which there are no answers. Only thus can we get our imaginative powers form a joint vision of the fragments in a work of art.

It is a commonplace that the artist works by his imagination, but ever since the problem of mimesis arose more than two thousand years ago, there has been lurking the idea that art simulates something tangible. This has never been true, but only modern art has made it clear that what art does is to create facts for a life in our imagination. Such facts of our imagination will guide our thoughts through our incoherent lives.

But we may recall what I said about the way a poem is detached from both the author's and reader's personal life through the mere forces of form and content. These are a fact of the imagination of a mechanism that works also for a painting by its perspectivic depth fused with the fact of its flatness. How can this work in visionary poetry or visionary paintings, with their incompatible elements separated

by the loosening of the discipline of rhyme and rhythm or the very destruction of perspectival depths?

The answer is that a visionary poem makes no assertions and hence cannot tell anything that bears on the poet's personal interests – or the reader's; and the situation is similar for a surrealist painting and indeed for all visionary works of art: their integration places them directly into a field of the imagination wholly detached from the personal matters of author and public.

The technique of attacking the incoherence of our social existence by a visionary sequence of incompatible fragments was first applied in the poetry of the *Fleurs du Mal*. I mean the rise of the bohemian outlook to which both Baudelaire and Rimbaud contributed. The bohemians professed contempt for current moral principles on the grounds that the acceptance of any values at second hand was dishonest, and that it was particularly so, since the society itself which taught these virtues did not live up to them. All manner of conformity was rotten. By the end of the century Bohemianism was deepened by Nietzsche and so developed into philosophic nihilism. And the shattering disappointment of the first world war turned many bohemians into revolutionaries. The 'armed bohemians' infuriated the battles which destroyed Europe.

As painters and poets condemned the world as absurd, they showed it as a heap of fragments, and as they were artists, their vision brought this pile to life in novel works of art. This is the way the artistic discoveries of our age were made. The honour of nihilistic protest was satisfied by cutting the world to pieces, and when the artist's vision arose in these torrents never seen before, this triumph crowned the artist, while his work went on perpetuating the chaotic condition of its origin.

Modern art may be accused of having shaped in our minds the destruction of coherence. But modern nihilism had emerged and achieved influences before Baudelaire responded to it. The materialist interpretation of moral principles in the *Communist Manifesto* shows it developed in the West, and Turgenev's *Fathers and Sons* recognised it as the ruling idea of the Russian intelligentsia. This was at times when expression in poetry had not long begun and its influence on painting and drama was yet in the future.

The modern distrust in noble sentiments grew from the world view of science. In the 18th century romanticism had played its great part in exalting the absolute rights of the individual, but as the Nineteenth Century followed, the romantic influence lost its battle compared with scientism and was absorbed by it. The Freudian interpretations show how romantic individualism changed into biological dynamics widely affecting modern thought.

Modern art has much helped in discrediting noble sentiments, but this does not efface its achievements. It accentuated the decomposition of meaning by expressing it, but its powers to transcend this decomposition by new ranges of visionary experience has revealed us worlds of the imagination, and I accept this balance.

The modern structure of art will become more manifest if we look at the way similar techniques are at work also in other kinds of human thought. I shall take

as my first example the celebration of festivities. Celebrations are a kind of actions: of actions that express festive ideas, and so we must say here something on the imaginative meaning of action. I have touched the meaning of an actor's performance on the stage. A play does not speak of real persons nor of actual events: the actor's part is to represent persons and actions imagined by the writer. He must respond by his own imagination to that of the author, and thus guided, he must embody the part evoked in him by the author.

Take the fact that a matter of intrinsic interest may be symbolised by an object lacking any interest of its own and it recalls also that such symbols will often bear a resemblance to that which they symbolise. This can be applied to an action. An action without interest of its own may acquire interest by embodying some other action of essential importance, and this is facilitated if the symbolic action bears some resemblance to that which it embodies. The performance of such an action becomes then metaphorical.

Feasts and pageantries; and rites of mourning, are metaphorical actions, the structure of which is similar to that of poetry and many other works of art. All such occasions break into the course of our current occupations and set free the imagination from the cares of the day. In painting and drama the elementary tools of the art suffice to detach them from the course of our normal experiences, and for poetry this insulation is worked by the poetic structure of the text. The mechanisms that serve to arouse us from our private concerns and open our minds to follow a work of art, are artificial products: their power to arouse and isolate our minds lies in their artificiality which clashes with our day to day lives; and this is also true for feasts and solemn occasions. Their artificial character breaks into our daily lives and arouses our minds in candid thoughts. This breaking is more direct than it is for the arts; it only causes a pause in us and that we put on our best clothes for appropriate rituals.

Solemnities differ from works of art in being broadly unoriginal. The theme of commemorations is conventional and its forms are traditional; but the themes are important and the forms can be deeply moving. Helmut Kuhn writes: „What we celebrate in a feast and consecrate in it can be of many different kinds, but it is basically always the same: it is the content of truth in our existence or in the existence of a society.” (Kuhn 1960, 67) And he discerns profundities even in the light hearted celebration of an ordinary birthday: „When we celebrate and solemnize the passage of our life, we confirm thereby the whole natural order of which human life with its cycle of birth and death forms part.” (Kuhn 1960, 68) Such subjects that lie deepest in our existence are fitly recalled in traditionally recurrent forms, which express our affiliation to a comprehensive lasting framework.

Medieval art might have resembled closely the ways solemn occasions are commemorated today, but the major part of all arts has, since the Periclean age, tried to express personal ideas and finally, in our own century, art has become bent largely on innovation. Even so, rituals of commemoration can be seen to be

essentially akin to works of art. Let me follow here Helmut Kuhn's thoughts on this matter (Kuhn 1960, 67-73 and Kuhn 1966, 271).

By their detachment, works of art stand outside time and hence speak to us of one single moment. Centuries may pass over a work of art, but if it be still recognised, it will still speak of the same moment. Our feasts, ceremonials, solemnities, these too are withdrawn from the days of our passing lives, they speak often of the past, but are yet themselves outside time. They are timeless, whether personal or historic.

Our modern temper balks at all rituals and formal customs. Since these are essentially unoriginal, they are deemed incapable of expressing genuine feelings; and are rejected as shallow pretences. But this misses the point. It is the very artificiality of traditional forms that enables them to act as a framework detaching the events to which they apply, and endowing them with a tangible and lasting quality by imaginative powers. The rejection of formal moments in the name of authenticity diffuses our existence into scattered details, deprived of memorable meaning.

Celebrations and solemnities usually include some symbolic actions, but these are even more prominent in the *structure of myths* to which I now turn. I shall focus on archaic myths, not yet affected by literary elaboration. The early stage of the myth presents a fundamental expansion of the mind.

Remember the story of the Clever Hans. The horse was trained to answer simple questions of arithmetic presented on a blackboard. It gave correct answers by stamping its foot until the right number was reached. Critical observers could find no fault in the horse's works until a test was made by an experimenter who did not know the reply. Then the horse went on stamping away senselessly. It turned out that all observers had unwittingly expressed by slight gestures their expectation for the horse to stop at the right point, and the animal had discovered these signals and acted upon them to earn a reward.

Animals can rival and surpass man's faculty to establish inductive regularities. Animals can also identify members of a species, and their restlessness during their sleep indicates that they can dream with imagination.

Evolution has added to these powers man's surpassing gifts including the powers of language. Language helps us to "look before and after." But even so we may still remain encompassed by our surroundings as animals are, and our thoughts amount only to greater cleverness in mastering our surroundings. I shall come later to the question, whether archaic ideas about the nature of things differ in principle from the views we hold of our surroundings today; here I want only to mention the achievement of man's mind in *creating a myth*.

Each animal forms the centre of interactions which define its surroundings and every species knows a distinctive circle of surroundings. (von Uexkull 1926) In his classic account of man's upright posture, E. W. Strauss writes that „In upright posture, the immediate contact with things is loosened. ... The horizon is widened, removed; the distance becomes momentous, of great import.” (Strauss 1966, 144) „The direction against gravity inscribes into space world regions to which we attach

values, such as those expressed by high and low, rise and decline, climbing and falling, superior and inferior, elevated and downcast” (Strauss 1966, 142). But these are still but preliminary conditions for creating myths. Our conceptions of the world as a whole go far beyond this; it formulates a daring speculation transcending all observable objects and extending the thought far beyond any possible experience.

Ethnologists have described strange behaviour in animals, which they would class as superstitions. Such errors are far more widespread among men, and they do abound in man’s archaic thought. It seems that the rise of man was accompanied by an outburst of imaginative powers which made him liable to a whole system of errors of which animals are free. Any major merit, or even mere social function, we may attribute to the creation of myths, must acknowledge these concurrent aberrations. Yet I prefer to set them aside for the moment, for they inevitably raise a larger question, which I want to postpone: I mean the question whether the intellectual mechanism of archaic man was basically different from that of modern people.

So I shall start by drawing a parallel between the structure of myths and that of poetry, and of other arts, when viewed as separate agencies for evoking the imagination. The content of solemnities will form a difference between the two classes. So I shall have to enlarge later on the content of archaic myths, which will also present us with a comparison between mythical beliefs and the world view of modern science, as outlined in my next lecture.

My guide for the description of archaic myths, and partly also for their religious interpretation, will be the work of Mircea Eliade. For corroboration by earlier sources I shall rely on Ernst Cassirer’s *Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* (and not on his *Language and Myth*). And further back in time, I shall use L. Levy-Bruhl’s *Les Fonctions Mentales dans les Sociétés Inferieures*. Strange to say, all these sources, spanning 53 years, appear to be essentially independent.

Eliade sharply distinguishes myth from other peculiar workings of the archaic mind. I accept this division in spite of the continuity between myths and magic and the whole system of archaic thought, for continuity does not preclude fundamental distinctions. Even within the wider area of myths, Eliade selects as a distinctive part of it the myth of creation, and I shall follow him also in this matter.

For this kind of myth embraces a cosmic view, which recedes, and may disappear entirely, in the stories about superhuman heroes. Let me quote here an introductory passage from Eliade’s recent book, *Myth and Reality, World Perspectives*, Harper and Row, New York (1963).

“Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the „beginnings.” In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality – an island, a species of plant, a particular kind of human behavior, an institution. Myth, then, is always an account of a „creation”; it relates how something was produced, began to be.” (Eliade 1963, 5-6)

Myths of creation apply to all important matters of our life, giving exemplary

models for diet or marriage, work or education, art or wisdom, which all are deemed to have been perfect at the beginning.

Myths narrate not only the origin of the World, of animals, of plants, and of man, but also all the primordial events in consequence of which man became what he is today – mortal, sexed, organized in a society, obliged to work in order to live, and working in accordance with certain rules. If the World *exists*, if man *exists*, it is because Supernatural Beings exercised creative powers in the „beginning.” But after the cosmogony and the creation of man other events occurred, and man *as he is today* is the direct result of those mythical events, *he is constituted by those events*. He is mortal because something happened *in illo tempore*. (Eliade 1963, 11)

These acts of creation were performed during a time that is different from that in which we live. This is the “once upon a time,” „the sacred time” of mythical events.

As is generally admitted today, a myth is an account of events which took place *in principio*, that is, „in the beginning” in a primordial and non-temporal instant, a moment of *sacred time*. This mythic or sacred time is qualitatively different from profane time, from the continuous and irreversible time of our every day, de-sacralised existence. In narrating a myth, one reactualises, in some sort, the sacred time in which the events narrated took place. (Eliade 1961, 57)

The sacred time is renewed in rituals. Ritual abolishes profane, chronological Time and recovers the sacred Time of myth. Man becomes contemporary with the exploits that the Gods performed *in illo tempore*. (Eliade 1963, 139-140)

What is involved is not a commemoration or mythical events, but a reiteration of them. The protagonists of the myth are made present, we become their contemporaries. This also implies that one is no longer living in chronological time, but in the primordial Time, the Time when the event *first took place*. (Eliade 1963, 19)

He who recites or performs the origin myth is thus steeped in the sacred atmosphere in which these miraculous events took place. The mythical time of origins is a „strong” time because it was transfigured by the active, creative presence of the Supernatural Beings. By reciting the myths one reconstitutes that fabulous time and hence in some sort becomes „contemporary” with the events described. (Eliade 1963, 18)

This is anticipated by Cassirer, Vol. 2.

„The idea of mana, like the negatively corresponding idea of taboo, represents a sphere distinct from and opposed to daily life, of customary processes.” „...they represent a characteristic accent which the magical-mythical consciousness places on objects” (any objects). (Cassirer 1955, 77)

„This accent divides the whole of reality and action into a mythically significant and mythically irrelevant sphere, into what arouses mythical interest and what leaves it relatively indifferent.” „...the sacred does not simply *repel* it, but progressively permeates it” (the *profane*). (Cassirer 1955, 78)

The recital of a myth is an experience that is detached from the day to day concerns of the reciting person in the same way as the aspect of a work of art detaches us

from the concerns of the day. Our acceptance of the myth consists – as in the case of listening to great poetry or a great play, or of viewing a great painting – in being overcome by it and carried away into its own sphere, away from the sphere in which we lived a moment ago and to which we shall presently return. It is the kind of detachment that we experience by observing a festive occasion or a day of mourning. The detachment of rituals prescribed by archaic myths are akin to religious devotion; but I shall deal at this stage only briefly with this relation.

Archaic myth is detached in the way a strict monotheism is, for example that of the Old Testament. Our personal involvement in the world is with some parts of the world, while the conception of creation encompasses the whole world beyond all parts. One is concerned with things as parts, while the other ignores these matters and has the totality of all conceivable experiences as its object. Creation is the event by which all conceivable things are believed to have come into existence and the creator, or creators, are supernatural in the sense that they transcend all particular matters. In this sense, therefore, myths of creation are not translatable in terms that apply to things within the world. Archaic myths and the invocations of archaic myths are of an intrinsically detached nature. They are wholly other than any actual human experience.

The question how thoughts so detached from our normal experience can deeply affect us, I have answered already for works of art and for the celebration of solemn occasions. But for religious thought we have to enlarge these terms. The integration of incompatibles for which we rely on the creative powers of the imagination, can be recognised even before we enquire into the interaction of such thought with our secular concerns. For the idea of agencies existing outside the world, and before its very existence, is conceivable only by a feat of imaginative thought. The creation of hitherto inconceivable conceptions by the combination of hitherto incompatible features is common in mathematics and modern physics and, here too, these innovations are usually fraught with indeterminate implications. The myth of creation admittedly goes beyond these cases by the fact that it speaks of the entire universe and of our destiny as human beings within these boundless perspectives. This quality by which a religious conception, like the myth of creation, differs from imaginary entities of mathematics or physics, makes such conceptions mystical.

Compare now the way our mystical imagination detaches our minds from our humdrum concerns, with the way a work of art has this effect. Eliade writes: "...one lives the myth, in the sense that one is seized by the sacred, exalting power of the events recollected." (Eliade 1963, 19) In this way a myth, if accepted, resembles the way a great work of art affects us, but it differs from it at two interconnected points. First, it speaks of 'events recollected' in place of 'events represented,' because the accounts of creation are believed to be true; and second, the rapture of a myth is deemed to surpass that of art by being sacred. Both Eliade and before him Cassirer speak of the contrast between myth and ordinary life as a relation between the sacred and the profane.

We must ask how this relation is achieved. To Eliade the archaic myth is sacred, because, being true, it reveals reality as distinct from the non-real:

„...in reciting or listening to a myth one resumes contact with the sacred and reality, and in so doing one transcends the profane condition, the ‘historical situation’. In other words, one goes beyond the temporal condition and the dull self sufficiency which is the lot of every human being, simply because every human being is ignorant - in the sense that he is identifying himself and Reality, with his own particular situation.” (Eliade 1961, 59)

Similar powers are attributed by Eliade to images and symbols:

„The symbol reveals certain aspects of reality...which defy any other means of knowledge. Images, symbols and myths are not irresponsible creations of the psyche; they...fulfill a function, that of bringing to light the most hidden modalities of being.” (Eliade 1961, 12)

But this still leaves us facing the question: is the myth effective only metaphorically in the manner of a poetic image? Think of the seventy thousand lines of poetry which English people may use to express states of their mind, that they would otherwise be unable to tell. They can recognise in their own experience the truth of a poet’s lines. Is the truth of myths of the kind that a great poet’s lines possess? Do the two differ only in the content of the images evoking the truth in us, the image of creation being of a kind that cannot be translated into tangible experience?

It will help us to see the way myth is in fact ‘lived’ by archaic people. We must look at the relation of these practices to magic and to the whole range of other typically archaic beliefs, and compare the archaic system with our own views derived from modern scientific knowledge.

Take first examples of re-living some myths of creation. Histories of creation are recited so as to connect with them any new beginnings. Dancers, men and women, recite the chant of creation and of the parent’s genealogy until a prince is born. A similar ceremony is performed during a funeral service, which is thought to transfer the soul of the deceased into the other world. (Eliade 1963, 32-33) „When a child is born among the Osages, a man who had talked with the gods is summoned. When he reaches the mother’s house he recites the history of the creation of the universe and of its terrestrial animals to the newborn infant. Not until this has been done is the baby given the breast. Later, when it wants to drink water, the same kind of man is called in again. Once again he recites the myth of creation, ending with the origin of water. When the child is old enough to take solid food the man ‘who talked with the gods’ comes once more and again recites the creation, this time also relating the origin of grains and other foods.” (Eliade 1963, 33)

“To do something well, to work, construct, create, structure, give form, inform – all this comes down to bringing something into existence, giving it ‘life,’ and in the last analysis, making it like the pre-eminently harmonious organism, the Cosmos.” (Eliade 1963, 32-33)

The powers of the cosmogonic age are evoked in immemorial phrases and

rituals which are believed to go back to those beginnings. The symbolic actions are performed, or directed by experts, in ancient lore and their function converts the recalling of myths into the practice of magic. In modern times the invocation of the divine presence by religious ritual claims similar results.

For Eliade the prime value of archaic myth lies in showing the world full of great meaning. Myth is an all comprehending work of art, which, like any other great work of art, fills its subject with inexhaustible significance. In such a world man does not feel shut up in his own mode of existence. „If the World speaks to him through its heavenly bodies, its plants and animals, its rivers and rocks, its seasons and nights, man answers it by his dreams and his imaginative life, by his ancestors or his totems (at once ‘Nature,’ supernatural, and human beings), by his ability to die and return to life ritually in initiation ceremonies (like the Moon and vegetation), by his power to incarnate a spirit by putting on a mask, and so on.” (Eliade 1963, 143)

This is essentially what Shelley called the wonder of our being, which poetry reveals by purging our usual chaotic experience from the films of familiarity. On these lines myth does not materially go beyond the scope of great works of art.

But the connection with Shelley’s interpretation of poetry recalls more areas of mental detachment which range from sheer ecstasy to theological doctrines and aesthetic programmes. Pure contemplation as practised by Japanese Zen Buddhism aims at sloughing our pragmatic observation of things and seeing them instead as fused into a comprehensive experience. We cease to look at objects severally and become immersed in them. They lose their usual meaning and are merged with the unfathomable scope of the universe. „Intuition is the faculty of comprehending the object of the soul in its interior relation with the cosmic totality lying concealed under the variety of the world. The task of intuition is to orient the inwardness of the human soul towards the NOTHING.” (Hasumi 1962, X)

Christians took a parallel line in the Mystic Theology of the Pseudo-Dionysios. But the Christian mystic aims not at NOTHING. He too seeks a visionary sight lying beyond the intelligent identification of his surroundings, but by this *via negativa* he seeks the presence of God. Through a series of detachments, he strives for absolute ignorance of particulars which grants union with Him who is beyond all being and all knowledge. In a perfect love of God the world is revealed as a divine miracle.

The radical anti-intellectualism of the *via negativa* attempts to break out of our normal intellectual framework, so we become „like little children.” It is akin to the reliance on the ‘foolishness of God,’ – that short cut to the understanding of Christianity – of which St. Augustine said sharply that it was free to the simple-minded, though impassable to the learned.

I have refrained from mentioning the Yoga, antedating both Zen Buddhism and Mystic Theology, because its contemplative exercises seek complete extinction of the senses. Nirvana is destined to release us not only of the intellectual framework of perception, but of our very existence as externally migrating beings. But in early Indian thought we do find the first theories writing opposites as the ultimate

foundation of the world; opposites may conflict, but on a deeper level they are one. „On the one hand there is distinction ... and conflict between the Devas and Asuras, the gods and the ‘demons,’ the powers of light and darkness ... But on the other hand numerous myths bring out the consubstantiality or brotherhood of the Devas and Asuras.” (Eliade 1965, 88-89)

In the West early attempts to discover a unified reality underlying the manifold appearances of the world were first made by the Ionian philosophers. Later, the predominant Christian theology imposed the mystic unification of Manichean and Arian dualities. According to Eliade (Eliade 1965, 80-81) the union of incompatibles was first elevated to a general theological principle by Nicholas of Cusa under the influence of the *Via Negativa* of the Pseudo Dionysos. He called it the *Coincidentia oppositorum* and argued that such a *Coincidentia oppositorum* was the least imperfect definition of God.³

Returning to the cult of rapturous contemplation in Zen Buddhism, we meet with a theoretical development of it into a doctrine of aesthetics. Art, poetry and painting is said to be the transmission of visionary experience, and hence to tell of the NOTHING, the Absolute, the ultimate reality. A culture informed by such visionary powers can see beauty in every gesture and every tool, however humble their use. It cultivates an omnipresent graciousness.

Of all ancient systems of ecstatic contemplation, Zen Buddhism alone applies directly to the creative arts. As it analyses both the making and the appreciation of art in visionary terms, it appealed to schools of modern art, as art became increasingly visionary. Moreover, modern schools, refusing the beautification of useful objects by added decorations, found support in the view that the beauty of practical objects must include their efficiency.

But let me say that since I have turned from feasts and rites of mourning to the structure of archaic myths and mystical ideas, I have attended only in passing to the question, how these facts of the imagination become so fully detached from our daily concerns. That a myth of creation deals with the world as a whole, the idea of which transcends any conceptions of parts in the world, does isolate myths, and the ritual observed in evoking mythical stories detaches them further from the common concerns of the day. But when we turn to the practice of a pure contemplation that passes from the normal viewing of a landscape to a mystical contemplation of it, we do not seem to be traversing any conceptual barrier, nor setting up an artificial framework in order to separate our experience from seeing the scenery as we usually see it. Where lies then the source of the detachment? The answer can be found most readily in the case of Zen Buddhism and this throws light on the whole range of other mysteric visions. Zen is acquired by a prolonged arduous training. „In order to experience (Zen) we must enter a monastery and take part in ... Zen meditation

3 Eliade refers to C. G. Jung *Psychology of Transference and Mysterium Conjunctionis, Untersuchung über die Trennung und Zusammensetzung der seelischen Gegensätze in der Alchemie*, for further references see Eliade 1965, 81.

exercises ... under the guidance of a profound and experienced master. We must learn through control of breathing to attain unity of soul and body, and at the same time to feel incessant shocks within.” (Hasumi 1962, 14) Descriptions abound of the harsh discipline to which the novice of Zen submits. His enlightenment is associated with the efforts and sufferings of his discipline, which detach him from the flow of normal experience and opens him access to ecstatic meditation away from the common interests of life.

And however grim the training to Zen may be, it is incomparably less painful than is the process of initiating a youngster into the knowledge of archaic myths. There is no purpose in describing here an example of such ceremonies; they are well known as *rites de passage*, marking the youth’s entry to manhood. But Eliade tells that they involve more than passage from one age group to another. „The initiation goes on for years, and the revelations are of several orders. There is, to begin with, the first and most terrible revelation, that of the sacred as the *tremendum*. The adolescent’s condition begins to be terrorised by a supernatural reality of which he experiences, for the first time, the power – its autonomy and incommensurability; and, following upon this encounter with divine terror, the neophyte dies: he dies to childhood – that is, to ignorance and irresponsibility. This is why his family lament and weep for him: when he comes back from the forest he will be another; he will no longer be the child he was ... he will have undergone a series of initiatory ordeals which compel him to confront fear, suffering and torture, but which compel him above all to assume a new mode of being, that which is proper to an adult – namely, that which is conditioned by the almost simultaneous revelation of the sacred, of death and of sexuality.” (Eliade 1959, 195-196)

Even allowing for the possibility that these lines of Eliade may be overdrawn, it is clear that initiation ceremonies effectively stamp in the minds of young people the esoteric nature of archaic myths. This should suffice by itself to establish the detachment of their imaginative vision.

But the overpowering force of initiation ceremonies brings back and reinforces our doubts whether myths of creation can be said to be true and their substance real, as Eliade teaches it. I shall resume this question in my next lecture on „Myths, ancient and modern.”