

Ariadne, Theseus, and the Circumambulation of the Mythic Self

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Abstract

This article examines a series of literary works in which the idea of return is linked to a sense of the eternal as an expression of the mythic self. The first three examples, which are taken from texts in different genres from the second half of the nineteenth century, show signs of an incipient mythopoeia. Following this introduction to the topic, attention is turned to works that appeared in the first half of the twentieth century, especially those that belong to its second decade. One critical moment in the Cretan myth of Ariadne is singled out for close analysis as an illustration of the modernist preoccupation with—and the continuing vitality of—myths from ancient Greece. In this case study, the focus is on the interaction between sea and shore as having the force of a liminal charge in which the sacred emerges from the profane.

Keywords

Ariadne, Lord Jim, T. S. Eliot, de Chirico, personal myth, sea journey.

1. The Return to Origins

Myth, as an aspect of the archaic mind, is intrinsic to all cultures. It exercises invisible control in matters of the imagination and offers a counterbalance to the rationalism that is claimed on behalf of secular institutions. Its order is a symbolic order which is self-renewing. Narratives of myth tend to operate at the level, not of cognition, but of recognition. They respond less to the linear imperative of progress than to a reflexive demand for a return to origins.

The return to origins, the eternal return, may be understood in various ways. It is a recapitulation in which each re-enactment in ritual, each re-telling in a literary work, each re-presentation in the world of art is at the same time a confirmation of a fundamental belief and a renewal of a sacred bond. Besides recapitulations that are the products of human agency, the repetition of a primordial event may take the form of a natural occurrence. The appearance of the rainbow in the sky, for example, is, in the words of God, “the token of the covenant which I make between me and you and every living creature that is with you, for perpetual generations” (Genesis 9, 12, KJV). A recurrence in nature is indicative of a correlative impetus in the supernatural world and *vice versa*. In Greek mythology wind is the prerogative of the god Aeolus, as Odysseus

found to his cost on his homeward journey after his crew's indiscretion in allowing all the winds to escape from the bag that the deity had donated.

The belief may be fanciful, as with Aeolus, and serve the purpose of entertainment or it may take on a religious meaning and strike at the heart of a civilisation as in the Biblical story of the flood and its aftermath. Yet, trivial or terrifying, it establishes a tie between the present and the primordial through a fusion of the natural and the supernatural. To adopt Mircea Eliade's distinction, it proposes a *sacred* rather than a *profane* dispensation. In his formulation, "one emerges from profane, chronological time and enters a time that is of a different quality, a 'sacred' Time at once primordial and indefinitely recoverable" (Eliade 1975, 18).

Myth offers an alternative to a scientific or rational account. Carl Jung regarded the aim of psychic development, in which myth plays a fundamental role, as one of arriving at a rounded awareness of the self through a process of individuation. According to Jung, "the self is the principle and archetype of orientation and meaning" (Jung 1975, 224). The self is situated at the centre of one's being and all of life's experiences return one inevitably to that centre. In a passage that suggested the title for this article, he wrote: "There is no linear evolution; there is only a circumambulation of the self" (Jung 1975, 222).

Jung approached myth from a psychoanalytical perspective and held the view that one's personal myth served the purpose of giving a direction to life, for good or for bad. His personal myth was constellated from memories, dreams and reflections. It grew as much out of fantasies as out of mythologies. The psychoanalytical concept of a personal myth shares many qualities with its literary equivalent, to which W. B. Yeats refers in his short poem "A Coat":

I made my song a coat
Covered with embroideries
Out of old mythologies
From heel to throat;
But the fools caught it,
Wore it in the world's eyes
As though they'd wrought it.
Song, let them take it,
For there's more enterprise
In walking naked. (Yeats 1965, 142)

Like Jung, Yeats acknowledges that a return to the "naked" self is essential for creative, that is to say authentic, development. It is only the stubborn and the self-deluded who believe in and insist upon a linear path through life. "There is no linear evolution; there is only a circumambulation of the self".

The supernatural is anchored in the natural and it draws upon the visible world for the enunciation of mysteries that involve gods and goddesses, hybrid monsters and semi-divine heroes and heroines. One of its most fertile domains is the sea and the sea voyage, for it is through the medium of water that flux and reflux are most closely associated with the individual as humanity loses contact with *terra firma*.

2. The Nineteenth-century Heritage

The contrast between determined directness and an adaptive avoidance of what seems to be a rational path is illustrated in the encounter between the protagonist in Act II of Henrik Ibsen's play, *Peer Gynt*, and the folklore figure of the Bøyg:

PEER Who are you? Answer!

VOICE (*in the darkness*) Myself.

PEER Stand aside!

VOICE Go round about, Peer. For the fells here are wide.

PEER (*tries another route, but runs into something*) Who are you?

VOICE Myself. Can you say the like? (Ibsen 2007, ll. 1077-79)

The juxtaposition of self-identity and circumambulation—in the Bøyg's repeated response to the question "Who are you?" with the declarative "Myself" [Migselv] and in his injunction to "Go round about" [Gåudenom]—serves to chart the territory that the hero is to explore in the course of the play. Self-knowledge calls for renunciation, recapitulation, and recognition before the threshold of awareness may eventually be crossed. Often, as in Ibsen's drama, the process is represented as a journey.

In the course of his picaresque life, Peer Gynt undertakes several voyages and meets many fantastic creatures that range from troll to sphinx to the spectre of death itself. In the second scene of the final act, his boat capsizes and he comes face to face with his destiny in the guise of the "Strange Passenger". Death spares him, despite his act of cowardice in letting the ship's cook drown, simply because, in the ironic words of his supernatural interlocutor, one does not die in the middle of Act Five.

The end of the journey is self-realisation. Its trajectory is recursive, returning upon itself, like the sea in its encounter with the land at full tide. Matthew Arnold, in his poem "Dover Beach" refers to

the grating roar
Of pebbles which the waves draw back, and fling,
At their return, up the high strand,
Begin, and cease, and then again begin,
With tremulous cadence slow, and bring
The eternal note of sadness in. (Arnold 1954, 191-92)

For the Victorian poet, listening to the repetitive and melancholic sound, the moment calls up an image:

Sophocles long ago
Heard it on the Aegaeon, and it brought
Into his mind the turbid ebb and flow
Of human misery. (Arnold 1954, 191-92)

The feeling of oppression gives rise to a conviction that, if the "note of sadness" is "eternal", an inalienable aspect of the human condition, then, by that very token, it stretches back to antiquity to unite the lyrical speaker with the Greek tragedian, the purveyor of myths, in a mutual awareness of "human misery". The loss of certitude in the present age is by no means diminished, but the burden is mitigated by its being

shared. It is, moreover, not merely shared. There is also in this companionship of spirits an ebb and flow, which takes Arnold back to a reflective Sophocles and returns him to his own era to face the “confused alarms of struggle and flight,/ Where ignorant armies clash by night”.

The examples from Ibsen and Arnold take us to the brink of mythology. Herman Melville confronts it directly in *Moby Dick*. In Chapter LVII, his narrator, Ishmael, asks the reader to consider “the subtleness of the sea”.

Consider the subtleness of the sea; how its most dreaded creatures glide under water, unapparent for the most part, and treacherously hidden beneath the loveliest tints of azure. Consider also the devilish brilliance and beauty of many of its most remorseless tribes, as the dainty embellished shape of many species of sharks. Consider, once more, the universal cannibalism of the sea; all whose creatures prey upon each other, carrying on eternal war since the world began. (Melville 1954, 241)

Anticipating the Jungian idea that the self is located at the centre, with the concomitant equation of the sea and the unconscious as constitutive of circumambient, archetypal fantasies, Ishmael proceeds to invite the reader to entertain a “strange analogy”:

Consider all this; and then turn to the green, gentle, and most docile earth; consider them both, the sea and the land; and do you not find a strange analogy to something in yourself? For as this appalling ocean surrounds the verdant land, so in the soul of man there lies one insular Tahiti, full of peace and joy, but encompassed by all the horrors of the half-known life. (Melville 1954, 241)

His recommendation, or rather his injunction, is prompted by a sense of self-preservation: “God keep thee! Push not off from that isle, thou canst never return!” It is not a piece of advice that he follows himself, nor is it the bold recommendation of the advocate of individuation, for whom a return to the naked self from the “eternal war” offers a path to salvation.

3. The Enchafèd Flood

The nineteenth-century works adduced above—*Peer Gynt*, “Dover Beach”, *Moby Dick*— all include references to the sea and sea-crossings. The emphases in the various genres are quite different, but in each case the sea is made to stand for the destructive element that is necessary for subsequent self-realisation. It has to be subsequent, for, as *Peer Gynt* exclaims while the storm rages, just before his encounter with the “Strange Passenger”, “You’re never really yourself when afloat” (Ibsen 2007, l. 3161).

Toward the end of the Victorian era, as the nineteenth century gave way to the twentieth and Sigmund Freud was at work preparing his *Interpretation of Dreams* for publication, Joseph Conrad placed before the reading public a penetrating fictional exploration of the character of the romantic dreamer. His novel *Lord Jim* is as adroit in its own way as Freud’s seminal study in the observations it has to offer on the modern

psyche, amongst the most celebrated of which is the ungrammatical utterance of the German lepidopterist, Stein, who advises Marlow, the first-person narrator, on the only way to cure inveterate romanticism (and, by implication, to know oneself):

“Very funny this terrible thing is. A man that is born falls into a dream like a man who falls into the sea. If he tries to climb out into the air as inexperienced people endeavour to do, he drowns—*nichtwahr?* ... No! I tell you! The way is to the destructive element submit yourself, and with the exertions of your hands and feet in the water make the deep, deep sea keep you up”. (Conrad 2002, 134)

Conrad may or may not have had Arnold’s poem in mind, when writing Chapter Twenty of his novel, but it is to be noted that Stein’s recommendation draws upon the same vocabulary and imagery as “Dover Beach”. In his poem, Arnold alluded to “the world, which seems/ To lie before us like a land of dreams”. He represented that world as a “darkling plain” lacking in “certitude” and “help for pain”. Stein, whose very name recalls the “pebbles” and “naked shingles” of Arnold’s poem, speaks of “the world pain” (Conrad 2002, 133):

hisdeep-set eyesseemed to pierce through me, but his twitching lips uttered no word, and the austere exaltation of a certitude seen in the dusk vanished from his face. [...] He sat down and, with both elbows on the desk, rubbed his forehead. ‘And yet it is true—it is true. In the destructive element immerse.’ ... He spoke in a subdued tone, without looking at me, one hand on each side of his face. ‘That was the way. To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream—and so—*ewig—usque ad finem ...*’ The whisper of his conviction seemed to open before me a vast and uncertain expanse, as of a crepuscular horizon on a plain at dawn—or was it, perchance, at the coming of the night? [...] Yet for all that the great plain on which men wander amongst graves and pitfalls remained very desolate under the impalpable poesy of its crepuscular light, overshadowed in the centre, circled with a bright edge as if surrounded by an abyss full of flames. (Conrad 2002, 134–35)

Beyond the repeated reference to dream, to loss of certitude, and to the darkling plain, the overriding tenor in this crepuscular scene is that of a recurrent sadness which partakes of eternity: “To follow the dream, and again to follow the dream—and so—*ewig—usque ad finem ...*”. Each memory of the past and each telling of an adventure is a recovery of an originating event, a return to a source, and every revival has its roots in myth.

In *Civilizations*, Felipe Fernández-Armesto (2000, 356) writes: “Seas attract and repel, inhibit and inspire. [...]. They are seen as life-threatening and life supplying”. Walter Otto reinforces this view when he observes that “To the mythopoeic mind, water is the element in which the primal mysteries of all life dwell. Birth and death, past, present, and future intertwine their dances here. [...] With water come vitality, re-invigoration, and nourishment to flood through all creation” (Otto 1965,

161). A mythic understanding recognizes the sea as ambivalent: inviting and assisting, but also unpredictable and destructive. The mythopoeic mind populates the sea with gods and sea nymphs (or mermaids, as they are known in other cultures), which attract and annihilate.

T. S. Eliot, in the third of his *Four Quartets*, states that “The sea has many voices,/ Many gods and many voices”. He calls the sea the “land’s edge”. The land is “the granite/ Into which it reaches, the beaches where it tosses/ Its hints of earlier and other creation” (Eliot 1977, 184). The “land’s edge”, the coastline where the sea meets the land, is a threshold, where the fluid and the firm come into contact with each other. It has the character of liminal space, where changes are prone to occur and nothing may be taken for granted. Eliot refers to the sea as tossing “Its hints of earlier and other creation” onto the beach. The sea is a primeval force, which has retained the power to wreak havoc on the shore when it is roused. This is shown not only in works of literature, but in our everyday vocabulary as well. Nouns normally indicative of solidity (beach, ground, and strand) become synonyms for danger and alarm when transformed into verbs. Thus, we speak, for example, of a disoriented whale becoming beached, a capsized ship running aground ... or an Ariadne stranded.

4. The Myth of Ariadne and Theseus

In the Cretan myth Ariadne and Theseus are united in their sea crossing, but the sea has a different meaning for each of them. Theseus’s journey is part of a *nostos*, or homecoming, as he sails from Athens and back again, via Crete and Naxos. Ariadne’s voyage, in contrast, is a flight from Crete to Naxos, where she is abandoned. Theseus is driven by the thought of return—and that is true also of his entry into the labyrinth, whereas Ariadne’s resolve has a forward momentum to it, a marine elopement that ends on an alien strand. Hers is essentially an island mentality; his is a metropolitan one. While the sea affords a means of onward travel for Theseus, it presents an insuperable obstacle to Ariadne, alone on Naxos. In “The Marriage of Peleus and Thetis” (Catullus 2017, 64: 185-87), she entertains the idea of returning to Crete only to proclaim her plight, surrounded by the truculent sea, as one of desolation: “nullafugaeratio, nullaspes: omniamuta,/ omnia sunt deserta, ostentant omnia letum” [no means of flight, no hope: all is silent/ all is deserted/ all is a manifestation of death].

Theseus, a culture hero, is perpetually on the move; Ariadne, the object of his desire, is always contained. Yet hers is not the stereotypical gender role of confinement. She is not the damsel in distress waiting to be liberated, like Andromeda, for example. The topos, in fact, is reversed. It is her ball of thread that saves Theseus who then leaves her to her fate far from home. When succour comes, it does so unexpectedly in the form of a god, yet there is no happy conclusion or, at least, not before further trials and transformations. Ariadne is to enjoy no lasting happiness on earth. She has first to be transfigured before she can take her place symbolically in the sky as a constellation.

Theseus is a man and Dionysus is a god. It is with this distinction in mind that we should assess their respective roles in Ariadne’s story. As a mortal, Theseus has a biography, that is to say his life is made up of a series of episodes that constitute his

mythological identity. We know that he volunteered to be one of the Athenians sent to Crete as an annual tribute to the Minotaur, that when he parted from his father Aegeus his boat carried a black sail which he promised to exchange for a white one should he return triumphant, that he defeated the bull-man in the labyrinth and found his way out with the aid of a ball of thread given to him by Ariadne, that he took her with him when he left the island, but abandoned her on Naxos before completing his journey to Athens, and that he forgot to change the black sail for a white one so that his father, at the sight of the original sail, threw himself off the cliff in despair and died. In all this, there is clarity in the narrative. As his life follows its path, a marked sequence of events occurs. There is, of course, also parallelism and patterning: the unwinding and rewinding of life's thread in the passage through the labyrinth and in the larger context of the *nostos*, or the deception of Ariadne as Theseus sails away from Naxos and the deception of Aegeus as he returns to Athens, both of which are attributed to forgetfulness. These recapitulations, however, are only perceptible against the mainstay of a linear narrative.

Linearity does not apply to Dionysus. Dionysus is a god and, as a god, he is not to be measured in terms of a human life-span. The episodes in his myth cannot be tied down to a particular order. He owes his prominence not to any narrative series, but to his image. If Theseus is an embodiment of the culture hero whose primary mode is narrative, Dionysus belongs to the sphere of the divine and is invoked – and appears – as an image, or a mask. He is, as Otto remarks, “there and not there”.¹ His function, above all, is circumambulatory – to attach himself, in his capacity as god, to human beings, imposing upon their lives and deaths an aura of the supernatural, or the mythological, which most characteristically – as with the maenads – takes the form of derangement.

5. Mr Eliot's Ariadne

Eliot makes two references to the mythological name of Ariadne in his early poetry. The first is in the title of a poem of 1911, “Bacchus and Ariadne; 2nd Debate between the Body and Soul”. The poem contains references to “a wave”, “floods of life”, and “winds beyond the world”, but its main point of interest for the present discussion is that Eliot's allusion is to the final phase of the Ariadne myth, after Theseus has abandoned her, and hints at the distinction between the “profane” body and the “sacred” soul in the lines: “I saw that Time began again its slow/ Attrition on a hard resistant face./ Yet to burst out at last, ingenuous and pure/ Surprised, but knowing” (Eliot 1996, 68). The second allusion, in the second stanza of “Sweeney Erect”, is an ironic one, employed in keeping with an approach that the author was later, in a book review, to dub “the mythical method”, a designation that has subsequently enjoyed a certain celebrity.

The “mythical method”, Eliot claimed, was “a step toward making the modern world possible for art” by the manipulation of “a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” (Eliot 1923, 483). Despite Eliot's contention, it was hardly a new device in literary construction. Alexander Pope had put it to satirical use

in the eighteenth century in *The Rape of the Lock* and John Keats had recourse to a similar strategy, albeit for a different purpose, in the composition of his odes in the nineteenth century, before Arnold took it up in “Dover Beach”. One may, however, safely conclude with Eliot that it is “*simply* a way of controlling, of ordering, of giving shape and significance to the immense panorama of futility and anarchy which is contemporary history” (Eliot 1923, 483; italics added).

Eliot created a character called Sweeney. Sweeney appears in three early poems—“Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service” (Eliot 1977, 54-55), “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” (Eliot 1977, 56-57), and “Sweeney Erect” (Eliot 1977, 42-43)—before he receives a brief mention in *The Waste Land* and later appears as an unsavoury character in the fragmentary play *Sweeney Agonistes*. “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service” concerns itself with Christianity and concludes with an incongruous, but not inappropriate, two-line reference to Sweeney, “Stirring the water in his bath”. “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” and “Sweeney Erect” juxtapose Sweeney’s sordid world with those of Agamemnon and Ariadne, respectively. Instrumental in establishing a parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity in all three poems is the implicit introduction of the imagery, in the final stanza, of bath water. In “Sweeney Among the Nightingales”, the allusion is made in reference to the murder of Agamemnon, whom Clytemnestra killed as he stepped out of the bath. In “Sweeney Erect”, it is signalled by the entry of Doris, “towelled from the bath”. Sweeney’s association with the bath is consolidated in *The Waste Land*, when he makes his one and only appearance in that poem:

But at my back from time to time I hear
The sound of horns and motors, which shall bring
Sweeney to Mrs. Porter in the spring.
O the moon shone bright on Mrs. Porter
And on her daughter
They wash their feet in soda water (Eliot 1977, 67)

In the two Sweeney poems that contain classical allusions, bath water is contrasted with sea water. More generally, an artificial and unappealing domestic interior is set off against the background of the natural world: “shrunk seas” in “Sweeney Among the Nightingales” and “snarled and yelping seas” in “Sweeney Erect”. It is, however, more than the world of nature that is evoked. The mythological allusions in these two poems (as indeed the reference to “the unoffending feet” of Christ—the Baptized God—in “Mr. Eliot’s Sunday Morning Service”) create a supernatural context.

6. Crete reformulated

Two episodes in the myth of Ariadne, in particular, have attracted poets, painters, and sculptors from antiquity to the present day. The first is Theseus in the labyrinth and the second is Ariadne on the shore at Naxos, either asleep or awake. These are the moments in the myth when narrative, as it were, yields primacy to image and, on both occasions, the story moves from life among humans to an encounter with other forms of being: with the Minotaur or the God.

Eliot chose to begin his poem “Sweeney Erect” by addressing the second of these two moments. The first two stanzas read:

Paint me a cavernous waste shore
Cast in the unstilled Cyclades,
Paint me the bold anfractuons rocks
Faced by the snarled and yelping seas.
Display me Aeolus above
Reviewing the insurgent gales
Which tangle Ariadne’s hair
And swell with haste the perjured sails. (Eliot 1977, 42)

This prelude to the account of Sweeney’s amatory activities in a house of low repute takes the form of an injunction to represent a mythological scene pictorially—to paint and display. Its ostensible focus is the natural world. Each line in the opening stanza ends with a word denoting a geographical feature, qualified by one or more adjectives that precede it. The repetition of “Paint me” in the odd lines of the stanza and the near rhyme of “Cast” and “Faced” in the even contribute to the sense of directness. No superfluous detail is supplied and none is sought in the requested depiction. The adjectives lend a particular dynamism to an otherwise bland reference to the rocks, sea, and shore of the Aegean. It is only in the second stanza that the natural scene takes on mythological overtones with the allusions to Aeolus and Ariadne.

It is tempting to correlate what Eliot has to say about the “mythical method” in its exercise of “a continuous parallel between contemporaneity and antiquity” with Eliade’s remark that “In most cases it is not enough to *know* the origin myth, one must *recite* it; this, in a sense, is a proclamation of one’s knowledge, *displays* it” (Eliade 1975, 17-18; italics in the original). It is precisely *display* that is enjoined in Eliot’s poem, in what amounts to a recitation, in the introduction of Ariadne into the picture.

Scene becomes story. The mere deployment of two names suffices to effect the alteration. Familiarity with the classical tradition, which Eliot assumed his readers had, is, of course, a *sine qua non* for an appreciation of the allusion to the myth of Ariadne who was abandoned deceitfully by Theseus. His hurried and secretive departure amounted to perjury, since he had sworn his love to the Cretan princess. In this picture, Aeolus, the god of the winds, is the active agent and Ariadne the suffering victim. The tangle of her hair, which brings these two mythological figures together, carries a subtle reminder of the ball of thread that had united Theseus and Ariadne in Crete.

This is not the end of the poem’s mythological associations, however, for traces persist in the parenthetical reference to Nausicaa and Polypheme, inhabitants of other Mediterranean islands, whom Odysseus encountered as he came ashore. Then, in the last stanza, Doris, who takes her name from the nymph married to the sea-god Nereus (“Doris, lovely-haired/ Daughter of Oceanus, circling stream”, as Hesiod called her),² makes her appearance, transformed, in the house of the aptly named Mrs. Turner. She enters, swaddled in a towel, “padding on broad feet” and brings “sal volatile/ And a

glass of brandy neat”, stronger stimulants than the soda water that administers to the needs of Mrs. Porter in *The Waste Land*. By now, Crete has become a distant memory. The very letters that make up the name of the island have been rearranged to form the epithet that characterises Sweeney: erect.

7. A Pictorial Coda

Eliot’s Ariadne is awake and gazes out to sea, but the image of the sleeping Ariadne, as Theseus slipped away, is also one that has caught the imagination of poets and painters alike. It was sufficiently compelling to have had the force of an obsession for the twentieth-century painter, Giorgio de Chirico. From 1912 to 1913, at the start of his so-called metaphysical period, he produced a set of paintings of Ariadne and he returned repeatedly to depictions of the enigmatic figure of the exiled Cretan princess throughout his life, completing as many works on the topic as there are Nereids in the ocean. His self-portrait of 1911 is inscribed with the words “Et quid amabo nisi quod aenigmaest?” (Dottori 2006, 204).³ In Ariadne, he found the ideal analogue of the enigma.

The Cretan princess is represented in the Ariadne series as a statue asleep in the incongruous setting of a modern Italian piazza with a train visible in the background. Critics, following de Chirico’s lead, identify a powerful link between enigma and melancholy in the artist’s representation of Ariadne, a combination which points ultimately to a preoccupation with self-identity and self-knowledge in which time (or the present) and timelessness (or the mythic) are of central, metaphysical concern. While acknowledging the importance of Nietzsche’s conception of the Ariadne myth for de Chirico, Michael Taylor argues that “ultimately the dejected figure of Ariadne transcends its origins in Greek myth and the writings of Nietzsche to become a personal symbol of loneliness, melancholy and mystery for the artist” (O’Hanlan 2012, 72).⁴ Ariadne, in effect, becomes de Chirico’s mythic self in the period from 1911 to 1913, establishing the ground for an evolving sense of his own identity as an artist in the early years of the twentieth century.

8. Losing the Thread

Abandoned by Theseus, Ariadne seeks another thread to guide her, but when Dionysus arrives he offers her a crown instead. A thread promises narrative continuity, a way into a story and a way out, but Ariadne’s story begins and ends on the land’s edge. In the mythic account, we find ourselves in the realm of competing images as the remainder of Ariadne’s story becomes more obscure and, in its different variants, contradictory. We are, in effect, unable to read Ariadne’s story, since the liminal cannot truly be narrated. We can merely look on. Her story may only be communicated from the outside by external display, as Eliot and de Chirico understood in their different ways. The indispensable medium of narration is time and, in a liminal experience, time is suspended.

Upon the arrival of Dionysus at Naxos, Ariadne’s story has become a theophany, a visitation of the god of duality, of life and death. Eliot’s “Bacchus and Ariadne” starts with the poet’s announcement: “I saw their lives curl upward like a wave/ And

break. And after all it had not broken” (Eliot 1996, 68). Indirectly, Eliot’s reference to the paradoxical, broken-unbroken conjunction of god and mortal acknowledges the union of two lives represented astronomically in the mythological account of the formation of the constellation known as Corona Borealis or the Northern Crown. An earlier English poet had been more explicit, drawing the reader’s attention to the heavenly “display” above the terrestrial sphere, in his injunction to look up at the night sky:

Looke! how the crowne, which Ariadne wore
 Upon her yvory forehead, [...]
 Being now placed in the firmament,
 Through the bright heaven doth her beams display,
 And is unto the starres an ornament,
 Which round about her move in order excellent.

(Spenser 1893, *The Faerie Queene* Book VI, Canto X, xiii)

In the language of symbolism, Spenser’s circular “ornament” is the antithesis of the linear thread. The end of Ariadne’s story takes us back to its beginning in an eternal return, for the heavenly crown is a refashioning of a diadem that crops up earlier in the myth. The earlier object is given to the Minoan maiden either by Dionysus (as a wedding gift, made by Hephaestus) or by Theseus (who obtained it from Thetis or her sister Amphitrite), depending on which version is followed.⁵ The story of Ariadne, we might conclude, is, like the image of Dionysus (or Bacchus), “there and not there”. Ultimately, it cannot be read, it can only be shown ... in the firmament, circumambulatory.

Notes

1. The mask is “the symbol and the manifestation of that which is simultaneously there and not there: that which is excruciatingly near, that which is completely absent – both in one reality.” (Otto 1965, 91).
2. *Theogony*, ll. 241-42 (Hesiod and Theognis 1973, 30)
3. “And what shall I love if it is not enigma?”
4. O’ Hanlan takes up Taylor’s use of the word “personal” to introduce the Jungian concept of a “personal myth” in her discussion of de Chirico, albeit in relation to the Dioscuri rather than Ariadne.
5. Other permutations also exist. It is even reported in one variant of the myth that it was not a thread that aided Theseus in finding his way out of the labyrinth, but the gems from the crown, shining in the darkness, which lit his exit.

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