

Lourdes Ortiz and the Re-appropriation of the Genesis Myth

Myth will here be taken to mean what the history of religions now finds in it...traditional narration which relates to events that happened at the beginning of time and which has the purpose of providing grounds for the ritual actions of men of today and, in a general manner, establishing all the forms of action and thought by which man understands himself in his world. (Ricoeur, 5)

The two basic functions of "myth" defined in Paul Ricoeur's *The Symbolism of Evil* establish its use within the confines of religion; firstly, as the basis for socio-religious rites and practices, and secondly, as a philosophical means by which man can attempt to come to terms with his existence on earth. Although Ricoeur's definition does not directly allude to the processes involved behind mythogenesis, what is none the less taken for granted is the implication of moral judgement suggesting to the reader/listener the most propitious conduct for the general good of society. The continued propagation of a particular myth would then presuppose some level of general consensus with regards to this judgement. Any myth that has not achieved this general consensus would simply not become established in the mythology of a people, but would find itself condemned to fictional death through silence. Once accepted into a popular mythology, the precepts of a myth can be effectively used as a strong psychological force capable of unifying society through a form of moral contract whose objective would be the maintenance of order within said society. This moral contract can further be utilized as an effective method of foreseeing and preventing changes to the subsequent established order. Given this extension of the implications of a popular mythology, the analysis of which particular myths are preserved and spread throughout a given culture can be directed towards the study of

the prejudices, at times carefully inculcated by the controlling sector, and the fears of that people. In a patriarchal set-up, for example, myths that exalt the supremacy of the feminine will be repressed in favor of those that will not subvert the established masculine "order."

The preservation of the most advantageous mythological base can become a matter of great importance to those in power and any deviation from the norm can provoke censure under the implied threat of dire consequences. The discourse of the North American mythologist Joseph Campbell reflects precisely this type of apocalyptic censure:

Moyers: What happens when a society no longer embraces a powerful mythology?

Campbell: What we've got on our hands. If you want to find out what it means to have a society without any rituals, read the *New York Times*.

Moyers: And you'd find?

Campbell: The news of the day, including destructive and violent acts by young people who don't know how to behave in a civilized society. (Campbell, 8)

According to Campbell, maturity would seem to imply a tacit acceptance of well established myths and rites on the part of the young people, who then become members of society only through their conformity. Without this implicit approbation, civilization runs the risk of wallowing in destructive anarchy.

The most persuasive myths, those of the Bible that govern the genesis of the Judeo-Christian-Muslim triad, have come under scrutiny as strong examples of prejudicial maintenance of societal order because of the privileged status afforded to the masculine in their structure. The patriarchal hegemony within the synagogue/church/mosque organization has led to biased biblical exegesis in which the role of the female personage is suppressed. This suppression is then reflected in the position of women within the communities that have accepted this biblical base. Female authors have rebelled against this mythological/religious manipulation that has left them without a "voice," without power. Their purpose is to achieve a subversive demystification "through which the now relativized patri-

archal or paternal source of myth and archetype is shifted, displaced, and replaced with a gender specific alternative" (Ordóñez, 103). An analysis of the short story "Eve" by Lourdes Ortiz serves as an example of this "shift" in that she provides a possible alternative reading of biblical myths; in this particular case, of the Genesis myth.

The patriarchal interpretation of the myth of the Fall, of man's expulsion from Eden, establishes a religious base for the long accepted alliance between woman and evil. The feminine is to be forever stigmatized through the culpability of Eve as reflected in the words of the Christian patriarch Tertullian:

Do you not know that each of you is Eve? The sentence of God on this sex of yours lives in this age: the guilt must of necessity live too. *You* are the Devil's gateway. *You* are the unsealer of that forbidden tree. *You* are the first deserter of the divine Law. *You* are she who persuaded him whom the Devil was not valiant enough to attack. *You* destroyed so easily God's image man. On account of your desert, that is death, even the Son of God had to die. (Noddings, 52)

This concept of woman's inherent vile nature which has facilitated many years of her religious oppression is subverted in "Eve." According to Ortiz, the original sin that assured the fall from Paradise was not the feminine act of submission to temptation, but rather the masculine act of "differentiation" in Adam's discourse: "Hasta entonces él...jugaba con las palabras y nombraba las cosas. No había valoración, ni adjetivo para comparar, ni matiz, ni grado que marcara jerarquías y diferencias" (Ortiz, 11)¹ (Until then he...played with words and named objects. There had been no value judgement, nor adjective with which to compare, nor nuance, nor level that would denote hierarchies and differences). Adam, gifted with the power to name and thus appropriate, begins to "distinguish" and "classify." Ideally, when an object is named, it is simply and precisely that object, without appraisal. But when the "gaze" awakens, what is also aroused is "algo de la serpiente en los ojos de Adán" (Ortiz, 11) (something of the serpent in Adam's eyes). God's firstborn is given the power to name with the purpose of facilitating distinction between objects, but he is incapable of preventing his "gaze" from capturing the features of each entity

that afford them advantages over himself. Envy becomes the predominant aspect of Adam's character.

The Fall begins with the naming of the birds as Adam differentiates between their appearance and abilities. When he realizes that he is incapable of the gift of flight, in mid-sentence, a cardinal sin is realized: "pero tiene alas, unas alas dúctiles y firmes con unos remos poderosos que de pronto, aquel día, el mismo día de la mirada y del deseo y de la piel, él comenzó a envidiar" (Ortiz, 12)² (but it has wings, firm, ductile wings with powerful oars that suddenly, that day, the same day of the gaze and of the desire and of the flesh, he began to envy). Adam has already tasted of the forbidden fruit, as evidenced by sexual desire, but the feminist focus shifts in order to concentrate on his "envy." The importance of the apple, Eve's submission to evil within the myth, is diminished. Through his jealousy, Adam distinguishes himself from the birds: "un anhelo apenas formulado, un 'sí yo también...' que implicaba pasiones, desvelos, expectativas" (Ortiz, 12) (a scarcely formulated desire, a 'yes, I too...' that implied passions, preoccupations, expectations). This distinction indicates the psychological scission similar to the Lacanian "mirror stage" with the first realization of the separate existence of "you" and "I." Before the comparison Adam was "todavía sin nombre" (still without name) and "parte indiscernible" (an indiscernible part) of Eve. Now through his envy of the "other," Adam has stopped accepting the primordial union and a simultaneous frenzy of differentiation occurs; of the "I," of value judgement, of adverb and adjective. All of these imply classification and inevitably denote certain limits between the differences. The true Fall becomes the realization of these limits and the otherness that they engender. If there exists a "más allá" (a further beyond) and an "arriba" (above), then there exists "un camino que recorrer, una aventura, preguntas nunca antes formuladas" (Ortiz, 13) (a road to travel, an adventure, questions never before formulated); in other words, an antipode to whatever is situated "here."

An inadvertent discovery precipitated by Adam's extension of his gaze outward, is the realization of his opposing inward gaze. Like inter-stacking Chinese boxes, each differentiation opens up to reveal another inner contraposition. The ability to

judge the advantages of the "other" inevitably affords the realization of "lack" within oneself. Adam, not content to merely envy exterior assets, now begins to compare with the intent of "attainment." The masculine tendency towards appropriation takes on major importance in Ortiz' version and is used to further underscore the basic differences between Adam and Eve's natures. Although both have tasted of the forbidden fruit, and therefore should be logically experiencing the same effects, the power to name that marks Adam's superior position also nuances the character of the Fall. Although the narrator comments to Eve: "tú también ambicionaste, comenzaste a desear aquella piel" (Ortiz, 14) (you also strove, you began to desire that pelt)³, it is Adam who takes measures and fabricates the first weapon—"la quijada" (the jawbone). With supreme irony Ortiz points out the ultimate object of destruction—a jawbone. Not only is this the instrument that is used to kill the first leopard and, in Cain's hands, his brother Abel, but also it symbolizes the part of Adam's body from which rises the voice leading to expulsion; that is to say, his power to name and thus differentiate. It can also be seen as ironically representing the weapon of the feminine voice that tries within this story to subvert masculine mythology through re-appropriation of her-story. In "Eve," the jawbone transforms Adam into a vicious beast of prey: "con las manos, que se asemejaban ahora en su destreza a las propias garras del leopardo, comenzó a desgarrar la piel, a separarla de la carne sanguinolenta" (Ortiz, 15) (with his hands, which now matched the skill of the leopard's own claws, he began to rip away the pelt, to separate it from the bloody meat). Instead of civilizing him, the power of the word has led him to a more primitive, regressed animal state. No longer is there a peaceful co-existence between man and beast; this relationship has been poisoned by the covetous desires of Adam.

Within this particular Chinese box are other relationships effected by appropriation. The leopard's skin, once offered to Eve, sets up a hierarchy between herself and Adam:

...al brindártela, algo se había transformado: Tú diminuta de pronto, sumisa y agradecida...tú ya no igual a él, sino regalada y protegida por él que además te contemplaba de manera diferente—¿cómo llamar a esa distancia repentina entre los dos, a esa manera de situarse frente a

ti y ante sí mismo...no ya parte de tu cuerpo, no piel de tu piel...
(Ortiz, 16)

...in his offering it to you, something had changed: You, tiny all of a sudden, submissive and thankful...you, no longer equal to him, but rather looked after and protected by he who also regarded you in a different manner—how to define this sudden distance between the two, this way of placing himself in front of you and before himself...no longer part of your body, not flesh of your flesh...

The separation between man and woman is complete; Adam is no longer of the same flesh. Eve occupies the lower rung of the scale and it would appear that she has to “pagar aquella piel dorada” (Ortiz, 17) (pay for that golden pelt). After making love, an act described in violently animal terms, Eve is converted into an object of prey equal to the leopard. The omniscient narrator comments: “él reposaba a tu lado satisfecho, cubierto con la piel parda, tiznada con tu sangre y la sangre ya seca del animal” (Ortiz, 17) (he laid by your side satisfied, covered by the dark pelt, soiled with your blood and the already dried blood of the animal).

The earth itself becomes an object of appropriation when Adam puts into action “proyectos, avenidas por construir, murallas, caminos que trazar, fronteras” (Ortiz, 18) (projects, avenues to be opened⁴, walls, roads to design, borders). Man has not only established psychological limits between himself and woman, but also physical limits between lands and peoples. Every patch of earth will now be separated, differentiated from one another. In this way, man has perpetuated not only the sin, but its own punishment; there will no longer be harmony and union. An ominous re-reading of the words of St. Augustine becomes possible: “humanity produced what humanity became, not what it was when created, but when, having sinned, it was punished” (Pagels, 109). Differentiating has opened the proverbial Pandora’s box, unleashing a chain of cause and effect that represent their own retribution. The gift of naming and appropriating has cyclicly appropriated man’s destiny, leaving him in a hell of his own making.

The separation of the primordial union of Adam and Eve comes full circle in Ortiz’ version with the birth of Cain and

Abel. The former, "queriendo ser Adán, obsesionado por ocupar su puesto" (Ortiz, 19) (wishing to be Adam, obsessed with occupying his place), renews the cycle of envy and possession. Cain assumes his father's work and even feels an illicit passion towards his mother: "dispuesto a combatir por ti y avergonzado de ese deseo" (Ortiz, 19) (ready to fight for you and ashamed of that desire). Eve is forced to cover herself in front of Cain from the moment that she becomes aware of this immoral desire, warned by "el calor húmedo de su aliento" (Ortiz, 19) (the humid warmth of his breath). God gives life with His sacred breath, but here man profanizes the symbol into one of possessive sexual desire. The imitation of the father reaches a climax when Cain, consumed by envy, kills his brother with the jawbone and proffers the same "grito de orgullo desmedido" (shout of unbound pride) that Adam celebrated upon killing the first leopard.

In opposition to Cain, Abel emphasizes separation from the father through his return to the paradisaical union. This son is still joined to Eve "en una especie de indisoluble unidad que volvía a borrar la diferencia" (Ortiz, 18) (in a sort of indissoluble unity that once again erased the difference), though he remains complete within himself: "macho-hembra que asumía la síntesis de aquella primitiva unión, antes de nuevo de la manzana" (Ortiz, 18-19) (male-female that took on the synthesis of that primitive union, once again before the apple). His gaze is the innocent one of before and his act of naming is the former pure act, without adverbs and adjectives. While Adam suffers from "un trabajarás y ganarás el pan que le excitaba y le impedía ver los árboles, el río, el pequeño lago junto al valle" (Ortiz, 18) (a "you will work and you will earn your bread" that excited him and prevented him from seeing the trees, the river, the small lake next to the valley), Abel (notably at the side of his mother) "los nombraba como si pudiera ver de nuevo el árbol, el río, el valle" (Ortiz, 19) (named them as if he could see once more the tree, the river, the valley). When Cain contemplates the earth, he is only capable of "mumbling" about projects for the future; in other words, his discourse is not clear or pure.

In further opposition to Cain, Abel's sex is the one that completes Eve's, not an illicit desire. This "male-female" represents

a possible return for mankind to the paradisaical state: "como si el Jardín volviera a estar allí" (Ortiz, 19) (as if the Garden were once again there). The narrator, speaking for Eve, clearly recognizes Abel's ability to bridge the difference between man and woman: "como si a través suyo, a través de aquel hijo-hija dual...pudiera volver a reconstruirse la unidad primigenia..." (Ortiz, 20-21) (as if through him, through that dual son-daughter...the firstborn unity could be reconstructed). For Eve, Abel represents this salvation, but for Adam and Cain, he represents an inversion of all the established values. From the male perspective, he is "Abel infame...despreciado e ignorado...Abel-mujercita" (Ortiz, 21) (vile Abel...despised and ignored...Abel the Effeminate)⁵. It is strikingly evident that Adam and Cain portray traditional male prejudice whereby the worst insult one can hurl at a man is the one that accuses him of being woman-like.

In spite of the apparent disdain, Cain is not above feeling consuming jealousy with regards to Abel. In one savage act, a faithful reflection of the killing of the first leopard, Cain destroys his brother and the possibility of Edenic return. In her attempt to invert the patriarchal focus of the traditional biblical reading, Ortiz puts the weight of the Fall totally on the shoulders of Cain and the father whom he imitates. After the assassination, "cayó el rayo vengador de los sucesivos dioses-machos e iracundos e imperó definitivamente la desdicha y la muerte...abrió el triángulo del miedo...de la vergüenza y de la culpa" (Ortiz, 22) (the vengeful bolt of the successive irate male gods fell and death and misfortune definitively reigned...the triangle of fear, shame and culpability opened up). Now Eve "sees" paradise only upon "closing" her eyes, upon canceling out "el reino de la mirada" (the realm of the gaze), all the while imagining the sound of Abel's flute. In her imagination, Eve once again lives in a world of pure words without differentiation, without value judgements. She is once more "Ave" (Bird)⁶ as Abel has named her, and she freely "vuela...simplemente vuela" (flies...simply flies) without limits through the skies. The cycle closes and her mind inverts time in the same way that Abel had inverted her name; she returns to innocence and the primordial union, confusing Abel with the Adam of before.

Physical time, however, is not so easy to escape as part of man's "differential" punishment: "El tiempo era ahora una línea incierta tendida hacia adelante, como un diseño de terrores por venir" (Ortiz, 22) (Time was now an uncertain line stretching forward, like an outline of horrors to come). The Fall is not restricted to the simple removal of Paradise; it has damned Adam's progeny to continual appropriation of the future. For having dared to distinguish, to assess limits, man is condemned to the terror of "*tiempo...denso y pesado, como una sucesión...algo que se podía medir, casi cortar...*" (Ortiz, 15) (time...dense and heavy, like a succession...something that could be measured, almost cut). This linear succession pushes man who plans against the present for the future and limits woman who is reduced to a state of constant measured "waiting." Adam has deprived them of paradisaical time, forcing them to travel the road towards death. It is not the woman Eve, but the man Adam who is the supreme transgressor for having appropriated and limited, to his own detriment, the concept of time.

Ortiz attempts to re-appropriate Edenic time for her Eve through Abel, portraying it as mythic time:

Abel contaba una a una las estrellas y creaba leones, toros, carros, hermosas mujeres que vertían agua fresca de un cántaro inagotable, convirtiendo el firmamento en un libro ilustrado, en un inmenso marco de premoniciones, de promesas, de símbolos que tú aprendías a leer a su lado...(Ortiz, 21)

Abel would count the stars one by one and would create lions, chariots, beautiful women pouring fresh water from a bottomless pitcher, converting the firmament into an illustrated book, into an immense framework of premonitions, promises, symbols that you were learning to read at his side...

Abel turns the Heavens into an entire Greek mythology for Eve, bringing reflections of this illusory past in contact with the future. In this way, time becomes a cyclical union, not a solitary linear progression. According to the definition of Mircea Eliade, all myths propose some form of return to a sacred Great Time:

...the myth takes man out of his own time—and projects him, symbolically at least, into the Great Time, into a paradoxical instant which cannot be measured because it does not consist of duration...

Merely by listening to a myth, man forgets his profane condition, his "historical situation..." (Eliade, 58)

Man effects a return to the sacred, which permits him to forget the profane. In the same way, Eve attempts a return to Edenic time in order to escape from the horror of a world "profanized" by Adam. When she turns her gaze to the past, Eve sees "una línea de tiempo congelado" (Ortiz, 19) (a line of frozen time), instead of destructive rapid changes. Her mind still functions in terms of Edenic time, confusing all her memories: "¡Fueron tantas cosas las que sucedieron casi al mismo tiempo!" (Ortiz, 16) (There were so many things that happened almost at the same time!). When Eve starts to narrate the story of paradise to her son Abel, she insists on its anti-chronological nature: "Cuando no existía el tiempo" (Ortiz, 20) (When time did not exist), and all that happened before the fall has no other delineation than "before the apple." With these references, Ortiz establishes the sacred character of Eden and of Eve, both innocent victims of Adam's temporal infiltration.

This insistence on the profanization of the sacred through masculine attempts at appropriation and differentiation subverts the traditional patriarchal reading of the Genesis myth. Ortiz has managed a re-reading which incorporates the basic elements of the biblical myth without prejudice against the feminine. On the contrary, Eve becomes a heroine, Adam's "object" turned into "subject" of the story. Through her personage, the oppressed feminine sector of society can re-appropriate her-story in a way that dignifies memory. Eve is not the transgressor, but rather the last vestige of Edenic life; that which Adam has destroyed still lives on in the memories of Eve. She is incapable of imposing limits, neither in time, nor between the sexes, and still longs for the sacred primordial union. If Eve suffers, it is for the sins of Adam who has assured their Fall within the masculine world of appropriation. Despite the implied painful destiny, the feminist reader can still discern some positive results: "the elixir of androgyny is glimpsed and the potential for revisionary female mythopoesis emerges, even if the individual quester is forcibly reintegrated into the patriarchy" (Ordóñez, 103). Eve empowers a feminine biblical voice and

allows the reader a glimpse of moral values that surpass the need to possess—one of the inescapable side-effects of masculine differentiation.

None the less, the very structure of the story threatens to annul this positive message. At the end of it all, the curious reader may find herself overwhelmed by a series of “whys.” Why is it necessary to re-write a patriarchal myth at all? Why re-appropriate if appropriation is to be despised? Why create an Eve who is still victim and object of man? And finally the ominous structural “why”—why does Eve not have her own voice? This omniscient narrator who continually speaks for the feminine character, is s/he God, Ortiz, Eve referring to herself in the form of “you,” or is it a simple reflection of the ambivalence and open structure of the feminine text? Although the structure’s lack of easily imposed conclusions figuratively complies with Eve’s desire to surpass the masculine need for limits within the text, the “voice” that Ortiz intends to return to the feminine personage disappears into this abyss. There is always an omniscient presence that directs Eve’s discourse; the subject of the story is incapable of speaking for herself. Is this a faithful reflection in a mythological world of woman’s position within the patriarchal scheme? It would seem that Ortiz is warning the reader not to attempt to formulate decisive conclusions that limit all possibilities; not to expect masculine logic, but rather a feminine structure that subverts any attempts at classification. The positive values depicted in the short story are to be accepted as expressed, along with their embodiment in the feminine character. Eve has been retrieved from the old alliance with evil without the wholesale destruction of the original myth. Ortiz has removed the masculine perspective in order to replace it with the feminine, and if the de-mythification has not managed to create a heroine without faults, at least it has given rise to a feminine “voice” in biblical writing and analysis—without general consensus, without destructive anarchy. Through “Eve,” Ortiz has denuded the masculine “myth” at the point of Genesis.

University of Toronto

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NOTES

- 1 All translations taken from the text of "Eva" are my own and tend towards the literal with stylistic changes being made only for purposes of clearer comprehension, as in cases of idiomatic equivalency. In such cases, literal translations will be provided in further footnotes.
- 2 In this context Ortiz plays with the double connotation of the word "remo" in its pluralized form. While the wings of the bird are given the image of oars, the bird is "sailing through the air" with the implied figurative associations, it is also a direct replacement for the word "limb" or "wing" as part of its dictionary definition. In this way she calls attention to the original association of an accepted cliché, which effects a return to the original "naming."
- 3 In this particular passage, the narrator is reminding Eve of her desire to acquire the leopard's skin to protect herself from the cold, presented as a more practical decision in opposition to Adam's "codicia" (covetousness).
- 4 Literally, "avenues to be constructed."
- 5 Literally, this last expression would be "Abel—the little woman."
- 6 "Ave" is a simple inverted play on the Spanish name for Eve, "Eva." It fulfills the double purpose of being a reference to the inversion of Eve to her former state through Abel, who has named her Ave, and also as a reference to the "bird" with its ability to soar freely beyond man's constructed limits.