

Philosophy of Religion; Myth

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Examples of analogy and myth ARE present in poetry, but, perhaps in no poem so consistently than that of Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.s' The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we Breathe, written in May, the Catholic Christian month of Mary, 1883.

The analogy which this poem develops is:

<u>sun</u> in relation to the earth::	<u>God</u> in relation to human beings
is to air	as God is to Mary

Albert Camus comments on myth within his collection of essays entitled The Myth of Sisyphus, written in 1942 and within the chapter titled "The Myth of Sisyphus": "Myths are made for the imagination to breathe life into them" (p. 89).

Mercia Eliade notes within his The Sacred and the Profane that the "religious" person "...cannot live except in an atmosphere impregnated with the sacred..." so such a person finds "...a large number of techniques for consecrating space" (p. 28) One such technique is the use of "signs". As Eliade observes:

Every sacred space implies a hierophany, an irruption of the sacred that results in detaching a territory from the surrounding cosmic milieu and making it qualitatively different. (p. 26)

Within **Genesis** (28:12-19), Jacob saw a ladder reaching from earth to heaven, with angels ascending and descending on it and heard **Yhwh** say to him: "I am the Lord God of Abraham".

Hopkins looks upon the air as that natural agent which enables the sun's light to be beneficial and nutritional to the earth rather than destructive and detrimental. The inspiration for this comparison seems to be within the "Prologue" to John's Gospel wherein the Second Person of the Blessed Trinity, the Son as the "Word made flesh" is compared to the light entering into the darkness, but the darkness did not receive this light:

In the beginning was the Word the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things came to be, not one thing had its being but through him. All that came to be had life in him and that life was the light of men, a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness

could not overpower...The Word was the true light which enlightens all men and he was coming into the world. He was in the world which had its being through him and the world did not know him. He came into his own domain and his own people did not accept him...The Word was made flesh. He lived amongst us and we saw his glory, the glory that is his as the only Son of the Father, full of grace and truth. (John, 1:1-14 *passim*, The Jerusalem Bible, Doubleday, Garden City, NY, 1966)

Hopkins looks at the natural Sun and sees God, as the Old Testament **Yhwh** and then looks at the natural air and sees Mary, the Mother of the New Testament God, Christ, the Son of Man as the filter for the Sun's harsh and dangerous rays. If we look at this comparison in relation to the oriental world and the **Tao** of Lao-tzu, we note two things: first, the major "goddess" of Taoism about 310 B.C. is Zhuangzi who "obtained the **Tao**", that is, received the **Tao** within herself! She became the divine personification of **yin**, the so-called female symbol within the world and was honored throughout the Han dynasty from 206 B.C. to 220 A.D. and thereafter as the patron deity of women and as a teacher who controlled the length and quality of people's lives. The Jesuit and missionary to China (1584), Matteo Ricci, S.J. accepted Zhuangzi, comparing her to Mary, the New Testament Mother of God.

The fascinating parallel which Hopkins draws between Mary and the air and God and the sun echoes the oriental relationship of **yin** to **yang**, **yin**, the feminine being the air through which the sun as the **yang** penetrates to warm the Mother earth and to nurture life therein. The interesting fact in this oriental comparison when compared to John's "Prologue" is that the darkness (or absence of light) obstructs the light which is Christ as the "Word made flesh", that is, "his own received him not". However, thanks to Mary's agreement to become the Mother of God in Luke's New Testament Annunciation (1: 26-38), that is, Mary opening herself up to this Word, "obtaining" the Son of God as man, the Word of God penetrated the dark air which had obstructed God coming to human beings. So, one could construe, as Hopkins did, Mary as a **yin**, that is, as air through which the Old Testament **Yhwh** "God of old" comes to human beings through this human being, Mary within the New Testament and "Through her we may see him/Made sweeter, not made dim,/And her hand leaves his light/Sifted to suit our sight..."

So, Hopkins sees this natural air as a sign of Mary's (as the mother of Christ) new, New Testament relationship between

God and humans and reciprocally between humans and God.
Therefore, Mary becomes "...an irruption of the sacred...":

This air, which, by life's law,
My lung must draw and draw
Now but to breathe its praise,
Minds me in many ways
Of her who not only
Gave God's infinity
Dwindled to infancy
Welcome in womb and breast,
Birth, milk and all the rest
But mothers each new grace
That does now reach our race..."

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*The Blessed Virgin compared to the Air we
Breathe*

Gerard Manley Hopkins, S.J.
May, 1883

Wild air, world-mothering air,
Nestling me everywhere,
That each eyelash or hair
Girdles; goes home betwixt
The fleeci-est, frailest-flixed
Snowflake; that's fairly mixed
With, riddles, and is rife
In every least thing's life;
This needful, never spent,
And nursing element;
My more than meat and drink,
My meal at every wink;
This air, which, by life's law,
My lung must draw and draw
Now but to breathe its praise,
Minds me in many ways
Of her who not only
Gave God's infinity
Dwindled to infancy
Welcome in womb and breast,
Birth, milk, and all the rest
But mothers each new grace
That does now reach our race -
Mary Immaculate,
Merely a woman, yet
Whose presence, power is

Great as no goddess's
 Was deemèd, dreamèd; who
 This one work has to do -
 Let all God's glory through,
 God's glory which would go
 Through her and from her flow
 Off, and no way but so.

I say that we are wound
 With mercy round and round
 As if with air: the same
 Is Mary, more by name.
 She, wild web, wondrous robe,
 Mantles the guilty globe,
 Since God has let dispense
 Her prayers his providence:
 Nay, more than almoner,
 the sweet alms' self is her
 And men are meant to share
 Her life as life does air.
 If I have understood,
 She holds high motherhood
 Towards all our ghostly good
 And plays in grace her part
 About man's beating heart,
 Laying, like air's fine flood,
 The deathdance in his blood;
 Yet no part but what will
 Be Christ our Savior still,
 Of her flesh he took flesh:
 He does take fresh and fresh,
 Though much the mystery how,
 Not flesh but spirit now
 And makes, O marvelous!
 New Nazareths in us,
 Where she shall yet conceive
 Him, morning, noon, and eve;
 New Bethlems, and he born
 There, evening, noon, and morn -
 Bethlem or Nazareth,
 Men here may draw like breath
 More Christ and baffle death;
 Who, born so, comes to be
 New self and nobler me
 In each one and each one
 More makes, when all is done,
 Both God's and Mary's Son.
 Again, look overhead

How air is azurèd;
 Oh how! Nay do but stand
 Where you can lift your hand
 Skywards: rich, rich it laps
 Round the four fingergaps.
 Yet such a sapphire-shot,
 Charged, steepèd sky will not
 Stain light. Yea, mark you this:
 It does no prejudice.
 The glass-blue days are those
 When every color glows,
 Each shape and shadow shows.
 Blue be it: this blue heaven
 The seven or seven times seven
 Hued sunbeam will transmit
 Perfect, not alter it.
 Or if there does some soft,
 On things aloof, aloft,
 Bloom breathe, that one breath more
 Earth is the fairer for.
 Whereas did air not make
 This bath of blue and slake
 His fire, the sun would shake,
 A blear and blinding ball
 With blackness bound, and all
 The thick stars round him roll
 Flashing like flecks of coal,
 Quartz-fret, or sparks of salt,
 In grimy vasty vault.
 So God was god of old:
 A mother came to mould
 Those limbs like ours which are
 What must make our daystar
 Much dearer to mankind;
 Whose glory bare would blind
 Or less would win man's mind.
 Through her we may see him
 Made sweeter, not made dim,
 And her hand leaves his light
 Sifted to suit our sight.
 Be thou then, O thou dear
 Mother, my atmosphere;
 My happier world, wherein
 To wend and meet no sin;
 Above me, round me lie
 Fronting my froward eye
 With sweet and scareless sky;
 Stir in my ears, speak there

Of God's love, O live air,
 Of patience, penance, prayer;
 World-mothering air, air wild,
 Wound in thee, in thee isled,
 Fold home, fast fold thy child.

In Eliade's words, through this poem "The... cosmic levels, earth, heaven... have been put in communication" (p. 36) so "...our world is holy ground because it is the place nearest to heaven, because from here, from our abode, it is possible to reach heaven; hence our world is a high place" (p. 39). Therefore, "...the world becomes apprehensible as world, as cosmos, in the measure in which it reveals itself as a sacred world" (p.64) So, Hopkins, as a "religious man":

...can live only in a sacred world because it is only in such a world that he participates in being, that he has a real existence. (p.64)

Religious man's profound nostalgia is to inhabit a 'divine world', is his desire that his house shall be like the house of the gods, as it was later represented in temples and sanctuaries. In short, this religious nostalgia expresses *the desire to live in a pure and holy cosmos, as it was in the beginning, when it came fresh from the Creator's hands* (p. 65).

Hopkins restates creation through his view of redemption within this poem. Eliade's comment is: "The myth relates a sacred history, that is, a primordial event that took place at the beginning of time, ab initio". (p. 95)