

Dark Fire: Dimensions of Luminosity in the Chthonic

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Abstract. This paper is an exploration of the light and darkness that exists in chthonic space, beginning with an analysis of early Western mythology, notably the Sumerian myth *The Descent of Inanna*. We examine how, for ancient cultures, the descent into the darkness of the Underworld maintained the homeostasis of the cosmos, enabling the continuation of the cycles of nature and the fertility of the land.

The premise that the world of fire below the earth is a crucial polarity (and mirror) to the sky above is examined, and, using myths and fairy tales as a navigational tool, I explore the Jungian idea that what is exiled turns into a monster, the below transforming over time into ‘hell’ and ancient deities becoming demons and witches.

Introduction

The relationship between human beings and the world beneath our feet is an ancient one. Indeed, the earliest records of our existence reveal that our Palaeolithic ancestors travelled on journeys lasting for several hours deep underground, descending via difficult terrain, to take part in religious ceremonies.¹ For example it can be deduced from findings and artwork in the caves at Lascaux in France that these were holy places. We also know that our ancestors carried with them lamps crafted from sandstone – using juniper wicks saturated with fat, they took the light of fire into the darkness below ground.²

In the modern world, where light is equated with knowledge, with goodness, with the divine, those choosing to go into the darkness and

¹ Mircea Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas, From the Stone Age to the Eleusinian Mysteries* (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1981), p.17.

² Clayton Eshelman, *Juniper Fuse* (Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2003), p.182.

shadows of the underground for religious ceremonies would arouse suspicions of ill motives. The Underworld then becomes a mysterious place to be feared and avoided. As Robert Macfarlane says, an ‘aversion to the underland is buried in language... depth is despised’.³ In the dark then, there is confusion, lines are blurred, nothing is clear. James Hillman says of black that it ‘negates the “light”... dissolves meaning and the hope for meaning’.⁴ Jay Griffiths notes in an essay on dusk that, ‘sight, ruler of the senses during daytime and untrickable at noon, is now, at dusk, losing power to the insurrection of other senses’.⁵

But the idea of the underworld has not always had such fearful connotations. Indeed, the notion of descent has been a key component of Western mythology, which we will use to explore gradients of light and darkness in chthonic space and how these have been perceived over human history. For, as Robert Bringhurst points out, ‘mythology is a kind of science in narrative form’.⁶ I will further consider these journeys in relation to the evolution of consciousness and look at how, for the people of the first Western civilisations, rituals around descent into the Underworld were an essential element in the maintenance of the homeostasis of the cosmos, and a crucial aspect of the cyclical nature of time and the universe. Moving into the modern world through the medium of alchemy and fairy tales, we will further explore the Jungian idea of the exiled becoming monster.

The beginning: animal as sacred

It is clear that our Palaeolithic ancestors had a religious life, although there are few clues about its precise nature. As Mircea Eliade says, ‘beliefs and ideas cannot be fossilised’.⁷ From the little evidence we have, we can only hypothesize on the deep mysteries of the prehistoric Underworld, of the connection with the divine as the flickering flames on rock walls brought to life the animals and human/animal hybrids that had been painted there. This underground world is now of the distant past, but for generations of our ancestors over tens of thousands of years, these caves were sacred, likely to have had their own life force infused with divine influence: Eliade suggested there was, across an area between the Urals and the Atlantic, a

³ Robert Macfarlane, *Underland* (Milton Keynes: Penguin, 2019), p.13.

⁴ James Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology*, uniform edition of the writings of James Hillman book 5 (2011; repr. Putnam: Spring Publications, 2014), p.87.

⁵ Jay Griffiths, *Twilight* (Devon: Hedgespoken Press, 2018), p.3.

⁶ Robert Bringhurst, *A Story as Sharp as a Knife: The Classical Haida Mythtellers and their World* (1999; repr. Columbia: Douglas and McIntyre, 2011), p.287

⁷ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, pp.8–9.

single ideological system, what he called a ‘religion of the caves’, that was ‘dominated by the mystical relations between man and animal’.⁸

Eshleman and others have suggested that this relationship was a ‘proto-shamanism’.⁹ The caves, then, were likely to have been gateways to the spiritual realm of the animal gods that kept our ancestors alive. Indeed, Eshelman notes that many engravings and paintings used natural rock formations, giving the impression that the animals were emerging from the rock itself.¹⁰

There is also evidence that in many prehistoric cultures there was a chthonic deity in the form of a great animal mother. It was often animals who made the world: as Tim Ingold wrote, it was animals who ‘originally laid down the order and design of human social existence’.¹¹ Indeed, we find a common thread in indigenous cosmologies that wild prey as the divine embodied offers itself to be killed as a gift from the animal mother, but will return, perennially renewed.¹² In the flickering light of the caves, then, it is highly probable that there was a life-affirming relationship between our ancestors and the divine, and early Underworld deities were in animal form. As Eliade points out, equally important as the sky and the celestial in prehistoric mythology were the ‘revelations’ of the night and darkness, of killing and of death.¹³

In Eshleman’s view, ‘the beginning of the construction of the Underworld takes place in Upper Palaeolithic caves’, where we also find the first evidence, he says, of human psyche.¹⁴ He postulates that being in the cave was like a return to the womb, but that the cave art that followed indicated a different kind of birth – that of the animal separating from the human. To be in Hades, he says, is ‘where the human resides in the animal’.¹⁵

Jean Gebser has a similar view, suggesting that what he calls the ‘ritual of the hunt’ formed the ancient origin of our culture, and that Homo sapiens escaped this animal self, what he calls the ‘binding force of his merger with

⁸ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, p.17.

⁹ Eshelman, *Juniper Fuse*, p.xvii.

¹⁰ Eshelman, *Juniper Fuse*, p.xviii.

¹¹ Tim Ingold, ed., *What is Animal*, 1-16 (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.12.

¹² Paul Shepard, *The Others: how animals made us* (Washington DC: Island Press 1996), p.35.

¹³ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas*, p.27.

¹⁴ Eshelman, *Juniper Fuse*, pp.16–17.

¹⁵ Eshelman, *Juniper Fuse*, p.6.

nature', in the move towards consciousness.¹⁶ Gebser charts the evolution of consciousness through prehistoric art and archaeological discoveries, suggesting that the importance of the nocturnal, the mysterious unseen below us, receded as the mind, 'presenting itself in the brightness of day', took precedence.¹⁷ This ritual journey to the Underworld by our Palaeolithic ancestors, then, may have been part of a process of negotiation with a natural world that Homo sapiens were separating from. Its preservation in mythology is significant – it is a remnant, a remembering perhaps, of our Palaeolithic past. For Gebser, this ritual descent represents the expression of the integration of the soul which brings light to consciousness.¹⁸ He further notes that the word hell and brightness have the same Indo-Germanic root:¹⁹

Old English *glæm* "a brilliant light; brightness; splendor, radiance, beauty," from Proto-Germanic **glaimiz* (source also of Old Saxon *glimo* "brightness;" Middle High German *glim* "spark," *gleime* "glow-worm;" German *glimmen* "to glimmer, glow;" Old Norse *glja* "to shine, glitter, glisten"), from PIE root **ghel-* (2) "to shine."²⁰

From this point of view, then, descent into darkness ultimately illuminates.

Cosmic rhythms

Moving forward in human history to the first known civilisations, there is some evidence about the evolution of the human relationship with chthonic space. Among the earliest written works, carved in cuneiform on clay tablets in ancient Sumer, is the poem/myth of the descent of Inanna (known in other iterations as Ishtar). She was the Queen of Heaven and Earth, the Morning and Evening Star, and Sumer's 'most beloved and revered deity'.²¹ These tablets, which had lain buried for 4000 years, were excavated and brought into the light of the modern world at the turn of the

¹⁶ Jean Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1985), pp.50–51.

¹⁷ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.174.

¹⁸ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.72.

¹⁹ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.193.

²⁰ 'Brightness', The On Line Etymological Dictionary, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=brightness> [accessed 24 December 2022].

²¹ Diane Wolkstein and Samuel Noah Kramer, *Inanna Queen of Heaven and Earth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1983), p.xiii.

twentieth century.²² The mythology of Inanna, who was both the goddess of love and war and hence life and death, is described by Eliade as ‘one of the most significant creations of the ancient world’.²³ In the story of her descent, Inanna undertakes a perilous journey to the Underworld, telling the gatekeeper that she has come to witness the funeral rites of Gugalanna, the husband of her older sister Ereshkigal, who is the queen of the chthonic realm. It is not mentioned in this poem, but in the Epic of Gilgamesh, it was an enraged Inanna who was responsible for this death, having sent Gugalanna, the bull of heaven, into battle to kill Gilgamesh as revenge after he had spurned her amorous advances due to her ill treatment of former lovers; but the bull of heaven is defeated and killed by Gilgamesh.²⁴

So it is, then, that Inanna, dressed in all her royal finery and with powerful objects that protect her, decides to abandon her domain in the sky to travel ‘from the great above to the great below’.²⁵ On arrival at the first of the seven gates of the underworld, she is instructed to leave behind her crown, followed by her beads, ring, sceptre, and clothes – all of the power and wisdom she has so far accumulated. Finally, she enters the palace of Ereshkigal, naked and ‘bowed low’.²⁶ But there is no welcome from her sister – Inanna is judged by the Annuna, the Underworld judges, and Ereshkigal fastens her with ‘the eye of death’.²⁷ Her corpse is hung, unceremoniously, on the wall. The morning and evening star then, is found guilty and extinguished.

This ancient mythology has been the subject of much discussion and interpretation. Mark says the story is a message on morality, about justice for Inanna’s previous bad behaviour.²⁸ Eliade’s view however, is less mundane, suggesting that Inanna intended to ‘conquer the kingdom of Ereshkigal, that is, to abolish death’.²⁹ Wolkstein looks at the journey from a Jungian point of view, suggesting it is a journey of the psyche to incorporate the ‘powers and mysteries of death and rebirth’.³⁰ It could be

²² Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, p.127.

²³ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas, volume 1*, p.64.

²⁴ Stephen Mitchell, *Gilgamesh* (London: Profile Books, 2005), pp.130–37.

²⁵ Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, p.52.

²⁶ Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, p.57.

²⁷ Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, p.60.

²⁸ Joshua Mark, ‘*Inanna’s Descent: a Sumerian tale of injustice*’ (2011), <https://www.ancient.eu/article/215/inannas-descent-a-sumerian-tale-of-injustice/> [accessed 16 February 2021].

²⁹ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas, volume 1*, p.67.

³⁰ Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, p.xvi.

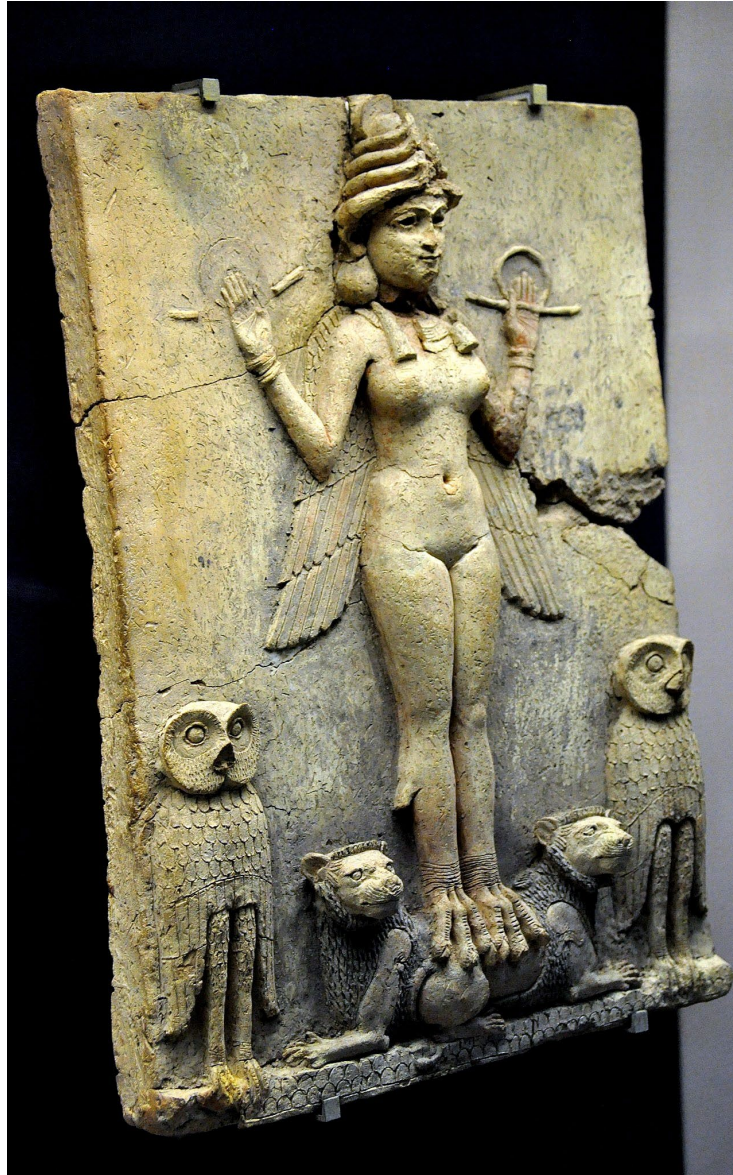


Figure 1: Queen of the Night relief from the old Babylonian period, 1800-1750 BCE.

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_of_the_Night_relief_\(also_Burney_relief\),_1800-1750_BC,_from_Iraq._The_British_Museum,_London.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Queen_of_the_Night_relief_(also_Burney_relief),_1800-1750_BC,_from_Iraq._The_British_Museum,_London.jpg)

seen as a story of initiation then, a journey that leads to greater consciousness that brings Inanna into her full divinity.³¹ What is clear from the story is that Inanna does not intend to remain in the Underworld, leaving strict instructions with her maid for her rescue. It can also be gleaned from the text that she wants knowledge – the wisdom of the underworld that can only be gained by travelling there. At the beginning of the myth she opens ‘her ear to the Great Below’ – as Wolkstein points out, in Sumerian the word for ear and wisdom ‘is the same’.³² For the Sumerians then, it would seem that there was a wisdom was not equated with sight, but with hearing. Indeed, in the darkness of the Underworld, the ear is more important than the eye.

Gebser, who refers to the period of the dawning of individual human consciousness as the magic period, says it ‘is not the Sun-related eye but the labyrinthine ear that is the magic organ... the labyrinth represents the cave-like nocturnal darkness of dormant consciousness. In this myth it is the eye, an organ associated with light and consciousness, that brings about the death of Inanna, but it is ultimately a death that brings forth a new dawn.

Thus far I have been looking at mythology from a modern perspective, from the consciousness of modernity, where myth is generally regarded as metaphor. But it is important to bear in mind that these stories are also about the cosmos itself. Inanna, as the morning and evening star, **is** the planet Venus. Reminiscent of our Palaeolithic ancestors and their lamps, the Queen of Heaven is taking her light, that which shines brightly in the morning and the evening, into the Underworld.

While in an astronomical sense, the descent of Inanna was based on observations of Venus, which orbits the Sun in phases and periodically disappears from the skies, we should bear in mind that, for the Sumerians and the other Mesopotamian cultures that followed, people lived in a sacred cosmos, in which mythology was considered to be a record of holy events.³³ Public rites and rituals not only re-enacted these events, but were considered **to be** those events, without which the cosmos would return to chaos. As Eliade explains, it was ‘a primordial mythical time made

³¹ Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, p.169.

³² Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, p.156.

³³ Erica Reiner with David Pingree, *Babylonian Planetary Omens*, part 1, The Venus Tablet of Ammisaduqa, Enuma Anu Enlil, tablet 63 (Malibu, CA: Undena Publications, 1975); Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane: the Nature of Religion* (New York: Harvest, 1963).

present', where time was reborn with each cycle.³⁴ We see in the descent of Inanna then, not just the celestial phases of Venus, but a sacred partnership between the heavens and the Underworld bonded by divine luminosity as she moved through the cycle. We see her light gradually tempered as she disrobes in her descent, before being finally extinguished by Ereshkegal's eye of death. But she is re-ignited (notably thanks to Enki the god of Wisdom).

Inanna then, becomes triadic, incorporating not only Heaven and Earth, but also now the Underworld. Her domain, as morning and evening star, is the one of beginnings and endings, of shadowy luminosity, the light of the dream, and of the shape shifting flicker of a candle. Her wisdom is deepened to incorporate the dark mysteries which lie in the chthonic realm. Indeed, we note that the Greek word Hades is from the verb 'to see', representing, says Gebser, that which 'is invisible and hidden from sight'.³⁵

For Mesopotamian cultures, the notion of the descent of celestial bodies, which rest in the Underworld to re-emerge in the next part of their cycle, is seen throughout mythology. For example, Inanna's twin brother the Sun god Utu (also known as Shamash), who was the bringer of divine justice as well as light, rested in the Underworld each night, being woken by his wife, who is the dawn, to traverse the sky. And Nergal, god of war and destruction becomes husband to Ereshkigal and, in later versions, ruler of the Underworld. His descent is, like Inanna's, one of tempering, and this time the bonding is with the chthonic goddess which ultimately protects crops against the destructive side of the Sun. As Marie Louise von Franz notes, if the Sun stands still it burns life to death.³⁶ The Underworld then, is an essential aspect of the cycles of the cosmos.

For Inanna, although she is brought back to life, there are lasting repercussions to her descent. In the next section of the mythological cycle, it is Inanna's husband Dumuzi who must take her place in the Underworld, where he then shares a 12-month seasonal cycle with his sister. For the Sumerians, the ritual connected to this mythology included the *hieros gamos* – the sacred marriage – the symbolic sexual reunion of Inanna and Dumuzi that brought the land back to life at new year.³⁷ The light of heavenly Venus then was annually bonded with the chthonic, ensuring the fertility of the land. We see here, as Eliade says, the cosmic rhythms in terms drawn from vegetable life – 'the cosmic cycle is conceived as the

³⁴ Mircea Eliade, *The Sacred and the Profane*, pp. 68–76.

³⁵ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.560.

³⁶ Marie Louise Von Franz, *Alchemy* (Toronto: Inner City Books, 1980), p.157.

³⁷ Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, pp.123–24.

indefinite repetition of the same rhythm: birth, death, rebirth'.³⁸ The Heavens, the Earth and the Underworld then, are all inextricably linked to each other and to the continuation of human life. Light brings life, descends to death, and rises again into life.

House of Death

A similar notion of descent to the Underworld is seen in Greek mythology, notably in the story of Demeter and her daughter Kore, who is kidnapped and raped by Hades, the God of the Underworld. It is Demeter, the goddess of grain, who negotiates her daughter's release, but only after fleeing Olympus and cursing the land so nothing grows. But because Kore is tricked into eating some pomegranate seeds in the Underworld, she has to return there for three months each year as its queen, known thereafter as Persephone.³⁹ Part of this mythology sees Demeter imparting the set of religious rites known as the Eleusinian Mysteries that gave initiates the secrets of the journey to the Underworld, the secrets of death.⁴⁰ Although, as the name suggests, we know little of what these mysteries entailed, Eliade speaks of torch lit processions and underground passages, concluding that these rituals were rooted in older goddess based agricultural practices that were superseded by the male gods of the Greek pantheon.⁴¹

Indeed, as we have seen, in ancient Sumer the ruler of the Underworld was the revered goddess Ereshkigal, and it was she who is praised at the closing of the Descent of Inanna.⁴² Her domain is the 'House of Death, of Darkness, of Decay, of Dust', a place of the unknown, with nothing to drink and only dust to eat.⁴³ We see here, too, some possible remnants of the ancient animal deities previously discussed – in the Sumerian

³⁸ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas, volume 1*, p.42.

³⁹ Hesiod, 'To Demeter', II. Lines 355-432, in *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric, including 'Works and Days' and 'Theogonis'*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1917), pp. 315-19. See also Robert Graves, *The Greek Myths* (1998; repr. London: The Folio Society, 2001), pp.93–94;

⁴⁰ Joshua Mark, 'The Eleusinian Mysteries' (2012) .

<https://www.ancient.eu/article/32/the-eleusinian-mysteries-the-rites-of-demeter/> [accessed 29 June 2019].

⁴¹ Eliade, *A History of Religious Ideas, volume 1*, pp.297–300.

⁴² Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, p.89.

⁴³ Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, p.139; Dominique Collon, *The Queen of the Night* (2005; repr. London: The British Museum Press, 2016), p.44.

Underworld, the dead had wings like birds.⁴⁴ It is also likely that Ereshkigal herself had bird-like attributes – we see what is probably a version of her in a Babylonian terracotta plaque entitled the Queen of the Night.⁴⁵ She has long downward pointing wings, her feet are the talons of a bird of a prey resting on the backs of two lions, and there are owls by her side. Owls, of course, are nocturnal and although they have good night vision, they cannot see when it is completely dark, relying on their ears to hunt at night. Indeed, the association of bird-like beings with the Underworld is common in the near east and Aegean.⁴⁶

In this period we also see an early depiction of fire connected to the Underworld, from a cylinder seal from the Akkad (c. 2330–2150 BCE), showing an Underworld goddess with rays or flames rising from her shoulders.⁴⁷ It is unsurprising that fire, a principle agent of transmutation used in purification rituals, came to be associated with the Underworld, for it holds within it a dual nature not unlike the Underworld itself, both purifying and destructive, the bringer of light and darkness. As Hillman notes, on the level of the psyche, fire takes us back to ‘our own base nature’.⁴⁸

In Ancient Greece, an early idea of fire in the Underworld was the notion that ‘sinners’ would burn in streams of lava, and the ruler of the Greek Underworld is Hades, described by Robert Graves as ‘the most hated of the gods’.⁴⁹ There are marked differences then between the Greek Underworld and that of the Sumerians. For example, in the Greek version Hades kidnaps Persephone and violates her, she does not descend through choice; there is the idea that the dead are rewarded or punished according to how they have lived their lives; and the Underworld is divided into zones, with the virtuous existing in the Elysian Plains described by Graves as ‘a happy land of perpetual day’.⁵⁰ There is an echo of older deities

⁴⁴ Collon, *The Queen of the Night*, p.44.

⁴⁵ Collon, *The Queen of the Night*, p.44.

⁴⁶ Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, p.191.

⁴⁷ Wolkstein and Kramer, *Inanna*, p.190.

⁴⁸ Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology*, p.23.

⁴⁹ Graves, *The Greek Myths*, pp.121–23 See Hesiod ‘Works and Days’ lines 151–157, in Hesiod, *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica, including 'Works and Days' and 'Theogonis'*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1917), p. 13.

⁵⁰ Graves, *The Greek Myths*, p.120 for the abduction of Persephone see Hesiod, ‘To Demeter’, ll. 75–85, in *The Homeric Hymns and Homerica, including 'Works and Days' and 'Theogonis'*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, (Cambridge Mass.:

however, in Hecate, the goddess of witches with her three bodies and three heads – that of lion, dog and mare. Graves says she has links with the older goddesses ‘supreme in heaven and earth’, but that her destructive powers came to be emphasized at the expense of her creative aspects.⁵¹ But, as Graves wrote, even Zeus himself never denies her the ancient powers to bestow or withhold from mortals any desired gift.⁵² We see this echo too in Medusa, who has snakes for hair and tusks for teeth, which Eshelman says illustrates the ‘animal adhesion’ giving way.⁵³

Gebser describes these changes as part of the move from the Palaeolithic ‘magic’ structure, which sees the beginnings of an awareness of the cosmic cycles and of the separate individual, to the mythical structure – an ‘expression of two-dimensional polarity’ that sees an awareness of the counter pole that reached from the earth up to the Sun and the sky.⁵⁴ He says that the earth became encompassed in what he calls ‘both polar psychic realities: by the sub-terrestrial Hades, and by the super-terrestrial Olympus’.⁵⁵ When we talk of polarity here, we are not talking of opposing opposites, but of complementary ones: one, then, cannot exist without the other. With this came an awareness of the ‘internal world of the soul’, represented by a circle.⁵⁶ Gebser notes a duality over this period which can be seen in architecture, of the ‘cavern-like’ Hades reflecting ‘the nocturnal aspect, maternal mystery, shelter and the parturient principle’, with the columnar corresponding to the sky and to Olympus, expressing the diurnal aspect ‘paternal illumination, exposure, the seminal principle’.⁵⁷ The bond between these polarities, according to Gebser, is life or the soul.⁵⁸ He notes that both poles are always active, and, he says, ‘continually act in tandem

Harvard University Press, 1917), p. 195; for the Elysian Plains see Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles, (New York: Penguin 1997), Bk. IV.

⁵¹ Graves, *The Greek Myths*, p.123. For Hecate see Hesiod, ‘Theogony’, lines 410-420, *The Homeric Hymns and Homeric, including 'Works and Days' and 'Theogonis'*, trans. Hugh G. Evelyn-White, (Cambridge Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1917), p. 109.

⁵² Graves, *The Greek Myths*, p.123.

⁵³ Eshelman, *Juniper Fuse*, p.6.

⁵⁴ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.66.

⁵⁵ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.66.

⁵⁶ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.66.

⁵⁷ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.66.

⁵⁸ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.72.

as complementary powers'.⁵⁹ For him, the descent to the Underworld is crucial, revealing the 'dark polar complement of the soul's manifest light'.⁶⁰

What we see then are seismic changes in perspective over thousands of years, with what was happening in Greece around 500 BCE setting the agenda for modernity. It was the beginning of what is now known as the Axial Age, a term originated by German philosopher Karl Jaspers.⁶¹ In Greece and Asia Minor, this period saw the emergence of philosophical thinkers, a concept which now permeates popular literature on the period. For example, in Gary Lachman's account, the 'old myths concerning the creation of the world... were no longer satisfying', and questions turned instead to what the world was made of: there was an impetus, Lachman add for 'solving the mystery of existence' that remains with us today.⁶²

Jasper's Axial Age saw the major religions emerging which fundamentally changed human perceptions of the cosmos, notably Zoroastrianism, which was a precursor to, and influence on, Christianity, Islam and Judaism.⁶³ Among the central tenets of this monotheistic religion is the idea that the world is a battleground between the opposing forces of good and evil in heaven and hell, light equated with good and darkness with evil: we also see the notion of a messiah and an end-time.

For Gebser, this shift was towards what he calls the 'mental structure' which saw human beings no longer operating within the polar complements described, but 'directed towards objects and duality' and drawing energy from individual ego.⁶⁴ As Gebser argued, 'This process is an extraordinary event which is literally earth-shaking; it bursts man's protective psychic circle and congruity with the psychic-naturalistic-cosmic-temporal world of polarity and enclosure. The ring is broken and man steps out'.⁶⁵

⁵⁹ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.220.

⁶⁰ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.72.

⁶¹ Karl Jaspers, *The Origin and Goal of History* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1949).

⁶² Gary Lachman, *Lost Knowledge of the Imagination* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2017), pp.10-11.

Lachman, *Lost Knowledge*, p.11.

⁶³ Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, 3 Vols. (Leiden, New York, 1983).

⁶⁴ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.75.

⁶⁵ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.75.

Above and Below

Over this time, mythology itself becomes more chthonic, descending, in Jungian terms, into the dream world of the subconscious. As Gebser points out, myth itself is a polar complement of life, what he calls the dream of waking consciousness.⁶⁶ From this perspective, there are chthonic forces, however – pagan cornerstones of Western culture that do not disappear. An example is alchemy, which has its roots in the furnaces of the Iron Age smelters but for Jung carries the central premise of death and resurrection.⁶⁷ Central to alchemy, from the Emerald Tablet inscriptions of the ancient Egyptian alchemist Hermes Trismegistus, is the tenet: ‘The below is as the above, and the above as the below’.⁶⁸ Thus, again we see the idea that chthonic space is a crucial polarity to the sky above. The alchemical journey saw the descent to the Underworld move into the laboratory, the goal to create a ‘gold’ or the philosopher’s stone from a base material. The alchemists’ journey was one through material substance of white, red and black, the fire and water transmuting the material in the well-sealed vessel until there comes the union of opposites, *the conjunctio*, and the creation or birth of something new. Von Franz says of this process: ‘sitting in Hell and roasting there is what brings forth the Philosopher’s Stone’.⁶⁹ In the blackness of the alchemical *nigredo* then is where the magic happens. Again, we see the idea that descent brings the light of consciousness, in the case of the alchemists, represented by their ‘gold’.

It is an ancient idea, still held in the Middle Ages, that all mineral ores gestate over time in the Earth, growing like embryos, as Eliade put it, to eventually become gold, notably associated with both sovereignty and light.⁷⁰ This idea is much like Eshelman’s notion of the human psyche gestating in the darkness of the caves. Yet gold holds within it not only the idea of the luminosity of solar ascension, but so too, the essence of Chthonic luminosity, sitting as it has done beneath the earth in rocks formed billions of years ago. With it too is often found silver, which has a luminosity associated with the moon. As Hillman says, ‘gold involves us in truth and all that truth would establish by its power... Silver involves us

⁶⁶ Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, p.72.

⁶⁷ Mircea Eliade *The Forge and the Crucible* (London: University of Chicago Press, 1978); Carl Jung, *Psychology and Alchemy* (1980; repr. Hove: Routledge, 2010).

⁶⁸ Alexander Roob, *Alchemy and Mysticism* (London: Taschen, 2006), p.8.

⁶⁹ von Franz, *Alchemy*, p.254.

⁷⁰ Eliade, *The Forge and the Crucible*, p.8.

in aesthetic value, discrimination, appreciation, refinement which is also an end in itself'.⁷¹

Into the forest

But it was not only through alchemy that the rich melting pot of pagan images remained. In fairy tales, we find many fragments of the old ways. Indeed, Marie Louise von Franz argues that there is evidence that certain themes go back 25,000 years BCE.⁷² For von Franz, looking at fairy tales from a Jungian perspective, their basis comes from 'an archetypal experience', that lives deep in the subconscious, old pagan ideas united with elements from what she describes as 'the Christian field of consciousness'.⁷³ But, as she points out, white and black in mythology are not ethical designations of good and evil – both can be positive and negative.⁷⁴

In fairy tales, it is often the dark wild forest, the place of the supernatural where the witch lives, that takes the place of descent into the Underworld. Vladimir Propp wrote that fairy tales were based on initiation – a quest, a visit to the land of the dead, and regeneration.⁷⁵ As Jack Zipes says, witches 'owe their existence to Pagan goddesses'.⁷⁶ The Russian witch Baba Yaga is perhaps the best example, a powerful initiatory figure who, says Zipes, 'decides on a case-by-case basis whether she will help or kill the people who come to her hut'.⁷⁷ As Marion Woodman puts it, she is 'the light in the darkness, the life force that is transforming'.⁷⁸ Robert Bly describes her as the 'Empress of the Dead'.⁷⁹ Indeed, her hut deep in the forest rotates

⁷¹ Hillman, *Alchemical Psychology*, p.131.

⁷² Marie Louise von Franz, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales* (Boston, MA, and London: Shambhala, 1996), p.4.

⁷³ von Franz, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, p.31; von Franz, *The Interpretation of Fairy Tales*, pp.158–59.

⁷⁴ Marie Louise von Franz, *Shadow and Evil in Fairy Tales* (Boulder, CO: Shambhala, 1995), p.303.

⁷⁵ Vladimir Propp, *Theory and History of Folklore*, ed. Anatoly Liberman (Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), p.117, as quoted in Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* (1937; repr. Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), pp.66–67.

⁷⁶ Jack Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale* (1937; repr. Princeton, NJ, and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2013), p.58.

⁷⁷ Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, p.62.

⁷⁸ Robert Bly and Marion Woodman, *The Maiden Tsar* (Shaftesbury: Element, 1999), p.196.

⁷⁹ Bly and Woodman, *The Maiden Tsar*, p.41.

on chicken legs reminiscent of the Mesopotamian Queen of the Night's bird feet. She is then, a Chthonic goddess par excellence, the creator and destroyer holding within her the forces of light and darkness.

In the fairy tale *Vasilisa the Beautiful*, we see echoes of the Descent of Inanna. Bullying stepsisters send Vasilisa to Baba Yaga to get light, and after completing the tasks set her by the witch and cleverly winning her favour, she returns from the Underworld with the gift of 'a skull with blazing eyes', which subsequently burns her wicked step mother and sisters 'to ashes'.⁸⁰ Vasilisa is then free for the next part of the story that sees her eventually marrying the king. Here then, we see a negotiation with chthonic forces that through wisdom, leads to the gift of light that burns through her old life, clearing the way for a *hieros gamos* union with the king of the land.

However, while Baba Yaga retains some of the elegance of her Underworld ancestors, in the main, witches have been demonised as cruel destroyers, the exiled deities of the Underworld, returning as cruel cold creatures who devour children. Zipes says that the great success of Christianity was its 'transformation of goddesses, sorceresses and fairies into demonic and malevolent figures....'.⁸¹ This evil aspect of the witch was, says von Franz, was projected onto women in the form of the witch persecutions – as an archetype she was neglected by Christianity which, in the Middle Ages, worshipped the Virgin Mary, but did not acknowledge the dark side of the goddess.⁸² As Marion Woodman puts it: '...if we blind ourselves to the side we don't wish to see, it paradoxically appears before us in compensating horror or beauty'.⁸³

Underworld Jewels

So, we have seen then, that the idea of a religious descent through a twilight world moved from a literal one for our ancient ancestors, to a mythical notion reflecting the movement of celestial bodies and agrarian cycles that was re-enacted in ritual as part of a life affirming contract with the gods. In modernity, the notion of this journey remains, in Jungian terms, as fragments in the collective human unconscious. These remnants of our past are embedded in myth and fairy tales, the stories themselves exiled to the margins of culture.

⁸⁰ von Franz, *Shadow and Evil*, p.197.

⁸¹ Zipes, *The Irresistible Fairy Tale*, p.77.

⁸² von Franz, *Shadow and Evil*, p.126.

⁸³ Bly and Woodman, *The Maiden Tsar*, p.192.

In the modern world, the idea of an Underworld as a polar complement to the Heavens is often an alien one. However, it is notable that recent discoveries of modern science have revealed that the centre of the earth is as hot as the sun.⁸⁴ The dark fire of the Underworld then, as a dark mirror of the heavens, has made it into the annals of modern science.

But we no longer turn our ears to the great below; we have become creatures of glaring solar luminosity who defy the diurnal and seasonal cycles with artificial light which blocks out the night, the darkness and Underworld culturally imbued with connotations of evil. There are questions to be asked now about the repercussions for a culture which is deaf to the deep time murmurings of the Underworld, to the twilight space where life begins and ends and begins again. As Griffiths notes, twilight is the hour of ambiguity, of paradox⁸⁵. In the modern world then, there is no place for the mysterious, the unexplainable, the paradoxical.

It seems, however, that there is some deep contorted memory that urges us to dig into chthonic space, some instinct to descend that has turned toxic. We excavate and mine the treasures below with increasingly sophisticated technology, taking minerals and jewels that feed not our basic needs, but greed that manifests as an unending consumption of objects. So too, we drill down for the dark fire of oil, what Thom Hartmann terms 'ancient sunlight' that has been trapped in fossil fuels for 400 million years⁸⁶. It is chthonic light then, that powers our homes.

We have moved from the humility of descent with the light of a juniper wick, to a brutal excavation of the treasures of the Underworld, riches we note, that do not belong to us. As Robert Graves says 'all the riches of gems and precious metals hidden beneath the earth' belong to Hades⁸⁷. James Hillman says that when 'Gods and demons are not given their proper place and recognised they become disease'⁸⁸. It is this disease that is, perhaps, another face of the Jungian monster, the consequence of a change in perspective that began some 2,500 years ago.

⁸⁴ Colin Schultz, 'The Center of the Earth Is as Hot as the Sun' (2013), <https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/the-center-of-the-earth-is-as-hot-as-the-sun-43631207/> [accessed 2 July 2019].

⁸⁵ Griffiths, *Twilight*, p.7.

⁸⁶ Thom Hartmann: *Last Hours of Ancient Sunlight* (New York: Mythical Research Inc., 2018), pxiii

⁸⁷ Graves, *The Greek Myths*, p.121

⁸⁸ James Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology* (New York: Harper Collins, 1975), p.14.

In these times where global warming is threatening to catapult the planet back to an Ice Age, and plastic, the creation of modern alchemists birthed from fossil fuels, has the planet in a strangle hold, it is Nergal now, the midday sun at its most destructive, who is set to fasten the eye of death. In turning our backs on the chthonic, we have brought the Underworld up, waking the deep time dragons to come and live among us.

But all is not lost. The remnants of an ancient way of being in the world, the myths and stories that have travelled alongside us, could give us, as Hillman notes, 'another vantage point'⁸⁹. And as Griffiths says, twilight is a time for stories.⁹⁰ Now could be the moment then to 'set out ear to the great below', not in search of something to save us, but to pay homage to a goddess with the feet of a bird and an eye of death. For the Babylonians, she was 'the Lady of the place of sunset... a temple in the place of sunrise, the place where fates are determined'.⁹¹

⁸⁹ Hillman, *Re-Visioning Psychology*, p.159.

⁹⁰ Griffiths, *Twilight*, p.19

⁹¹ Collon, *The Queen of the Night*, pp.43-44