

Magic Realism and the Archetype in Hubert Lampo's Work

When studying magic realism in the context of Hubert Lampo's work, one has to take note of certain characteristic qualities of mythology, and also of Jung's work on the collective unconscious; in the first place because both are part and parcel of magic realism, and secondly because Lampo himself refers to them directly and indirectly, both in his novels and in discussions of his own work.

The great American mythologist and philosopher Joseph Campbell said in an interview with Bill Moyers of PBS, about the relationship between mythology and language:

"The best things can't be told because they transcend thought. The second best are misunderstood because they are the thoughts that are supposed to refer to that which can't be thought about; and one gets stuck with the thoughts. The third best are what we are now talking about; myth is that field of reference - metaphors referring to what is absolutely transcendent; what can't be known and can't be named, except in our own feeble attempts to clothe it in language. [...] The artist's function is the mythologization of the environment and the world. Artists are the myth makers of today."

In other words art, in all its forms, as well as mythology, are attempts to say in words or give expression to what cannot be said otherwise.

However, magic realism differs from more traditional forms of prose in that its relationship with mythology is, generally speaking, much more obvious than the one which Campbell is positing. In the case of Lampo, there is a very direct connection between his work and the antecedent classical myths or archetypal situations, and in some cases both.

My paper is an attempt to throw some light on how the work of Hubert Lampo, the very popular Flemish writer, relates to myths and, as I said before, to certain principles of Jung's theories on archetypes. In his essay "The Concept of the Collective Unconscious," Jung describes the collective unconscious as

"a part of the psyche which can be negatively distinguished from the personal unconscious [Freud's area] by the fact that it does not, like the latter, owe its existence to personal experience and, consequently, is not a personal acquisition. While the personal unconscious is made up essentially of contents which have at one time been conscious but which have disappeared from consciousness through having been forgotten or repressed, the contents of the collective unconscious have never been conscious, and therefore have never been individually acquired, but owe their existence exclusively to heredity. Whereas the personal unconscious consists for the most part of complexes, the contents of the collective unconscious is made up essentially of archetypes."

Concerning the archetype, Jung says that it is "an indispensable correlate of the idea of the collective unconscious," and that it indicates the existence of definite forms in the psyche which seems to be present always and everywhere.

At this point the resemblance between mythology and Jung's theories becomes very clear. Jung says in this connection:

"Mythological research calls them [the archetypes] 'motifs'; in the psychology of primitives they correspond to Levy-Bruhl's concept of 'représentations collectives', and in the field of comparative religion they have been defined by Hubert and Mauss as 'categories of the imagination.' Bastian long ago called them 'elementary' or 'primordial thoughts.' From these references it should be clear enough that my idea of the archetype - literally pre-existent form - does not stand alone but is something that is recognized and named in other fields of knowledge."

Jung sums up his theories on the archetypes, stating:

"My thesis, then, is as follows: In addition to our immediate consciousness, which is of a thoroughly personal nature and which we believe to be the only empirical psyche (even if we tack on the personal unconscious as an appendix), there exists

a second psychic system of a collective, universal, and impersonal nature which is identical in all individuals. This collective unconscious does not develop individually but is inherited. It consists of pre-existent forms, the archetypes, which can only become conscious secondarily and which give definite form to certain psychic contents."

Lampo, perhaps more than any author, and certainly more than any author I know, has widely commented on his own work in the form of complete books, hundreds of pages long, in articles, in interviews, some of which have been published, and even in radio and TV appearances. He admits his indebtedness to Jung in several places, not in the sense that knowledge of Jung's work helped him to write better novels, but in so far as it helped him to understand what was happening psychologically in his own books. He became acquainted with Jung's work, he points out, after he had already written what is his best-known novel, namely *De Komst van Joachim Stiller* (Joachim Stiller's Coming, 1960). He writes about this (I translate):

It is beyond dispute that the conclusion of *De Komst van Joachim Stiller* shows an obvious analogy with the gospel story about the disappearance of Jesus' body from the tomb. Initially I had not even given this a thought. As the story was proceeding towards its conclusion, it became unstoppable. Stiller was, clearly enough, a kind of Messiah figure. For a third generation unbeliever like me, this was a quite alarming and confusing experience. The question which immediately presented itself was: how would a liberal like me have come to write a story in which a modernized version of the sacrificial death of Jesus Christ was the central theme? To make a long story short: I found the explanation for this remarkable phenomenon in the views of the Swiss psychologist Carl-Gustav Jung (1875-1961)."

Concluding from what has been said about the relationship between literature on the one hand and mythology and psychology on the other, one can distinguish three basic forms of this relationship. Firstly, there is the form referred to above by Joseph Campbell according to which all literature is a way of forming myths, of expressing the inexpressible; it has taken the place of classical mythology. Both mythology and art can, in this sense, be seen as attempts by sensitive and artistic people to create some form of order in what appears, to creatures with limited understanding, to be chaos: art, according to this definition, is supposed to lead to a better understanding of life.

Secondly, there are authors who base their stories very directly on classical myths. They reformulate the

theme of classical myths and apply the "moral of the story" to modern situations. Lampo himself, in discussing his own work and comparing it to that of other writers, mentions as a typical example of this kind of novel, James Joyce's *Ulysses*. He uses the term "inspiration" to explain the relationship between mythology and literature in this connection.

As is well-known to countless readers, this monumental work describes one day, June 16, 1904, in the life of Leopold Bloom who lived in Dublin. The protagonist is quite easily recognizable as a modern variation of Ulysses, just as Stephen Dedalus is the modern version of Telemachos; Molly Bloom is both Calypso and Penelope, Gerty Mac Dowel is Nausicaa and Bella Cohen the double of Circe. It is also quite clear that this is what James Joyce intended; the very form of the book, according to some critics, is reminiscent of a Greek temple or even a modern Freemasons' lodge.

Another example I wish to mention, and I am certainly not the discoverer of this parallel, is Harry Mulisch's work, for example the novels *Het Stenen Bruidsbed* (The Stone Bridal Bed) and *De Aanslag* (The Assault). The way in which the protagonist in the latter novel, Anton Steenwijk, experiences time in this, in my opinion, equally monumental work is also inspired by Greek thinking, and the same can be said with regard to the structure of the novel, each element supporting and reinforcing the other. Lampo also mentions Jean Anouilh's version of *Antigone*, which he calls a beautiful work but at the same time no more than a consciously reproduced modern version of an existing play by Sophocles.

Neither of these two methods of applying the principles of classical myths, however, is what Lampo understands by magic realism. It can safely be assumed that both Joyce and Mulisch, in the first place, consciously write stories in which they wished to apply the themes of classical myths and, secondly, had a very clear picture of the total structure of their books before committing them to paper. This is not the case with Lampo's work. And so we come to what magic realism is according to Lampo's criteria. He says that he, in contrast to Mulisch, Joyce, and others, has never intentionally sat down to write a novel which would be a new version of, or resemble, or even be reminiscent of, a classical myth. In fact, he claims that he always starts to write a novel without any idea of how it is going to develop, which personae will make their appearances, what their relationship will be, and what deeper meaning it will eventually appear to have. "We cannot," he says, "open a door and go down into our unconscious as into a basement."

Lampo compares the process by which the archetypal situations and characters materialize, to an electric short-circuit. In certain circumstances, such as strong emotions or hallucinatory experiences, the unconscious sends signals in the form of symbolic images, representations or behavioral patterns to the TV screen of our consciousness. These images are related, he says, to the mythical pictures prehistoric man had of the cosmos, of his own relationship with the unknown, with life and death and with his fellow mortals. These images are "remembered" or stored in our collective unconscious. As a result of certain stimuli, these mythical images crystallize, as it were, and rise from the sedimentary level of the unconscious to the surface of the conscious, and link up there with our psyche. Here our reason somehow assumes control over them and, in the case of an author writing a novel, they become artistically integrated into the writing process. To put it in a different way: they respond to some known or unknown need of the person concerned. They come to his aid, helping him to understand the problematic situation and, hopefully, solve it for him. The author is, in yet other words, doing what his prehistoric ancestors did long ago, i.e. *creating* a myth, which is, obviously, very different from what writers like Joyce, Anouilh and Mulisch do.

Lampo, in order to describe the process of writing a magic realist novel, likes to refer to *Kasper in de Onderwereld* (Kasper in the Underworld, 1969) because he regards this novel as a typical magic realist novel and also one of his most successful ones. In a copy I was fortunate enough to receive from the author personally, he wrote (I translate): "I consider this as an example of a magic realist, that is an archetypal novel. And it is quite simple: reality + archetype = MR."

In another article he relates how he, in 1969, was approached by the Dutch Committee for the Promotion of Dutch Literature with the request to write a novel which could serve as a present to the customers of bookstores on the occasion of the Boekenweek (Week of the book) of 1969. Quite recklessly, Lampo explains, he accepted the invitation and decided to write a book, which he originally called *De Goden moeten hun getal hebben* (The Gods Must Have Their Number), later renamed *Kasper in de Onderwereld* (Kasper in the Underworld). Only after agreeing to write the novel did he realize that he found himself in a very precarious situation since he was, at the time, neither in the process of writing a book at all, nor did he feel inspired to start one; he had just finished *De Heks en de Archeoloog* (The Witch and the Archeologist). At the time he happened to be living in an area in Belgium called De

Kempem, near the Dutch border, and near a village called Geel. This village was then, and perhaps still is, known for its homes for the mentally disturbed. He tells that on a number of occasions clients of these homes had come to the house of the Lampo's to sing songs on their porch appropriate for the time of year, for example around Christmas, and for this they would be rewarded in cash. The Lampo's had often been surprised about the amount of freedom these people experienced and wondered if it never happened that they ran away.

It was exactly this question which triggered a mental/psychological process which appeared to provide the inspiration for the book which he had promised to write. In his mind Lampo saw an attractive though mentally disturbed young man, who had escaped from Geel and who was now walking down a path near the harbor of Antwerp, which at that time happened to be undergoing extensive construction changes and looked quite messy and chaotic; in the book he compares it with a moon-scape. This situation appeared to be so loaded with mythological inspiration that Lampo was able to complete the book in a matter of a few months.

Kasper, the escaped client, enters this, for the more experienced reader, more or less typical Lamponian region (typical because of its mysterious atmosphere in which literally anything can happen) and takes up residence in an old-fashioned inn. Here he is made to feel very welcome by the innkeeper's attractive young daughter (another situation not unknown in Lampo's work). At the time of Kasper's arrival, there are also many dockworkers in the inn who happen to be on strike. It must be noted that, although he shows no outward signs of any form of derangement, Kasper is in fact quite disturbed. Before his mental collapse he was a professional concert pianist and he believes, without any logical reason, that he murdered his beloved a long time ago. In spite of the fact that he knows, or rather, believes that she is dead, he hopes to find her again some day, and expects this to happen in Antwerp, where she was born. Lampo insists that this situation is completely realistic, and that therefore the novel is basically a realistic novel and not a magical one.

Soon all sorts of things happen that indicate that the place where Kasper finds himself has many characteristics of the underworld, as we know it from many classical myths. Kasper, being a professional musician, and being unable to perform in concerts, always carries a mouth organ with him. In his room in a barge, where he was put up by the innkeeper's daughter, he often plays on his instrument. In this way he attracts a seal which lives in the waters of the harbor and with whom he shares his food. By means of his music Kasper

appears to have unusual powers, over not only the seal but also over a totally unmanageable tiger from a circus and an extremely fierce dog guarding a place which looks like hell. These animals all become like lambs as long as Kasper plays on his mouth organ, allowing their keepers to handle them and do with them what they want.

There are many situations in this book which one would never encounter in more traditional or realistic novels. During one of his wanderings, for example, Kasper loses his way and is addressed by three old hags selling flowers near a graveyard. It is the middle of winter but there is a fragrance of Spring in the air around them. One of them is knitting and informs Kasper that she has a feeling that there is a lot of truth in the traditional belief that every time she accidentally drops a stitch, somebody dies - another over-obvious reference to a classical myth. In the graveyard itself, which he had not intended to visit, he has a vision of a parade of all the people he remembers from his youth, including his own parents. The parade continues as long as he keeps playing on his mouth organ.

The keeper of the graveyard informs Kasper that he is the keeper of the dead and that his and Kasper's paths simply had to cross sometimes, a statement which neither Kasper nor the reader quite understands. "It is not my task to discourage you," he explains, "on the contrary, it is my task to reassure you, to tell you to keep on searching, without losing any time, in the area whose supervision has been entrusted to me." He continues his wanderings in this utterly inhospitable place, walking along fields with buildings which he describes as "ten dode opgeschreven" (doomed); there is a junk yard full of wrecked cars with lamps like dead eyes, drearier than the cemetery he has just left. The stench of a garbage dump hits him as though it were committing an obscene assault on his life. He also observes all kinds of ghost-like figures moving about in the reddish smoke clouds of unexplained fires.

At this point neither Kasper nor the reader is surprised when Kasper finds himself near a building which he at first takes to be a tennis club, but which turns out to be the main building of the International Metal Industry, whose employees are having a staff party. The doorman mistakes Kasper for the President of the firm dressed up as a vagrant, and invites him to join them. After taking care of the Great Dane by playing on his mouth organ, Kasper enters the room. The scene that meets his eyes he can only describe as hell.

"This is hell, he thought. Soundlessly his lips pronounced the words. This is hell. Never would I have been sure that the

world of the dead resembled the world of the living. But this is hell. The absolute limit of humiliation and decay ... Why should I not shout like a madman? Or is it enough to feel like a slug which somebody has strewn some salt on and which is now disintegrating into non-existence?"

He immediately recognizes the perfectly built striptease dancer:

"It was terrible. Never had he thought deeply about the conditions in which he would find her. ... Never had he counted on having to sit and watch, paralyzed and speechless, while his beloved and worshipped chimera would be performing a striptease in this Godforsaken corner of the earth, hurting him to the deepest of his being."

Later, he actually meets his Eurydice and speaks with her, telling her that he has not come to wrong her but to save her. To make a long story short, she follows him while he plays on his mouth organ, or at least he believes she is following him, to the world of the living, which he believes resembles a place in ancient Greece. When he is killed in the heat of a demonstration of striking dock workers, he feels no pain, falling forward, arms spread, smiling, his fingers clasping his mouth organ.

Lampo claims he has not written a story that would in any way resemble the Orpheus and Eurydice myth. Even the fact that Kasper calls his beloved Eurydice was more or less a coincidence, he says. *Kasper in de Onderwereld* is supposed to be still primarily a realistic novel in which so-called mythical short-circuits take place. A multi-dimensional reality penetrates, unwilling by the author, the division between the conscious and the unconscious; one could also call it a fusion of reality and dream. Not for a second did he even think of choosing the Orpheus myth as his point of departure, he claims again and again. He planned to write a story of an escaped client from a mental institution which only gradually, unintentionally and unconsciously developed itself, as it were, into a story which is to be understood as a parallel to the classical myth. The contrast between the rural and peaceful surroundings of the village in De Kempen and the hectic life in the city, to be sure, is fertile ground for all kinds of situations with potentially mythological ramifications.

The incrustation, as he calls it, of the mythical reality onto the everyday reality took place during the process of writing. Moreover, Lampo states that this process of incrustation could in principle take place during the period of incubation, i.e. before the author actually starts writing, when he is still dreaming about the book. This did indeed happen in *De Heks en de Archeoloog*.

It was clear to him, he says, that the beautiful woman who is the protagonist in this book, might, under the influence of certain conditions, acquire qualities that in the past would have been attributed to witches. For this and other reasons Lampo would, in retrospect, have preferred the name mythic realism rather than magic realism to describe his work; but whatever name one gives to it, this kind of novel can never be written by consciously building on an existing myth. This would go against the principles of magic realism which by definition, like Jung's archetypes, unconsciously rise to the level of reality.

This happens also, to give another example, in *De Komst van Joachim Stiller*. Freek Groenevelt, the main character, longs for someone who can deliver him from some danger or fear. In response to this emotion, the archetype of the savior rises to the level of his conscious and takes his place in the real world, in the form of a real person who physically appears on the scene only in the last pages of the book. The contact between the conscious and the unconscious has caused a short-circuit. Stiller arrives at the station and is killed by a truck, thus giving his life, serving as a scapegoat, for Freek: a new dimension is added to the three-dimensional Newtonian reality.

Lampo says he wrote this novel at a time when he was going through a period of deep depression. He unconsciously projected his emotions onto his main character who, in other words, shared his psychological troubles. The specific form of the archetype, he says, is determined by the culture in which he happens to have grown up. The mythological concept condensed into something the mind of Lampo could handle. A Mohammedan or a Jew, for whom Christ in no way represents a savior, would have experienced a different embodiment of the same archetype. Religion as such has nothing to do with it, says Lampo, because all people participate in the collective unconscious - it is a part of every person's psychic personality, just as genes and chromosomes are part of everybody's physical makeup.

Because of his method of beginning a story, leaving it open for anything to happen, Lampo seems to me to invite certain basic human emotions to dictate the proceedings; the writer is therefore to a large extent subject to the emotions that he happens to be experiencing at the time. This probably explains why the number of types, both of persons and situations, is rather limited in Lampo's books. Beautiful women, witches, a savior, coincidental meetings, and an endless number of strangers who turn into friends who take a very personal interest in the main character, abound in Lampo's books. All these situations must obviously relate some-

how to the circumstances and personality of their creator, in the widest sense of the word, and it is therefore not surprising that the same "characters" and situations appear again and again in Lampo's work. The main character can be described as the Parsifal-type, the romantic dreamer, the believer in a paradise-like state of which another typical Lamponian archetype, namely the anima or perfect woman, necessarily forms an integral part. The way in which such a vision reflects on the author hardly requires explanation. It might be of some interest to know that Lampo dedicated *Kasper in de Onderwereld* to Luc (or Lucia), his third wife, with whom he is now happily living in his almost paradise-like little home in Grobbendonk, just outside Antwerp.

A certain amount of repetitiousness is not necessarily to be considered as a weakness or something one would accuse Lampo of. The work of the most prolific and famous writers shows this tendency. Even in the novels of the great Simon Vestdijk, whether they be historical or otherwise, we find stereotyped characters, the same antagonists confronting each other in very similar situations, and with very much the same outcome in most of his books. They are, just as in the case of Lampo, reflections of the personality and circumstances of the author. Indeed, I believe this principle to hold true for all writers: even the best of their works often appear, on close inspection, to be variations on a theme. Therefore Lampo may be regarded, along with the best, as having enriched Dutch literature in a very unique way, and we would have been the poorer without his work.

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