

## The Recurrent Quest: Demeter and Persephone in Modern-Day Ireland<sup>1</sup>

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In the outskirts of Athens, in an area now disfigured by urbanisation and smoke from nearby cement factories, lies a site that was once sacred to the entire Hellenic world, and to where pilgrims thronged in vast numbers to be initiated into a cult that claimed to 'hold the entire human race together'.<sup>2</sup> This was Eleusis, the site of the famous Eleusinian Mysteries, where the cult of the Two Goddesses, Demeter and Persephone, was celebrated for perhaps as long as two thousand years. The importance of this cult for the Greeks cannot be underestimated. Indeed, it was considered to hold the human race together not just because people came from all corners of the world to be initiated, but also because the Mysteries seemed to offer the key to the whole question of human existence. In 364 AD, a Roman official, an initiate, pleading the case of the Mysteries before the Catholic emperor Valentinian, who wished to abolish them, clearly stated that life (*bios*) would become 'unliveable' (*abiotos*) if the celebration were to cease.

The Mysteries may have begun in the Mycenaean period (15<sup>th</sup> century BC) as a local cult closed to strangers. However, by the time of Pericles (5<sup>th</sup> century BC), Eleusis was clearly under the hegemony of Athens, and the pan-Greek importance of the cult no doubt served Athenian political ambitions. Certainly by 480 BC, vast numbers were involved, for Herodotus speaks of thirty thousand initiates taking part at the time of the Persian Wars, and both Euripides and Aristophanes describe vast

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<sup>2</sup> Most of the information about the Eleusinian Mysteries in this section is taken from C. Kerényi, *Eleusis: Archetypal Image of Mother and Daughter*, trans. R. Mannheim (Princeton University Press, 1967).

thongs whose cries and dancing made heaven, earth and the underworld resound. By this time, it seems, initiates were required to undergo preliminary purification at the Lesser Mysteries of Agrai in the Spring, before proceeding to the Great Mysteries of Eleusis, which took place in the Autumn month of Boedromion, and would last a week or more. Here there were two stages of initiation: the first, *myêsis* (from the verb *myeo*, meaning 'to close (the eyes)' and implying initiation into something secret) involved a great procession of initiates to the Telesterion, where the second stage of *epopteia* (the seeing) was attained.

What exactly was seen during the *epopteia* remains open to conjecture, given the great secrecy shrouding this part of the ceremony. It may have involved the display of sacred objects and sights, and perhaps the representation of some kind of mystic drama in which the abduction of Persephone and wanderings of Demeter were enacted.<sup>3</sup> Certainly there seems to have been singing, torch-waving in the darkness, the announcement by the Hierophant of the birth of a divine child, and, according to Hippolytus, the silent display of a cut ear of wheat at the climax. However, it was clearly some great spiritual experience, which caused participants to feel that they had been completely transformed, and which is described in the most transcendental terms in the classical sources. Kerényi (1967:95-96) likens it to the *visio beatifica* of the Christian mystical tradition, the *telos* of all existence, which conferred supreme happiness on the initiate. Even the name 'Eleusis' testifies to its role as supreme goal: it refers to the underworld in the favourable sense (etymologically related to 'Elysion'), and means 'arrival'.

The cult entered into demise when an illegitimate hierophant usurped the sacred role, an act said to have led to the destruction of the sanctuary by the Goths in

395 AD. Thus ended two thousand years of spiritual activity, and signalled the collapse of the whole world for the Greeks. Thereafter began a whole new era, and the myth of Demeter and Persephone, around which the Mysteries had revolved, took on a very different form.

### ***The Myth***

The myth upon which the Mysteries of Eleusis were based told the story of the kidnap of the goddess Persephone by Hades, god of the underworld, and the quest of her mother Demeter to retrieve her, culminating in the famous compromise instigated by Zeus by means of which Persephone spends part of the year with her husband below ground, and the rest above with her mother. The earliest reference to the myth is found in Hesiod's *Theogony* (c. 700BC), but the most famous and influential Greek account comes to us in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, composed by an anonymous bard and probably written down in the 7<sup>th</sup> Century BC. (The Orphic tradition contained a different version, with which Sophocles, Euripides, Aristophanes and Plato were all familiar, but unfortunately only fragments and indirect references remain).

Demeter was the goddess of the grain, and her grief at her daughter's abduction led her to withdraw all her crops from the world in protest, thus instigating a terrible famine. It is this motif that has led to her being interpreted primarily as a fertility goddess, and the disappearance of Persephone is taken as an allegory of the agricultural cycle in which the seed lies dormant in the ground for half the year, to burst forth in the spring (Frazer, 1978:517-525; Frye, 1990:136-138).

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<sup>3</sup> See H.Foley, *The Homeric Hymn to Demeter: Translation, Commentary and Interpretative Essays* (Princeton University Press, 1994:68). However, the hypothesis of the *drama mystikon* is firmly denied by Kerényi.

Later mythographers have, however, interpreted the story in other ways. The Ritual School, which holds that myth arises out of rite, rather than the reverse, have thus seen the Demeter/Persephone story as verbal manifestations of cults that probably began initially as simple behavioural sequences to which significance was attached later. While modern commentators generally avoid the finer philosophical details of the Ritual School, many continue to see the myth as having a predominantly aetiological function, explaining how Demeter and Persephone came to have the honours that they currently enjoyed in the world and simultaneously legitimising the Mysteries, which no doubt served a political function within Athen's pan-Hellenic ambitions.

To my mind, the most fruitful approach to the Demeter/Persephone myth has been the psychological perspective assumed by Jung, Kerényi and Neumann, according to which mythological figures are reflections of archetypes existing deep within the collective unconscious. Proof of the resonance of this theory is the prolific stream of feminist psychoanalytical literature produced in recent decades which give a central place to the motif of Demeter's quest for her lost child, usually interpreted as the female quest for psychic wholeness. In many cases, Hades is seen as representing patriarchal society which estranges woman from her deeper Self and enslaves her; and wholeness is interpreted as consisting of reunion with the powerful Goddess archetype. Indeed, a whole body of feminist thought is centered on the notion that, before the onset of patriarchy, there existed a universal fertility Goddess figure (who had many different manifestations) that represented the power of the feminine principle in its purest form.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This example of modern Mythopoeia finds its clearest exponents in Charlene Spretnak, *Lost Goddesses of Early Greece: A Collection of Pre-Hellenic Myths*, (Beacon Press, 1992 [1978]) and D. Leeming & J. Page, *Goddess: Myths of the Female Divine* (Oxford University Press, 1994).

Aside of scholarly attempts to interpret the myth in accordance with theory, there have been many attempts throughout the centuries to rewrite it. The most important Classical version after the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* was clearly Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, in which the tale appears as one of many loosely connected mythical episodes focusing on the theme of transformation. This was the version that most influenced the modern world, and formed the basis of many of the countless other rewritings that have been done since then.

A glance at some of these rewritings is enough to show that many different agendas have been served by this story throughout the ages, and that the narrative takes on a markedly different form according to the perspective of the author. A simple shift in narratorial focus may have the effect of radically altering the storyline, as different events come into focus and others recede or are reinterpreted. Indeed, there have been versions that focus respectively on Demeter, on Persephone and on Hades, or which are told from the standpoint of a (supposedly) impersonal omniscient narrator; and the resulting tales seem to have nothing in common with each other. After several thousand years, the total myth (and I prefer, like Lévi-Strauss, to define the myth as 'consisting of all its versions')<sup>5</sup> is now so rich in variation and detail that any number of motifs may be chosen as the basis for different re-workings.

It is for this reason that I find it difficult to subscribe to the notion that there exists a 'central mythologem' to any myth that is passed unchanged through the ages like a nugget of gold. The whole question of centrality implies privileging one motif above another, and as we will see in our study of two Irish rewritings, this changes in accordance with the perspective adopted. The very act of selecting material for inclusion, followed by the exercise of linguistic choice in the process of narration,

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<sup>5</sup> C. Lévi-Strauss, 'The Structural Study of Myth' in *Myth: A Symposium*, Ed. T. Sebeok (Indiana University Press, 1965 [1955])

necessarily involves the activation of some sort of value system on the part of the writer, a value system which will of course be defined by the cultural context to which that writer belongs. Even the most apparently neutral retelling of a tale is often replete with unconscious value assumptions, and many writers of the postmodern era have assumed a consciously demythologising stance in order to reveal dominant myths for what they are, namely a repository of prejudice and injustice that reflect the interests of the dominant group.

It is here that that our use of the word ‘myth’ (as a culturally transmitted story that embodies some communal insight or knowledge) intersects with Roland Barthes’ use of the term. He has termed it ‘depoliticised speech’, and suggests that ‘myth has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal’ (1993:142). Thus, it functions as a kind of propaganda, surreptitiously disseminating partisan value-systems under the guise of ‘Truth’. It is this definition of Myth that forms the basis of postmodernist approaches to culture, and much energy has been devoted in recent years to the systematic deconstruction of the white, patriarchal, capitalist viewpoint which was hegemonic for so long. This has been done largely through the retelling of dominant myths from unexpected perspectives.

In this work, we shall in fact be examining two such modern reconstructions of the Demeter/Persephone story, one of which sees it as a parable of private feminine experience, and another which overwrites onto it the political struggle of modern-day Ulster. As we shall see, the value-systems implied in each case are radically different from each other, and from more traditional interpretations. In fact, I shall attempt to show that, in the case of Ciaran Carson’s poem at least, the basic *fabula* of Demeter and Persephone merely serves as a backdrop onto which a completely different myth

has been superimposed, thus disintegrating any notion of a central unchanging mythologem.

### ***Modern Rewritings of the Myth***

The Demeter/Persephone myth has aroused a great deal of interest in the English-speaking world, particularly among women writers, for whom it clearly has a particular relevance. Most will have used Ovid as their source, since this work has had an immense influence on English literature generally, having been translated and retranslated many times since antiquity, into both poetry and prose. Indeed, the two poems which I have chosen for comment here are taken from a work first published in 1994 entitled *After Ovid: New Metamorphoses*, which consists of new poetic rewritings of ‘as many incidents, passages, characters from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* as (the editors) were able to find takers for in a year and a half, done into English by some forty poets from Britain, Ireland, America, Australia and New Zealand’ (Hoffman & Lasdun, 1996:xi)

It is not possible to know from the introduction whether the two poems dealing with the Demeter/Persephone theme were allocated to the poets by the editors or chosen by them; however, for anyone who knows the two poets concerned, the themes they have dealt with are remarkably in line with the respective poetic personae that have arisen in their other works. What is more, the two poets concerned are of a very similar background (both Irish Catholic of the same generation, who have elsewhere written with some poignancy or bitterness about their experiences of the political situation), and are distinguished principally by the fact of gender, which, as we have seen, is a charged issue with relation to this myth. It was their contrasting treatment of the subject, despite so many similarities of background, that motivated

me to make them the object of this study, out of the myriad versions of the myth that I could have chosen.

Eavan Boland is currently one of Ireland's foremost women writers, and has risen to prominence in recent decades particularly due to her foregrounding of women's issues. She has responded to the intensely patriarchal society of Ireland, not by asserting her right to participate in the public domain on equal terms as men, as many English feminists have done, but by defining a specifically female territory as the subject for her poetry. That is not to say that she has not written political poetry; on the contrary, her 1975 collection *The War Horse* was distinctly political in its aspirations. But even this was distinguished from the work of many male contemporaries by the choice of a suburban location for many of the poems, and the sense that there was perhaps some more domestic 'meaning' lurking behind the symbols of violence. She is particularly sensitive to the way 'Myths / are made by men' (1990:31-35; 36-38) and many of her poems urge resistance to male labels and to the idealisation of women.

Whilst sensitive to the psychological power of myth, Boland is, therefore, also engaged in demythologising, particularly as regards women's role. This is something she has in common with our second poet, Ciaran Carson, who has made it something of a crusade to attack and debunk some of the atavistic tendencies of many of his compatriots, particularly the Nobel Prize winner, Seamus Heaney, whose mythic writing he frequently deconstructs. Carson is a younger generation than Heaney, and as such, is no longer able to identify with the 'grand narratives' of the homeland. Instead he and his contemporary Paul Muldoon, are committed to subverting those narratives in order to reveal the (usually reactionary) drives behind them. Carson is thus generally perceived as a postmodern poet, sharply aware of the shifting nature of

reality and identity, and of the gap between linguistic sign and the world it describes. He is also determinedly ideological, both in his choice of thematic material and in his style, which is anti-lyrical and demotic.

Consequently, it is interesting to see how two noted deconstructors of myth have dealt with our Demeter story, and also to compare the treatment given by a male and female writer of the same generation. Both poems are given in full in the Appendix.

***The Pomegranate* –Eavan Boland** (*see Appendix 1*)

From the outset of the poem, Boland locates her focus of interest in the personal relationship between mother and daughter, thus bringing the poem into line with much of her other work, which also focuses on this very central issue for a woman.

The central mythologem is briefly summarised by her as ‘The story of a daughter lost in hell/And found and rescued there’, which, unlike Carson, does not linger on any one of the individual motifs but instead prefers the panoramic vision of the whole cycle. The next line (‘Love and blackmail are the gist of it’) continues her ‘suburban housewife’ role by presenting the story almost as if it were a television soap opera unwinding over a period of years, and with which she can identify, no matter where in the story she ‘switches on’ (‘And the best thing about the legend is/I can enter it anywhere’). She begins by envisioning (or remembering) herself as the displaced Persephone (‘..a child in exile in / A city of fogs and strange consonants’), a personal experience which has been recorded in other poems, such as ‘An Irish Childhood in England:1951’,<sup>6</sup> and then passes on to her mature role as Demeter looking for her daughter in her suburban garden. This duality of role emphasises the

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<sup>6</sup> In *‘The Journey’ and other Poems*, (Manchester: Carcanet, 1987 ).

cyclical nature of the legend that has been so stressed by feminist psychoanalysts, and suggests that the story may form part of archetypal female experience, in which Demeter and Persephone are not separate entities but merely two facets of the same eternal feminine principle.

In her role as Demeter, however, carrying her little daughter in her arms on a summer afternoon, this mother already feels the chill of the oncoming winter, and foresees the moment when her daughter will have to pass through Hades, just as she herself once did ('...I knew/Winter was in store for every leaf/On every tree on that road./Was inescapable for each one we passed/And for me...'). Hades here, I think, is, most generally, the inevitable process of growing up, of awakening to sexuality, and the loss that this entails to both mother and daughter.

Then the poem, in cinematic fashion, cuts to a different moment in time. Now it is the metaphorical winter of her daughter's teenage years, and she is lying asleep on her bed, surrounded by the paraphernalia of youth. By her side is 'her plate of uncut fruit', which suddenly becomes imbued with intense mythological significance ('The pomegranate! How did I forget it?'). This piece of fruit now becomes emblematic of everything that seduces the young girl away from the domestic comfort of her mother's home. The word is deconstructed into its component sounds ('the French sound for apple', i.e. *pomme*, and 'The noise of stone', i.e. *granite*), each of which becomes resonant with significance. The way the young girl reaches out and pulls down the fruit deliberately recalls Eve and the fruit of the Tree of Knowledge, (with the sexual significance highlighted in the penultimate line of the poem by the 'papery, flushed skin' that the girl will hold 'in her hand/And to her lips'), and the act resonates throughout the physical environment, and indeed throughout her life, like an earthquake or massive avalanche. The stony imagery is continued in the 'rocks full of

unshed tears', the 'flint-coloured' road and the 'rifts in time', giving a picture of Hell as a cold, hard, sterile place, where feelings are unable to be expressed, and where nothing grows. However, hidden within those rocks are 'diamonds', which are 'gifts' that the mother has no right to 'diminish' through her warnings or prohibitions; we have once again the sense that the passage through Hades is a necessary stage on the quest of life, and that all the mother can do is watch and wait for her daughter to emerge.

There is also the sense in the poem that the legend is somehow a kind of dream or virtual experience that the daughter is living while her physical body remains extended on the bed. To create this effect, Boland contrasts the inner world of the spirit with the demands of the physical body ('the proof/That even in the place of death,/At the heart of legend.../...a child can be/Hungry'), and juxtaposes the archetypal timeless images of rock, diamonds, legends etc, with the everyday banality of the suburbs, cars and cable television, which exist 'aboveground' in 'another world'. The effect is of some profound, universal experience being played out far beneath the temporal superficial surface of things, hence the 'beautiful rifts in time'.

All the mother can do is watch and wait until her daughter wakes up. The waiting is painful and the absence of her child difficult to bear, but the mother has to resist the temptation to warn her which will only 'defer the grief'. The girl has the right to pass through this experience. However, having already lived it herself, the mother trusts completely that her daughter will return. The repetition of 'will' in the last three lines of the poem reveal her utter faith in the cyclical nature of things, which thus affects her resolve to say nothing that might shake this precarious and necessary experience.

Consequently, Boland's poem reveals an overwhelmingly *cyclical* interpretation of the myth, and a quiet acceptance of 'death' as a stage in the constant renewal of life. This is a perspective which, as we have seen, has been very attractive to feminine commentators on the Demeter/Persephone myth, and has formed the basis of a kind of feminine Jung-based psychoanalysis aimed at reconciliation with the Self through blending with the Goddess archetype. It will now be contrasted with the male experience, which, as we shall see, is quite different.

***B) Ascalaphus by Ciaran Carson (see Appendix 2)***

What is immediately most noticeable about this rewriting as opposed to the previous one is the way that an apparently 'minor' incident in the overall narrative has been foregrounded at the expense of elements that have traditionally been considered more central to the myth of Demeter and Persephone. We cannot be sure, of course, that Carson chose this theme for himself; it may have been allocated to him by the editors of the volume. Nevertheless, the importance that has been given to it clearly illustrates the point that I wished to make in the first part of this article, namely the impossibility of selecting from the agglomeration of disparate stories that constitutes a myth, a single mythologem to consider as the central nucleus. Centrality implies perspective, and perspective implies ideology; clearly, when one places a character such as Ascalaphus at the centre of a reading/rewriting, then those figures that have traditionally been the protagonists of the myth shrink in size and move back into the periphery of the story, as both Proserpina and Ceres have done.

The opening line immediately adopts a mythophagic stance with its scornful vernacular tone ('Proserpina ate seven pomegranate seeds. So what?'). In a few words, the pomegranate is stripped of all its mystical and emotive associations, and

becomes a piece of edible vegetable matter, which the poet sees no reason why she should not enjoy. As he explains in the next line, the prohibition against this fruit has no intrinsic or universal basis, but is the result of arbitrary legislation by the 'Powers That Be', who seek merely to define the boundaries of their power. The use of 'strange fruit' alongside 'Powers That Be' is a direct reference to a poem by Seamus Heaney, which in turn recalls the Christian story of the Tree of Knowledge, and in addition, echoes the title of a famous Billy Holiday song, about the lynching of an innocent black man during the days of the Klu Klux Klan in America. This association is clearly intended to awaken the reader's sense of injustice at the arbitrary and tyrannical use of power, extended in the next line with his description of the punishment that awaits offenders: ('Who put you on a hunger strike, which if you break, you'll stay put/In the Underworld...'). The use of 'hunger-strike' is very subversive. On the superficial level, it echoes the plight of the Irish Nationalists, many of whom used the hunger strike as a weapon of protest in the struggle against British domination in the '70s and '80s (thus providing another example of the subjection of one group of people by another). However, in this poem, the roles are reversed because it is the dominant power, not the subaltern, who uses hunger as a weapon. With this reversal, we cannot but remember the Great Famine of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, in which so many people died and which has been indelibly ingrained in the collective memory of the Irish as the great instance of their oppression at the hands of the English. And we are also suddenly back in the Classical myth, with a whole new perspective on the narrative: the Power whose weapon was Hunger was of course Proserpina's mother Ceres, who caused a famine throughout the earth in her outrage at her daughter's abduction. From this changed perspective, she, rather than Hades, now appears as the tyrant, demanding obedience to arbitrary rules, and harshly

punitive when her will is crossed; indeed, the Underworld now becomes some dark prison (H-block perhaps) where she confines any who dare to oppose her rule.

The motif of hunger is continued in the next section of the poem. Proserpine had wandered, by chance, onto forbidden territory, lured, we have the impression, by the sight of food, and we have an image of her sucking hungrily like someone who has been deprived of basic nourishment (the use of the verb 'suck' with its connotations of that elementary nurturing at the breast, surely is another dig at Ceres who is supposed to be the goddess of nurture). Ascalaphus too, waiting in the shadows, is also salivating, and two of the colloquial expressions chosen to describe his informing ('Mouth' and 'spill the beans') continue the food/eating motif. The cumulative effect of these terms is of characters that have been deprived of basic nourishment and are therefore unnaturally avid and greedy. Hence, we have an inversion of the usual reading of our myth: under Ceres' dominion, there is deprivation and hunger, and it is this denial of a basic human right that leads the oppressed to wander into the forbidden zone in search of sustenance.

The description of the pomegranate also demythologises the fruit. Textually, it is usually described as red, which is of course redolent with symbolic significance, but here we have an example of Carson's technique of trying to get beneath the literary representation or symbol to the real-life referent before his eyes: for him it is 'dull-orange' – not a mythic colour but a real tangible and unglamorous hue. In this poem, it is merely food, something to satisfy hunger. Proserpina too is unglamorous. 'Splitting the cortex' is a violent way to describe the opening of the fruit, and together with 'sucked', gives the picture of a young woman whose hunger has got the better of her good manners. She is also not delicate in her responses to what she sees as an affront. After Ascalaphus' betrayal, we are told she 'slabbered on him', which is rude

and uncouth in the extreme. The verb 'slabber' is an Irish colloquial expression which would seem to have the dual meaning of 'slobber' (i.e. to spit or salivate) and to 'chatter colloquially'. Thus, we are perhaps free to understand her action either as a physical spitting of poisonous venom, or as a spitting of verbal abuse. Either way, the response is not what one would expect from the delicate Korê creature of the myth.

The description of Ascalaphus as an informer in slang redolent of the Irish political situation ('Stoolie. Pipsqueak. Mouth', and later, 'touts everywhere') is of course also highly ideological, as is the reference to the 'Troubles' and the 'no-go zone' at the end. Here the narrative is firmly situated in Northern Ireland, and we are clearly being given the perspective of the Catholics, for whom oppression and persecution have been a way of life for years. It is at this point that the story once again starts to look something like an allegory, with Ceres as England in the role of tyrant, Proserpina as some starving and uncouth Irish peasant girl, Ascalaphos as an informer, and Hades as the 'no-go zone'. The reference to the politically manipulated Hunger is also unequivocal.

In this context, I would like to hazard an interpretation of the use of 'Auld Lang Syne' in the final stanza. As any English person knows, this is a Scottish expression roughly translatable as 'Times gone by' which is sung at New Year's Eve/Hogmanay celebrations all over the English-speaking world (and particularly in Northern Ireland where the Scottish presence is strong). The song, a traditional one, famously transcribed by the poet Robert Burns in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, basically celebrates old friendships and augurs the start of a new cycle, involving a clean break with the past and the determination for change. This would seem to make a connection between the Classical myth that underlies this poem, and the old Celtic customs

revolving around death/rebirth associated with the New Year.<sup>7</sup> The final stanza of Carson's poem then gains a new, sinister significance, with the 'Beware' becoming an augury of some momentous Rebirth that will replace the 'doom' and 'gloom' of Pluto's zone.

What it seems we have, then, underlying our deconstruction of a classical myth, is the imposition of a different narrative, one that charts the course of Irish oppression and predicts redemption in the future. In fact, what is revealed here is nothing less than the Marxist or revolutionary *myth of deliverance*.<sup>8</sup> The references to the Northern Irish Troubles are unmistakable, and by activating the association to Hunger, already latent in the classical story, we pass inevitably to the Great Famine, with its unequivocally mythical role in the Irish collective memory, and thus to Nationalist ideology.

Even more strikingly than Boland, then, Carson has succeeded in rewriting this myth in line with a new agenda. Whether he is committed to this agenda or is being darkly ironic is largely irrelevant, since his intentions are ultimately iconoclastic. As Roland Barthes (1993:135) has pointed out:

‘...the best weapon against myth is perhaps to mythify it in its turn, and to produce an *artificial* myth: and this reconstituted myth will in fact be a mythology. Since myth robs language of something, why not rob myth? All that is needed is to use it as the departure point for a third semiological chain, to take its signification as the first term of a second myth’.

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<sup>7</sup> The many parallels with Celtic mythology on this score are worthy of further study. See for example the persona of Brigit, who was a maiden goddess, daughter of Dagda, and a triple muse, yet another manifestation of Kore/Demeter.

<sup>8</sup> L.Coupe in *Myth*, (London: Routledge, 1997:71-72) explains how the Marxist/revolutionary myth is essentially a secular reworking of the Christian redemption myth: ‘Both Christianity and Marxism are

By highlighting an event from the story that is not usually placed centre stage, Carson has distorted our perspective on both the Demeter myth and the narrative of Northern Ireland, and in doing so, effectively reveals the arbitrary nature of the dominant viewpoint. He mythologises in order to undermine; that is his great achievement.

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Several factors jump to prominence in this juxtaposition of two rewritings of the same myth. Firstly, there is the contrast between the *private* domain privileged by the woman poet and the *public* arena of the male version, with its overtly political overtones. This of course is a very traditional separation of gender roles, one which the first generation of feminists sought to transcend by insisting on the female right to operate on equal terms in the public sphere. However, it is a measure of Boland's progressiveness, not conventionality, that has seen her move her poetry into this realm in recent decades. She belongs to a later generation of feminist who attempt, not to 'play men at their own game' but instead to value the feminine activities of nurturing, which have for centuries been deprecated in relation to economic productivity. The very act of writing poetry about suburban life and parent/child relationships is, in this sense, subversive.

Secondly, whilst Boland has retained and emphasises the essential *cyclical* nature of the Greek tale, Carson has, by abstracting a tiny episode from the wider narrative, superimposed a *linear* structure upon it. Although, as I hope my analysis has shown, we have in his poem the sense of some imminent Rebirth into a superior unalienated mode of being, this is in no sense given as a Return; rather it is presented as Progression. To my mind, this links Carson's poem to the vast body of Quest

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myths of deliverance: both are progressive, both involve crucial choice and commitment, and both promise absolute redemption' .

literature that has been so amply studied by mythographers, and which will be discussed in more detail below.

Thirdly, it is of interest that the dark power that temporarily threatens the protagonist of each of the two poems is represented by the opposite sex. In Boland's poem, the 'papery flushed skin' of the pomegranate, which her daughter will 'hold...in her hand, /And to her lips' is an unmistakable reference to the male organ; while Carson's tyrannical power that holds all in thrall is identified with Demeter, the archetypal mother figure. There is a difference, however, in the way these respective threats are resolved. The feminine vision, we note, by accepting partial loss, also implicitly accepts incorporation of the male principle into what had previously been an all-female world. This is not the case with the masculine version. Carson's poem is full of disdain for the overpowering Demeter figure, and his scornful deconstruction of her myth combined with the ominous tone of 'Beware.../Troubles' augury for Auld Lang Syne' suggests that his Hero narrator will be ruthless in his overthrow of her when the time comes.

### ***The Demeter/Persephone Myth as Quest***

Efforts have been made to read this myth as a Quest. Some interpretations, activating Orphic versions of the story in which Demeter herself descends to the underworld,<sup>9</sup> have consequently categorised the story as a Ground Myth. Lord (1994) emphasising motifs of withdrawal, disguise, hospitality to wandering hero, recognition, disaster occasioned by absence and reconciliation/return, has sought to demonstrate that Demeter's story, as told in the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter*, shares the narrative structure of the great epic Quests of Homer. However, given the clearly cyclical

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<sup>9</sup> See Rutgers website: (<http://www.scils.rutgers.edu/special/mjoseph/found.html>)

nature of its narrative, the *Homeric Hymn to Demeter* has more often been contrasted with the linearity of the Hero myth, frequently emphasising gender as the basic differentiating factor. For example, Foley (1994:104) writes:

‘...Demeter’s female quest both resembles and differs from that of male heroes like Achilles and Odysseus. Both sexes pursue honour and status, but in Demeter’s case the recovery of her lost daughter plays an emphatically central role. The female quest is defined by issues relating to marriage and fertility, the male quest by war and kingship. The male quest ends with an acceptance of mortality mitigated by fame, the female quest with a cyclical reunion and separation that also mitigates “death”’.

The contrasting ways in which each sex seeks immortality is, to me, the key notion here. In particular, Foley’s formulation highlights the difference between the essentially *goal-oriented* nature of the masculine version (whose story ends with victory over the enemy and the subsequent acquisition of fame and glory), and the endless retelling implicit in the feminine version. The latter has been succinctly formulated by Jung (1993 [1949]) in a very famous passage from his essay on ‘The Psychological Aspects of the Korê’:

‘The psyche pre-existent to consciousness...participates in the maternal psyche on the one hand, while on the other it reaches across to the daughter psyche. We could therefore say that every mother contains her daughter in herself and every daughter her mother, and that every woman extends backwards into her mother and forwards into her daughter. This participation

and intermingling give rise to that peculiar uncertainty as regards *time*: a woman lives earlier as a mother, later as a daughter. The conscious experience of these ties produces the feeling that her life is spread out over generations – the first step towards the immediate experience and conviction of being outside time, which brings with it a feeling of *immortality*. The individual's life is elevated into a type, indeed it becomes the archetype of woman's fate in general. This leads to a restoration or *apocatastasis* of the lives of her ancestors, who no, through the bridge of the momentary individual, pass down into the generations of the future. An experience of this kind gives the individual a place and a meaning in the life of the generations, so that all unnecessary obstacles are cleared out of the way of the life-stream that is to flow through her. At the same time, the individual is rescued from her isolation and restored to wholeness.'

Indeed, the notion that women have a cyclical relationship to time in contrast to male linearity has for some time been accepted within Gender Studies, and forms the basis of much feminist critique of patriarchy. The distinction has perhaps been most clearly laid out by Marilyn French in her introduction to her critical book about Shakespeare (1982: 22-23):

:

'The masculine principle is linear, temporal, and transcendent, for it aims to construct something in the world and within time that will enable the individual to transcend nature (which is cyclic) time, and mortality. The thing erected is a sort of immortality. It may be a tribe bearing the father's name, or a dynasty; it may be a noble act recorded in legend and poetry. Or

an institution or tradition such as a religion, a school of thought, a school of art...’

French goes on to refer to the existence of a pre-patriarchal and universal nature/Goddess figure, simultaneously nurturing and destructive, which, as we have seen, has since become the basis of a New Age Goddess cult:

‘As far as I can deduce, the two aspects of nature were taken as a whole in pre-Christian thought. Identified then as now with the female, nature was a powerful lover and a powerful hater. Eve the instigator of the fall was also Eve the mother of all living; Aphrodite was a goddess of shifting weather, of the fruitfulness of spring and the withering of autumn, the goddess of sexual desire and of wedded love and fruitfulness; Kali incarnated both natural creativity and temporal destructiveness.’

Upon the appearance of patriarchy, this argument goes, these Goddesses were transformed, lost power or were deprecated, or subsumed in masculine deities:

‘The later myths of Aphrodite and Athene as having been produced by the immaculate conception of their fathers’ brains or sperm are attempts to harness the powers of the feminine principle into service to the masculine. But these attempts were not notably successful. They drove female goddess-worshippers underground; the old religions were denigrated as mere magic; the goddesses gave up their names to the new gods; the characters of the Erinyes was changed from agents of justice to avengers; and the father was declared the true parent of the child, the mother being merely a vessel. Zeus

(power) and Apollo (light and order seen as harmony) superseded the older, more earthly deities. Flesh, body, was declared inferior to mind, and the two were perceived as antagonists inhabiting a single entity. Word was declared prime, and the nature of deity; while spirit, which is feeling, was ignored. In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God, and the word was God.'

In relation to this, it is interesting to look at what happened to the goddess Demeter after the advent of Christianity. In most parts of Greece, it appears that she was reduced and altered by the Church into a masculine saint figure, Saint Demetrius. However, in the village of Lefsina (the modern name for Eleusis), the figure remained female, and was known as Saint Demetra, but she is now a sad old woman, too frail to undertake the quest for her daughter herself. Consequently, she is aided by the mayor's strong and handsome son, who sets off in search of the nameless daughter, shut up in a tower by an evil Turkish magician. With the help of the Panagia (Virgin Mary in Greek Christianity), he storms the tower, defeats dragons and the shape-shifting Turk, and eventually rescues the maiden (Carlson, 1997: 45-49).

Kore is now unempowered, no more than a 'damsel in distress' in need of rescue; while Demeter is so feeble that she cannot even make the quest herself, but instead needs a hero to do it for her. The struggle that takes place is now between men: a Christianised hero and a presumably barbarian foreigner. Here, once again, a *linear quest* structure has been superimposed upon the earlier *cyclical* story, and as such, offers support for the feminist allegations of an overthrow of the feminine principle (the Goddess) by patriarchy in the dawn of civilization.

However, I would hesitate to accept unquestioningly that the one model in any way precedes or is closer to the matrix of human experience than the other. Northrop Frye (1990:104-106), while accepting that ‘the pull of ritual is towards pure cyclical narrative’, argues that the linear, or dialectic, pattern also has an important part to play. The feminist view, therefore, is of less interest as document of fact than as a modern-day exercise in mythopoeia.. It may also be considered a dialectical response to the excesses perpetrated by centuries of patriarchy, which notoriously included the elevation of *logos* above *mythos*, particularly since the Enlightenment. Now, with postmodernist decentrings, and the new prominence given to the subjective experience of reality, we would appear to be entering another phase in which *mythos* is accorded a respected place. Maybe, therefore, we will see fewer attempts to deny or explain away myth in a Euhemerist fashion, and instead, more recognition of the inherently human tendency to process experience in this way. This should result in an increase in myth-making activity, through the creative reworking of the old stories in line with modern realities, which should in turn illuminate some of the unchanging truths that inhabit the heart of each mythologem. Only then might we be able to personally experience something of that epiphany that so transformed the lives of initiates at Eleusis, and understand the true goal of the poet’s recurrent quest.

## *Appendix 1: The Pomegranate*

(Eavan Boland)

The only legend I have ever loved is  
The story of a daughter lost in hell.  
And found and rescued there.  
Love and blackmail are the gist of it.  
Ceres and Persephone the names.  
And the best thing about the legend is  
I can enter it anywhere. And have.  
As a child in exile in  
A city of fogs and strange consonants,  
I read it first and at first I was  
An exiled child in the crackling dusk of  
The underworld, the stars blighted. Later  
I walked out in a summer twilight  
Searching for my daughter at bedtime.  
When she came running I was ready  
To make any bargain to keep her.  
I carried her back past whitebeams.  
And wasps and honey-scented buddleias.  
But I was Ceres then and I knew  
Winter was in store for every leaf  
On every tree on that road.  
Was inescapable for each one we passed.

And for me. It is winter  
And the stars are hidden.  
I climb the stairs and stand where I can see  
My child asleep beside her teen magazines,  
Her can of Coke, her plate of uncut fruit.  
The pomegranate! How did I forget it?  
She could have come home and been safe  
And ended the story and all  
Our heartbroken searching but she reached  
Out a hand and plucked a pomegranate.  
She put out her hand and pulled down  
The French sound for apple and  
The noise of stone and the proof  
That even in the place of death,  
At the heart of legend, in the midst  
Of rocks full of unshed tears  
Ready to be diamonds by the time  
The story was told, a child can be  
Hungry. I could warn her. There is still a chance.  
The rain is cold. The road is flint-colored.  
The suburb has cars and cable television.  
The veiled stars are aboveground.  
It is another world. But what else  
Can a mother give her daughter but such  
Beautiful rifts in time?

If I defer the grief I will diminish the gift.

The legend will be hers as well as mine.

She will enter it. As I have.

She will wake up. She will hold

The papery, flushed skin in her hand.

And to her lips. I will say nothing.

## ***Appendix 2: Ascalaphus***

(Ciaran Carson)

Proserpina ate seven pomegranate seeds. So what? I'll

    tell you what –

It doesn't do to touch strange fruit, when it's forbidden

    by the Powers

That Be. Who put you on a hunger strike, which if you

    break, you'll stay put

In the Underworld. It doesn't do to get caught out.

    Watch out for prowlers.

She'd wandered into Pluto's murky realm; plucked the

    dull-orange bubble.

Split the cortex. Sucked. And who was salivating in the

    bushes dark interior

But Ascalaphus. Stoolie. Pipsqueak. Mouth. He spilled

    the beans on her, he blabbed-

Straight off he shot, and knocked, knocked, knocked  
on Heaven's iron door.

But she spat back as good as she had got: unholy water  
from the Phlegethon

She slabbered on him. His eyes yellowed, drooled and grew.

His neb became a beak.

He sprouted spermy wings. Hooked talons shot from his  
fingers. His body dwindled

Into mostly head. All ears, all eyes: touts everywhere,  
potential freaks,

Beware. For now he is the scrake-owl, Troubles' augury  
for Auld Lang Syne,

Who to this day is harbinger of doom, the gloom of  
Pluto's no-go zone.

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