



A Dangerous New Myth is Emerging: The Return of the Titans

by Pete Williams

Wandering between two worlds, one dead, the other powerless to be born. To live in the time between the gods which have fled, And the gods which are not yet.

—Matthew Arnold

The study of myth and mythological imagery and motif is one of the principle pillars of Carl Jung's psychology. He understood that our mythic heritage represented a collective expression of humankind's accumulated experience of the archetypal world. For Jung, myths are the windows through which we might peer into the deepest strata of the psyche, the *collective unconscious*. But Jung also understood that the teleological impulses of the human psyche demand that our myths evolve in order to remain resonant with our ever-evolving psychic life for, the archetypal images that populate the stages of our mythic dramas not only harken from the past but they also function to purposefully call us forward. In his autobiography, Jung writes:

I had explained the myths of peoples of the past; I had written a book about the hero, the myth in which man has always lived. But in what myth does man live nowadays? In the Christian myth, the answer might be, "Do you live in it?" I asked myself. To be honest, the answer was no.

Pete Williams, Ph.D., is a licensed psychotherapist in private practice in Atlanta. He obtained his doctorate in Depth Psychology from Pacifica Graduate Institute and is currently in analytic training with the Inter-Regional Society of Jungian Analysts.

For me, it is not what I live by. "Then do we no longer have any myth?" "No, evidently we no longer have any myth." (1961, p. 171)

As we hear Jung here struggle with these questions, he echoes the words of Matthew Arnold—we live in "the time between", the liminal place between the old myths that have faded and a new myth that has yet to emerge.

Both Jung and Arnold seem to suggest that our task is to stand in the tension of this liminal and wait, wait for the unconscious to produce something new for if, as Jung suggests, the hero myth is dead and the Christian myth is fading, a void exists that will inevitably be filled. But, I believe there is today compelling evidence indicating that to passively wait is an unacceptably dangerous position. Jung's attitude of patient curiosity is a luxury we can at present ill afford for, threatening gods are now on the move and they are attempting to march into the psychic void of our myth-less collective consciousness.

So, what do the Titans have to do with Carl Jung, Matthew Arnold and the peril in living in the time between myths? A brief look at an early Orphic creation myth may provide us with some insight.

Before the time of the mighty Olympian gods and god-

esses, before the time of the creation of humans, the earth was ruled by a race of giants called Titans. As the stories go, the Titans first appeared when Light emerged from out of the darkness of Chaos and the heavens, the earth and the sea were formed. These ruthless giants were so jealous of their power that when the great Titan Cronos realized he was to father a new race of gods that could threaten his unilateral rule, he swallowed his yet unborn offspring. But, despite this determined effort on the part of Cronos to eliminate all potential challengers, one son, Zeus, survives and forces his father to restore his siblings. Soon after, a great war began that pit the young gods and goddesses led by Zeus against the older Titan race. Eventually, the Titans were defeated, banished to a distant and isolated other-world and the new rulers of the universe took their place upon Mount Olympus.

The rich and complex fabric of our Western mythological heritage has grown out of this myth of a *pre-human* world ruled by the Titans. What is of interest to us is a particular myth found in the writings of Orpheus, the myth of *Dionysus-Zagreus*—a story of an encounter between the subdued Titans and the favored son of Zeus, Dionysus. According to this myth, Dionysus was the child of Zeus and Persephone. One day, shortly following their defeat, the angry and vengeful Titans lured the very young yet curious Dionysus to a remote cave where he was beyond the vigilant and watchful eye of his protective father, Zeus. There, the Titans viscously attacked the youth, tearing him limb from limb and then devouring his every piece. Zeus, learning of the assault, immediately struck at the Titans who, with their bellies still full with the freshly consumed young god, were reduced to smoldering ashes. And, as the story goes, it was from these ashes that Zeus then created humankind. Thus, all of humankind is part Titanic and part Dionysian, two very different archetypal potentialities that roam our psychic landscape.

Mythologist Rudolph Otto says of the myth of *Dionysus-Zagreus* that, “the Orphics incorporated this myth into their teachings and found in it a mysterious meaning for *the destiny of man*.” The ancient Orphic poets understood that the “destiny of man” is determined by the psychic balance of our Titanic/Dionysian nature—the dominance of one and the banishment of the other leads to a dangerous and destructive one-sidedness, a one-sidedness that is now creeping into the liminal vacuum of the myth-less collective psyche.

And so, in answer to Jung and Arnold, it is the gods of Olympus that have fled, and it is the cold, hubristic Titanic that threatens to arrive. We are today witnessing an attempt at the triumphant return of the great Titans, a return that heralds the victory of the *literal* over the *imaginal*, the *rational* over the *aesthetic*, *arrogance* over *eros*, *fundamentalism* over *tolerance*, *isolation* over *relatedness*, *pessimism* over *hopefulness*, *projection* over *responsibility*, *demonization* over *understanding*, and *technology* over *psychology*. And, what should be of paramount concern to us all is the reality that the most prominent casualty of the Titanic way is Psyche in all her spontaneous, imaginal, erotic splendor.

There are abundant indications of a growing awareness of the turn in American culture toward a Titanic consciousness and thankfully, there is also a concomitant, growing concern

regarding its implications. And yet, we seem powerless to alter the course. From a depth psychological perspective, correcting a one-sidedness in the conscious attitude, restoring balance to a psychological imbalance, requires acute awareness and painstaking attunement to the situation. It requires what James Hillman refers to as the necessity “to see into, to see through” the problem in order to uncover the psychological, mythical sub-strata that most accurately describes its present manifestation.

There is a substantial body of post-Jungian theory that supports the idea that the old mythic structures operating and at work in the collective often first find expression through the medium of film. The 1997 film *The Titanic*, although produced at a time when the current psychological-political-cultural predicament was still bubbling below the surface, offers a startlingly vivid glimpse into the mythic forces that first fully erupted in response to the events of 9/11 and that now seem to have us in their grip. The movie is a re-telling of the tragic story of an ocean going cruise ship, The Titanic. At the time it was christened, The Titanic was considered the very embodiment of supreme technological achievement and a powerful symbol of modern man’s mastery of his environment. In fact, however, while on its maiden voyage, the “invincible, unsinkable” Titanic is sent to its watery grave as a result of a collision with the underwater shelf of an iceberg.

In an article entitled “Re-Sinking the Titanic”, Glen Slater uses this movie to describe the dangerous and threatening nature of the titanic forces that have been gathering at our cultural doorstep. Slater puts forth the idea that this ultimately doomed vessel represents the dominance of technology over not only nature, but also over the relational, aesthetic, poetic and imaginal realms of the inner life. The invincible ship embodies that within our culture that steams unerringly and purposefully into our collective consciousness, ruthlessly, relentlessly pushing ahead while remaining completely oblivious to that which lies below the surface. A titanic consciousness is steely cold and grey like the metal decks and body of the ship and it moves along with dehumanizing hubris and unconscious aggression—it represents “unmitigated pride and sacrilege, inflation, grandiosity and unchecked haste”. Do we now find ourselves standing upon this deck, sailing arrogantly along while ignoring the unseen dangers that lurk below the surface?

If we consider this great ship, The Titanic, as an image of the current American collective psyche, we then wonder, Who’s on board and who’s in command? Who steers this arrogant vessel? Guided by the *Dionysus-Zagreus* myth, we can imagine the presence of two energies on board, two opposing forces that represent the mythical, psychological, inner dynamics operating aboard this cultural vessel—two archetypal images, the Titan Prometheus and the Olympian Dionysus.

As an archetypal image identified with the Titan race, Prometheus represents technological triumph and discovery, single-minded purpose and drive, ambition and competitiveness, rationality and linearity. A Promethean consciousness values only the literal, empirical condition of our existence and, as such, it embodies an attitude that devalues humankind’s divine potential, subordinates the unconscious and denies the validity of the inner world. Hillman says that identification with the Promethean archetype is “a cultural consciousness that thinks only of the future, it has lost its connec-

tion with the underworld resulting in egocentricity and hyper-activism, the life-fanaticism of Western culture.” It is the Titan Prometheus who is now ruling and steering the collective, psychic vessel and he does so with complete disregard for the consequences of his arrogant, careless and hasty ways.

But, all is not lost, for, as the film so beautifully depicts, while Prometheus rules the upper decks, the wily, seductive, erotic Dionysus prowls restlessly within the ship’s bowels. Our connection with the Dionysian archetype is essential if we are not to completely succumb to the titanic way of life. Dionysus is the embodiment of all that the titanic opposes—the irrational, the relational, the imaginal, the aesthetic. Jungian Lopez-Pedraza tells us that Dionysus represents “our dark, hysterical unpredictable nature. He is both cause and liberator of madness and, as the god of psychological life and death, he is *the most repressed god within Western culture.*” The only antidote against the toxic, suffocating titanic forces that threaten to snuff out the flickering flames of a soulful cultural consciousness is to invite the return of our Dionysian nature.

And so, what’s the moral of this tale of many threads—Jung, Arnold, Orpheus, Hillman, myth and movie? The end of the film, I think, describes the most hopeful of possibilities. The thick, steely hull of the Titanic vessel is torn wide open as a result of a collision with something hard and determined that lies under the surface, a confrontation with something existing in the unconscious. It is a confrontation that sinks The Titanic. The Promethean way, it seems, is doomed to fail, unable to survive its confrontation with unseen yet very powerful unconscious forces. But, by abandoning ship, the Dionysian energies free themselves from the Titanic deck, dive into the watery realm of the unconscious and survive. [Note: The character played by Leonardo DiCaprio is the one who carries the Dionysian throughout the film and, while he experiences a *literal* death in the movie, the survival of his *anima*, played by Kate Winslett, tells us that symbolically, the archetypal energy of Dionysus lives on and again gains mastery over the Titanic way.]

As we all await the articulation of a new myth for modern humankind, we must remain conscious of this old mythic structure—the Titanic/Dionysian drama—that is currently at work on both the individual and the collective psychic stage. It is a drama that is today exerting its influence throughout our culture in politics, religion, science and education. As Jung once said, “the world hangs but by a thin thread and that thread is the human psyche”, a notion perhaps more true today than ever before. If we listen to the wisdom our old myths offer, it seems we have little choice but to abandon what we might believe to be the security of the Titanic deck and consciously acknowledge and embrace that which lies below the surface—the as yet unknown contents of the waters of the unconscious. A Dionysian consciousness opens us to the full potential of the imaginal capacities of the psyche, to the ability to imagine new ways of being in relationship to our inner and outer worlds. We can no longer allow the Titanic energies to have full and unchecked command of our cultural, collective vessel. Rather, we must be bold in imagining ways of sailing forward with an attitude of conscious respect, awareness and appreciation for what lies above *and* below the surface of the waters ■



William Willeford, 1989

Poetry by Wilson McCreary

RANDOM NUMBERS

They drew snake eyes from that big pair of dice God rolls around heaven deciding which way to send the hurricane and when to switch on the earthquake. Speedy died after slowly sailing away with Lou Gehrig and now Ralph has a dragon eating an organ that Ralph can't live without and the world's getting lonelier.

We'd drink rum and coke, ("Cuba Libres" Ralph called them) the three of us and Frank too, to make four, and swap lies and jokes. Frank, retired now, was a proper academic, teaching technical things too complex for most of us to understand, enjoying time with less couth, Speedy, and Ralph, and me. We were all gentle souls, really, even though Ralph and Speedy spent time fighting in the Navy and Air Force. I once fixed Ralph a

Wilson E. McCreary is a semi-retired computer systems engineer. Connected to Jung through poets, lots of reading and conversation, Wilson writes a little poetry, makes a little music and talks to his archetypes—his people inside—when they will.