The Survival of Myth

The Survival of Myth:
Innovation, Singularity and Alterity

Edited by

Paul Hardwick and David Kennedy

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The Survival of Myth: Innovation, Singularity and Alterity,
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INTRODUCTION

PAUL HARDWICK AND DAVID KENNEDY

Ovid begins the *Metamorphoses*, 'In nova fert animus mutatas dicere formas / corpora', which Arthur Golding famously translated in his 1567 version as 'Of shapes transformde to bodies straunge, I purpose to entreate.' More than 1,500 years after Ovid, the philosopher Gilbert Ryle wrote in *The Concept of Mind* (1949) that 'A myth is, of course, not a fairy story. It is the presentation of facts belonging to one category in the idioms appropriate to another.' (Ryle 2000, 72) Facts in different idioms are crucial to many of Ovid's tales. The nymph Io, transformed into a heifer, is unable to speak and so traces the letters of her name in the dust with her hoof. Myths, then, are closely associated with species of exchange and traffic between different modes of representation; and that exchange and traffic are themselves closely associated with the origin, function and subject matter of myth which, as Robert Segal notes, 'unite the study of myth across the disciplines.' (Segal 2004, 2) Segal is, incidentally, one of the few recent writers who have attempted to say clearly what myth is: myth, he argues, is a story that 'accomplishes something significant for adherents', although he leaves 'open-ended what that accomplishment might be.' (Segal 2004, 6) We might add, however, that the transformations of myth tell us much about the transformative nature of story itself.

The tales in *Metamorphoses* are re-tellings of ancient Greek versions of even older stories and this speaks to two important characteristics of myth. First, myths are not only stories of transformation but are also imaginative transformations of existing stories. Second, myth has what might be termed an archaeological function. Sigmund Freud, whose study and consulting room were filled with ancient artefacts, made a direct comparison between the discoveries of psychoanalysis and the discoveries of archaeology. Just as archaeology brings to light the enduring influence of older ideas of belief and social organization, so psychoanalysis reveals how our inner lives are moulded and driven by primitive psychological experiences. In the words of Donald Kuspit, Freud's artefacts 'reminded him of the inescapability and pull of the collective past, that is, of the fact

that we all exist, phenomenologically speaking, in already sedimented life.' (In Gamwell and Wells, eds, 1989, 150) A myth, reimagined and retold in the idiom and modes of a particular age, puts us in touch with that sense of sedimentation.

It would be very easy to take this convergence of archaeology and psychoanalysis and argue that myths echo the structure of the unconscious and that this explains in large part our enduring fascination with them. However, it is probably truer to say that the physical transformations, supernatural beings, and magical objects have much to tell us about how the unconscious emerges into waking, material life. In this sense, myths might be likened to a residue, supplementary material, that stubbornly resists assimilation into economic and scientific models of human development. Myths may therefore offer another way of thinking about origins and evolution although, as several of our contributors demonstrate, this has often been used to justify nationalistic ideologies.

In marked contrast to the continuing cultural uses of myth, literary critical interest in myth has tended to focus on either psychological and psychoanalytic readings or structural similarities. There has been little attempt to study a range of specific examples of how and why myths are retold and reused. Books on myth tend to fall into three distinct categories: 'overview' studies such as Joseph Campbell's *The Power of Myth*; collections of myths from particular cultures; and reimaginings such as Margaret Atwood's recent *The Penelopiad*. Atwood's book is part of a larger series in which leading novelists, such as Ali Smith and Jeanette Winterson, are invited to retell Greek and Roman myths for a contemporary readership. *The Survival of Myth* aims to make a particular intervention in the study of myth and literature by examining a range of uses of myth. If writers keep returning to myth then that is because myth differentiates itself from other discourses by speaking to the lives of individuals, communities and nations simultaneously; and by addressing the way that that emotional life is bound up with cycles of birth, growth and death. Crucially, myth often provides a way of dealing with whatever anxieties seem to be challenging the contemporary moment. As the new millennium gets under way, we are surrounded by new myths of otherness and by a range of conflicting stories about the future of the planet. Indeed, it seems that myth for our times has ceased to be historical and has become synonymous with fantasies about the future. After all, what are the conflicting stories on climate change and global warming if not different templates for how to live?

This, then, is the focus of this collection of essays. Our contributors examine a range of texts from the Biblical to the contemporary and some

common threads can be detected. Many of our contributors focus on the way that ancient stories both give access to the unconscious and offer individuals and communities personae or masks. Myths translated and recreated become, in this sense, very public acts about very private thoughts and feelings. The subtitle of our book, 'Innovation, Singularity and Alterity,' reflects the way in which the history of cultures in all genres is a history of innovation, of a search for new modes of expression which, paradoxically, often entails recourse to myth precisely because it offers narratives of singularity and otherness which may be readily appropriated. The individual contributors offer testament to the continuing significance of myth through its own constant metamorphosis, as it both reflects and transforms the societies in which it is (re)produced.

We believe that this volume will provide stimulating readings of the cultural and literary uses of myth through presenting a range of interdisciplinary and transhistorical perspectives. *The Survival of Myth* is, however, is not just a collection of 'case histories'. The common link between its eleven essays is that myths are much more than a collection of readymade stories. Karalina Matskevich's structuralist narratological approach to the biblical narrative of Jacob opens this collection by illuminating the foundational metaphors upon which largely unquestioned gender hierarchies have subsequently been constructed. In contrast, Gillian Alban reaches back further in order to trace the evolution of Melusine, the legendary snake woman of the Middle Ages, and demonstrates how her symbolic power, whether worshipped or abhorred, has remained undiminished from prehistory to her incorporation into popular Christian devotion and beyond. Whilst crossing a somewhat shorter temporal distance, David Annwn shows how geographically distant and isolated communities have functioned according to congruent mythical matrices, both of themselves and in response to outside intervention.

Few figures are as central to the transmission of myth in the West than Ovid. Amina Alyal explores the ways in which Ovidian metamorphoses in the English Reformation period translated proscribed theological patterns of thought into imaginative metaphor which would resonate in poetry throughout subsequent centuries. Focusing upon the enthusiasm for Ovid in Renaissance England, Sarah Carter considers how the figure of Hermaphroditus was imaginatively employed in translations and retellings – somewhat surprisingly, perhaps – in order to support contemporary views of gendered concepts of behaviour in the period. Cliff Forshaw traces a line of translators and adapters of Ovid from the Renaissance to the start of the twenty-first century, arguing persuasively that truth to the

spirit of myth is only to be found once slavish adherence to the letter of the myth is abandoned.

In looking at the modern fortunes of the Norse god Thor, Martin Arnold demonstrates the way in which myth may function as an ideological battleground upon which nationalistic struggles may be both fought and legitimised. Alan Halsey, focusing upon a rather different kind of contest – conflicting accounts of Percy Bysshe Shelley's death – offers a fascinating exemplar of how mythological motifs may enter even the most avowedly 'factual' accounts to fill the gaps in which raw facts themselves fail to deliver the required levels of significance demanded by the narrator.

Katie Lister demonstrates the way in which the erotically-charged literary and cultural myth of the *femme fatale* may be appropriated as an icon of autonomous female power, rather than a dangerously alluring male fantasy figure. Further exploring rhetorics of power and identity, D. W. de Villiers engages with the problems of mythologizing one's own country, whereby such a process may enable the dissolution of the very ideological structure it seeks to enshrine. Maria del Mar Pérez-Gil closes this collection by exploring how a number of contemporary English-speaking women writers have questioned the established symbolism of the Virgin Mary as an essentially passive, subordinate role model and instead have presented her as an icon of strength through shared female experience.

This discussion in many ways returns us to our first essay, but each contribution – however distinct in scope and approach – casts light on each other. Together, the essays in this book argue that myth's adaptability and malleability have enabled and continue to enable writers to do three important things: to innovate and invent, to scrutinise and in some cases go beyond the norms of the culture and time in which they are writing, and to explore otherness. Our individual contributors offer testament to the continuing significance of myth through its own constant metamorphoses, as it both reflects and transforms the societies in which it is (re)produced.

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CHAPTER ONE

MOTHER'S LAND, THE LAND OF THE SHADOW: BINARY STRUCTURES AND THE FEMININE IN THE JACOB NARRATIVE (GEN. 25:19-37:1)

KARALINA MATSKEVICH

Claude Lévi-Strauss, who was the first to apply structuralist analysis to the study of myth, expressed reservations concerning the use of this method in biblical studies. (Lévi-Strauss 1963.1, 631-32) For him, the literary character of the biblical text and its loss of primary ethnographic data through repeated editing make it an imperfect material for an anthropologist, whose main interest in myth lay in its representation of social structures. However, leaving aside the anthropological concern, the literary analysis of the Hebrew narrative with its skilful composition and use of symmetric literary forms holds rich possibilities for application of the structuralist method. These possibilities to some extent remain unexplored. While the cosmological myths of Genesis 1-3 have attracted the particular attention of structuralists, (Leach 1969, 7-23; Thompson 1979, 18; Jobling 1986, 17-43) studies of other biblical narratives have been mainly limited to the analysis of shorter textual units. (Barthes 1971, 27-40; Leach and Aycock 1983, 113-127)[1]

This essay owes much of its methodology to Lévi-Strauss and his works on the binary character of myth. It will examine some aspects of structural binarity of the Jacob narrative cycle in the book of Genesis (25:19-37:1). The approach adopted here presents a convergence between structuralist analysis and narratological interpretation. Looking at the way the world of the text is constructed, analysing its elements and the structures of meaning they belong to will help to disclose the text's internal symbolism and the functioning of specific metaphors in the overall argument of the story.

As a myth of national origin, the Jacob narrative deals with issues of identity, projecting various aspects of the historical formation of Israel on

to the characters and structures of the story. In the narrative, Rebekah, the wife of patriarch Isaac, helps her younger son Jacob to steal his elder brother Esau's blessing. As a result he has to flee to Haran, his mother's place. God appears to him on the way and grants him the promise of the land and Abrahamic succession. In Haran, Jacob serves his uncle Laban in return for marrying his daughters Rachel and Leah. During his twenty year exile twelve children are born to his wives and Jacob himself gains considerable wealth. On the way back, he fights a divine adversary who blesses him with the new name of Israel, after which Jacob finally makes peace with his brother and returns to his father's house in Canaan.

Even the most superficial examination of the Jacob narrative shows the clear presence of binary structures. The conflict between the two brothers, the rivalry between the two wives, Jacob's fight with a deity, and the flight-return pattern of the overall plot are all binary mythic motifs familiar in comparative studies. A more detailed analysis of the text uncovers a network of carefully balanced elements that stand in opposition to each other. These structural tensions that shape the myth on different levels all seem to stem from the initial opposition between Father and Mother.

In Lévi-Strauss's definition, myth provides a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction. (Lévi-Strauss 1963.2, 229) His method breaks down elements of myth into pairs of opposites, which are resolved through mediators only to be further broken down into new pairs of opposites. This generates a spiral progression which only ends when the *signified*, or the complex idea behind the myth, is exhausted. The Jacob story offers a striking example of such a progression:

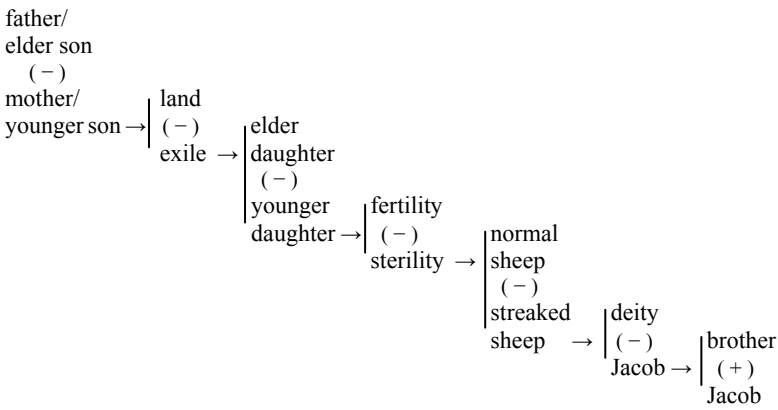

Figure 1. Progression of oppositions in the Jacob narrative

The father-mother dichotomy is reflected in the differentiation between the elder and younger sons, and as such is carried through all the divergences of the plot. It is finally resolved in the reconciliation scene, where the concept of the brother finally comes to replace that of the younger or older son. What unifies this prolonged sequence of related oppositions is its overall subversive character. From one level to another, a tension is created between the existing system of reference and its opposite, i.e. between the normal, accepted, or superior on the one hand, and the irregular, impossible and subordinate on the other hand. The mediation between them consistently inverts the institutional order, for each time the narrative chooses to develop the element that represents a subordinate group or position. Therefore the coalition of Rebekah and her younger son wins over the patriarchal authority of Isaac and the right of primogeniture. This initial impulse sets off a chain reaction of similar subversions: the blessed son goes into exile; the younger daughter is preferred to the elder; the barren wife bears sons; the herd animals produce abnormally coloured offspring; and, finally, Jacob holds his own against God. The minus sign at each stage of this progression stands for a negative or contrasting relationship between the opposites with the exception of the last stage which marks the reconciliation that resolves the initial tension of the story.

The elements of most of these oppositions can be grouped around two strands: the institutional and the individual. The institutional strand includes the elements of 'father', 'older sibling', 'blessing', 'fertility', and 'promised land'. The individual strand, in contrast, operates with the concepts of 'mother', 'younger sibling', 'non-blessing', 'barrenness', and 'exile'. These two groups represent two value systems: one that serves the interests of patriarchy, in which the primary values are patrilineal descent, father's authority and the right of the firstborn, and the other that validates individual quests and choices. Set within an institutional framework, the narrative, like the deity itself, favours those characters who defy the institution and display complex motivations, feelings and inner growth.

Typically, most matriarchs represent the individual perspective in the narrative, and so does Jacob. We are dealing with a situation where authority, that is, power institutionalised by society, rests with the patriarchs, but where the women/younger siblings are capable of effecting changes and exercising considerable personal influence over the course of events.[2] Mary Douglas describes a similar model in the myth of Asdiwal as a paradox between male dominance and male dependence on female help. (Douglas 1975, 163) Lévi-Strauss translates this dynamic into the language of kinship structures, defining it as a contradiction between

patrilocal residence and matrilineal marriage. (Lévi-Strauss 1963.2, 27-28) Both approaches are applicable in the case of the Jacob myth. Indeed, the fundamental binarity between Father and Mother manifests itself on different levels and to a certain extent accounts for the elegant concentric composition of the narrative (see Figure 2).

Structural levels	***Gen. 25:19-28:22***	***29:1-31:55***	***32:1-37:1***
Compositional	Jacob-Esau	Jacob-Laban	Jacob-Esau
Configurational	Subject gains	Subject loses and gains	Subject renounces
Geographical	Canaan	Haran	Canaan
Social	patrilocal residence	matrilineal marriage	patrilocal residence
Metaphorical	father's land	mother's land	father's land

Figure 2. Levels of structural symmetry in the Jacob narrative

The ***composition*** of the cycle consists of two extended narratives: the tale of Jacob's conflict with Esau that takes place in Canaan, the land of their father (Gen. 25:19-28:22; 32:1-37:1), and the story of the hero's dealings with his uncle Laban in Haran, the land of Jacob's mother (Gen. 29:1-31:55). The Haran narrative is the middle or central stage in the development of the plot that prepares the conditions for the hero's return to Canaan. This compositional symmetry of the narrative was highlighted by Michael Fishbane, in whose opinion the central story of Jacob and Laban in Genesis 29-31 counterpoints the surrounding narrative of Jacob and Esau. (Fishbane 1979, 55)

The ***configuration*** of the cycle supports the compositional polarity of the two narrative strands. Four major transformations of the Subject take place in the course of Jacob's journey, and each of them changes the power balance in the world of the story. The overall plot unfolds as a series or chain of reversed situations, where the hero's success alternates with defeat or relinquishing of power:

Esau – Jacob : *Jacob – Laban* : *Laban – Jacob* : *Jacob – Esau*

First, in Genesis 27 Rebekah replaces her firstborn son Esau with his younger brother Jacob. As a result Jacob receives his father's blessing, which has been meant for the firstborn (*Subject gains*). Then, in Genesis 29 Jacob is deceived by Laban who replaces his younger daughter with the firstborn; this action symbolically inverts the episode of the stolen blessing (*Subject loses*).[3] This deception, by which Laban robs Jacob of his wages is reversed when Jacob takes all Laban's flocks as his wage (*Subject gains*). Finally, the flocks that now belong to Jacob are shared with Esau in what the narrative presents as a symbolic returning of the blessing. In Genesis 32:13-16 Jacob selects from his herds a gift for Esau and later offers it to him saying, 'Take now my blessing (*birkati*)…' (Gen. 33:11). The giving back of the stolen blessing marks the end of the series of symbolic inversions of the narrative and resolves the main complication of the plot (*Subject renounces*).

It is clear from the above sequence that the Jacob-Laban episode in Genesis 29-31 represents the central stage in the development of the plot. In the broadest terms it illustrates Lévi-Strauss's definition of myth as a logical model capable of overcoming a contradiction. Through a mechanism of inversions this episode puts the subject in a position to resolve the main contradiction and thus serves to redress the disturbed balance within the narrative world. This role has, nevertheless, to be qualified, for although the Jacob-Laban episode develops all the conditions necessary for a resolution, the resolution itself happens back in the Jacob-Esau narrative.

On the ***geographical*** plane, the compositional polarity between the narrative strands of Jacob-Esau and Jacob-Laban is reflected as a tension between Canaan, the promised land, and Mesopotamia, the land of exile. This tension is mediated by the hero's journey from Beersheba to Haran and back that results in the treaty between Jacob and his uncle Laban (Gen. 31:44-54). This treaty resolves the opposition between insider and outsider, between native and foreign and validates the geographical boundary between Canaan and northwest Mesopotamia.

At the level of ***social structures***, the Jacob narrative exhibits a tension between the patrilocal residence of the hero in Canaan and his matrilineal marriage in Haran. This tension is expressed in the territorial taboo concerning the return of the heir to the ancestral land (cf. the earlier episode of the wooing of Rebekah, where Abraham prohibits his son Isaac to enter Haran (Gen. 24:6, 9)). In the case of Jacob this taboo is overruled by his mother's authority. The mediation here takes place through the moving of the wives and children from their native land to the land of Jacob's father that signifies a return to patrilocality.

The world of the narrative, constructed around the archetypes of Father and Mother, maintains a more or less clear division between their respective spheres. At the **metaphorical** level, all the mentioned structural tensions contribute to a construction of one all-inclusive opposition between *father's* and *mother's land*.

Father's land vs. mother's land

The structural distinction between *father's* and *mother's land* seems to be emphasised in the narrative. Canaan, the father's land, is a positive reality, the land of promise, the paramount symbol of God's blessing. The connection with this land puts the hero in the wider context of the Abrahamic succession, and thus denotes the unity and permanence of patriarchal history. The narrative repeatedly associates this land with Jacob, first as the realm of his immediate experience ('the land you are lying on', Gen. 28:13), then as the land of his fathers (31:3), his native land (31:13), and later simply as 'his land' (32:9). In Jacob's vision at Bethel this land and the house of his father are indicated as his final destination, the ultimate goal of his journey 'there and back'. From a structuralist point of view, this land is the Object which the Subject has to come to possess if his narrative programme is to be successful. Therefore, although Jacob will remain in the narrative until Genesis 49:33, as a Subject he is acquitted in Genesis 37:1 with the achievement of his goal: 'And Jacob lived in the land of his father's journeys, the land of Canaan'.

At the opposite pole from the father's land stands Haran in Paddan-Aram, the land of Jacob's mother. Here, the connection with Rebekah is not merely implicit; Jacob comes to be in Haran precisely on her account. It is Rebekah who initiates and organises the removal of her favourite son from the father's house and his sojourn with her relatives. Jacob's exile in Haran is both an indirect consequence of her trick with the blessing and a direct implementation of her wish for him to take a wife from among her family. Both through narrative causality and by association, Haran for Jacob is the *mother*'s place.

This role of mother's land is attributed to Haran elsewhere in the patriarchal narratives. In the stories of Abraham and Isaac this land has the function of providing women/mothers: Rebekah, Leah, and Rachel all come from Haran, and even Sarah, the first matriarch, who like Abraham comes from Ur in Mesopotamia, is brought to Haran and stays there before the family moves to Canaan (Gen. 11:31). The fact that Abraham comes from there too does not necessarily contradict the symbolic association

with the Mother: for all that the reader knows, Mesopotamia is the birthplace, the origin, the cradle of the patriarchal lineage – the motherland.

Compared to the clear and positive symbolism of *father's land*, the metaphor of *mother's land* is much more ambivalent and displays multiple characteristics. On the one hand, the narrative shows it as a negative reality, a land of bondage and exile, the taboo land that Jacob's father was never allowed to enter (Gen. 24:6-8). It brings Jacob a twenty-year long servitude in the house of his uncle. Describing the hardship of his service to Laban, Jacob says, 'the heat consumed me by day, and the frost by night, and sleep fled from my eyes' (Gen. 31:40). The land of Jacob's mother is a symbolic punishment for his misdeeds, for here Jacob the deceiver is deceived 'ten times' by Laban (Gen. 31:7). At the level of the overall plot this negative connotation of the *mother's land* metaphor serves to express and balance out the tensions of Jacob's story outside Haran. In this its function is expiatory.

On the other hand, during his exile Jacob is blessed in all other respects, as his family and his possessions grow in abundance. Fertility is a dominant feature of this land where women come from. One is reminded here of the patriarchal blessing the hero received back in Canaan; there the father's promise of 'earth's richness and abundance of grain and wine' (27:28) was a potential that comes to realisation only in Haran. Jacob himself describes his post-Haran situation as that of fulfilment: 'God has been gracious to me and I have all I need' (Gen. 33:11). Moreover, Jacob's wealth acquired in the mother's land, plays an important part in resolving the main conflict of the narrative, i.e. the hero's conflict with his brother: in Genesis 33:11 Jacob symbolically returns the stolen blessing by sharing his possessions with Esau. The metaphor of *mother's land* is therefore simultaneously experienced by the Subject as two contrasting realities, i.e. as punishment and exile as well as fruitfulness and fulfilment.

This ambiguous symbolism of *mother's land* is further amplified when Paddan-Aram, the destination of Jacob's flight, is described as 'the land of the sons of the east' (Gen. 29:1, cf. Num 23:7). This description is problematic from the point of view of the geography of the region, but as R. Sacks comments, the specific geographical location of the land 'may not be as important as its ambiguous character', (Sacks 1982, 304) which arises from the symbolism of the term *qerem*, 'east'. From the onset of the Genesis narrative, East is named as the location of the garden of Eden: 'Yahweh God had planted a garden in Eden, in the east' (2:8). The obvious feminine symbolism of the garden, with the four rivers flowing from it and the tree of life in its midst, is consistent with the fertility aspect of the mother's land; by placing Haran in the east the narrator adds a

connotation of the life-giving character of the land. And yet, the fertility of the Mother is not the only connotation of the term *qerem*. M. R. Hauge observes that in the wider context of Genesis, the movement toward the East is repeatedly associated with the losing party, the outcasts, the exiles, so that the land of the east comes to symbolise defeat and separation from the promise. (Hauge 1975, 15) Thus, the cherubim are placed 'in the east of the garden of Eden' after the man is driven out of it in Genesis 3:24; later, the East becomes the 'land of wandering' of Cain and his descendants (Gen. 4:16), the location of the tower of Babel (Gen. 11:2), the direction Lot goes on the way to Sodom (Gen. 13:11), and the place to which Abraham sends away his sons born after Isaac (Gen. 25:6). Stephen K. Sherwood points out the irony of Jacob's situation, where he, the victor in the conflict with his brother, must travel to the East, the land of exile and defeat. (Sherwood 1990, 34)

It seems that the tension between the negative and positive connotations of *mother's land* in the Jacob narrative reflects the ambivalent role the narrator ascribes to the feminine. Borrowing the wordplay used by Cheryl Exum, *mother*'s place stands for *other*'s place. (Exum 1993, 94-147) Her land is a realm of alterity, of symbolic inversions, of the intuitive, the unconscious, and the fertile. This is shown in a number of concepts or narrative elements that are found almost exclusively in the Haran episode. These elements include fertility, meeting at the well, sexual relations, use of herbs, night, dreaming, idols and divination.

Fertility. This is the underlying theme of the Haran episode. The long account of Jacob's wives giving birth to his twelve children, unparalleled elsewhere in the Bible, receives a particular emphasis as it stands at the compositional centre of the episode and the entire cycle (Gen. 29:31-30:24). Fertility (or the lack of it) is emphasised here as the main aspect of characterisation of Jacob's wives; it is the stake in Rachel's rivalry with Leah and in her conflict with Jacob (Gen. 30:1-2); a conferral of fertility is implied in the purchase of mandrakes (Gen. 30:14-16). Significantly, most instances of child-bearing in the cycle are found in the Haran episode, with the exception of the births of Jacob and Esau at the beginning of the cycle (Gen. 25:21-26) and the birth of Benjamin that happens in the transition between the two lands (Gen. 35:16-18). Fertility is also central to the story of Jacob's sheep-breeding in Genesis 30:25-43. What allows Jacob to get the upper hand over Laban is his control of animal fertility. It is hard to determine how exactly, in the narrator's view, Jacob's herdsmanship brings about the desired result, for his techniques could be regarded as practice of magic as much as traditional skills based on experience. There is a disagreement among scholars as to the nature of Jacob's procedures.

Thomas Thompson, for instance, defines them as 'imitative magic'. (Thompson 1979, 19) On the contrary, Bruce Vawter suggests that Jacob's methods were quite scientific for their time, considering a 'notion of how prenatal influences can be transmitted to fetal life'. (Vawter 1977, 332) Similarly, Claus Westermann regards Jacob's artifice as a sign of an 'earlier transition from magical to scientific thinking'. (Westermann 1985, 483) However, the mechanism of deception that enables Jacob to take over the flocks of Laban is radically different from his rational trickery back in Canaan, since it engages the natural forces of reproduction.

Meeting at the well. This recurrent motif in the biblical narrative that Robert Alter calls a 'betrothal type-scene' describes a situation, where the hero, or his envoy, meets his future bride at a well in a foreign land (Gen. 24:10-61; Gen. 29:1-20; Ex. 2:15b-21). As Alter points out, the well is a recognised symbol of fertility and generally a female symbol, while the foreign land could be serving as a 'geographical correlative for the sheer female otherness of the prospective wife'. (Alter 1981, 52) Significantly, the first thing that Jacob does in the land of his mother is to draw water from the well. This action symbolises an opening of the land's stored fertility, made possible by overcoming an obstacle (rolling off a stone in Gen. 29:10).

Sexual relations. With such a strong emphasis on fertility it is not surprising that six out of the seven references to sexual relations in the Jacob cycle belong to the Haran episode (Gen. 29:23, 30; 30:4, 15, 16, 16). The only reference to sex outside Haran, found at the end of Jacob's return journey to Canaan, concerns the illegitimate, incestuous relationship of Reuben and Bilhah (Gen. 35:22). Legitimate sexual relations, i.e. sexual relations in the service of procreation, are therefore limited to the mother's land.

Mandrakes. In the middle of the child-bearing race between Jacob's wives, Rachel acquires a plant from Leah that is possibly meant to cure her barrenness (Gen. 30:14-16). This mysterious plant derives its name from the root *dwd*, which has a connotation of physical love; and the plant has been associated with the mandrake because of the latter's well-known aphrodisiac properties. While the text throws little light on the exact use of the plant, there is no doubt that possession of the mandrakes in one way or another confers fertility.

Night. It is notable that the narrative of Jacob's life in Canaan contains no mention of night time. By comparison, in the story of Jacob's exile in Haran the term *laylāh*, 'night' appears 7 times (Gen. 30:15, 16; 31:24, 29, 39, 40, 42, 54), and is also implied in Gen. 29:23-25. It is night when Laban deceives Jacob, exchanging his daughters; when Leah receives

Jacob, having purchased him for mandrakes; and when God speaks to Laban in a dream. In addition, the theophanies of Bethel and Penuel that frame the Haran episode both happen by night (Gen. 28:11; 32:23). In the realm of the Other night acquires a special significance. It is hardly accidental that the previous time Haran was mentioned in the patriarchal narratives, i.e. in the episode of the wooing of Rebekah in Genesis 24, the narrator made it imperative for Abraham's servant to spend the night in the house of Rebekah's mother (the word 'night' is mentioned here three times, Gen. 24:23, 25, 54).

Dreams. The Jacob narrative presents dreaming as a numinous experience, a communication from the deity that puts the immediate situation of the hero in the context of the promise. In the first dream that Jacob has at Bethel, on the way to Haran, God renews for him the Abrahamic promise and emphasises his future return to the father's house. In the second dream, while he is still in Haran, God explicitly orders him to return ('leave this land and return to the land of your fathers and to your kin', Gen. 31:3; cf. 31:13). By limiting Jacob's kin (*môledet*) to the immediate family back in Canaan, the text simultaneously excludes the mother's side of the family from Jacob's kinship. It is interesting that in the language of Jacob's visions Haran is only qualified in a negative way, as a state of separation from the father's land, a finite and transitory stage of Jacob's journey there and back (at Bethel Haran is not mentioned at all, being concealed by the broad term *hadderek hazzeh,* 'this journey', Gen. 28:20). In terms of God's promise, the opposition of Canaan and Haran becomes a dichotomy of sacred and profane. (Fishbane 1975, 36)

Apart from Jacob, Laban is the only person whose dream is recounted in the narrative ('God came to Laban the Aramean in a dream by night and said to him, "Take care not to speak to Jacob either good or bad"', Gen. 31:24; cf. 31:29). Here the communication from God has an entirely different character: this dream conveys the idea of separation, setting a limit to further interaction between Laban, the bearer of the mother's lineage, and Jacob. It is interesting that at this point Laban is called an Aramean (*'ărammî*), a foreigner, which not only introduces the idea of national boundaries, but also emphasises Laban's connection with Rebekah (in Genesis 25:20 the word *'ărām* was used three times to introduce Rebekah, 'daughter of Bethuel the Aramean of Paddan-aram, sister of Laban the Aramean'). The end of Jacob's stay in the mother's land is thus manifested in the increasing alienation of Laban, and through him, indirectly, of Rebekah. Along the same lines, Jacob's wives define themselves as foreigners to their father: in Genesis 31:15 Rachel and Leah say to Jacob, 'Does he [Laban] not regard us as foreigners?' This

definition signifies, as Exum holds it, the passing over of the women and their children from the father's control to that of the husband, and more generally, a denial of the importance of matrilineal descent. (Exum 1993, 117) To summarise the point, one could conclude that God's communications in the mother's land happen in the form of dreams that facilitate the hero's return to Canaan, and sever his links with the mother's lineage.

Idols. The foreign character of the mother's land is further emphasised with the idea of its religious alterity. Laban's idols or household gods (*t^{e}rapîm*), which are called in Gen. 35:2, 4 'foreign gods', receive a particularly subversive meaning in the narrative, as they become an instrument of a feminine quest for power. Rachel, the favourite wife of Jacob, steals her father's idols, and later in an attempt to hide them, sits on the *t^{e}rapîm*, further undermining her father's authority by doing so (Gen. 31:33-35). From the patriarchal perspective, the *t^{e}rapîm* belong to the inferior reality of the mother's land, and the narrator clearly shows the superiority of the God of Jacob's fathers over the gods of Laban in the final dispute between Jacob and Laban (Gen. 31:26-55). The difference in the presentation of the two sides of the dispute is striking: the short designations of Laban's idols ('my gods', Gen. 31:30, 'your gods', Gen. 31:32) stand out against the elaborate formulas describing the God of Jacob ('the God of your father', Gen. 31:29; 'the God of my father, the God of Abraham, and the fear of Isaac', Gen. 31:42; 'the God of Abraham, and the God of Nahor, the God of their father', Gen. 31:53). In this dispute, the God of Jacob's fathers wins, and so Jacob may leave his mother's land, but an element of alterity lingers with him and his family: the *t^{e}rapîm,* which Rachel stole from Laban, stay in her possession until the end of their journey, when all the 'foreign gods' are destroyed at Bethel (Gen. 35:2-4). Only then can Jacob reaffirm his fidelity to the God of his fathers.

Divination. It is likely that household gods or *t^{e}rapîm* were used for the purpose of divination (cf. the references to *t^{e}rapîm* as an object of divination in Ezek. 21:26; Zech. 10:2). In Genesis 30:27 Laban learns through divination that God has blessed him because of Jacob. This detail seems to imply that the idols that are supposedly used for divination are subordinate to the higher deity who alone can issue blessings.

Looking at the above features of the Haran episode it would seem that the narrator, presenting a male, institutional, rational perspective, grouped them together as signifiers of alterity, constructing thereby a complex if biased metaphor of the feminine. The mother's land is much more than a spatial element of the narrative; it is the *locus* and in a broad sense the

symbol of its main transformation. This is a shadowland where Jacob, the male hero, a bearer of the patriarchal promise, or the conscious Self, has to be enslaved, subdued, allowing the other side of reality to manifest itself. Jacob's exile resembles a mythic journey to the 'other side', which effects a transformation, endowing the hero with a new identity. In this way the contradiction between Father and Mother, the main contradiction of the cycle is mediated: Jacob is separated from his father and the promise, and can only come back when he has matured enough to become Israel in the exile of his mother's land. Accordingly, towards the end of Jacob's journey, the mother's influence is being gradually relinquished. As the first indication of it, the foreign gods are disposed of in Shechem (Gen. 35:2-4). Second, Rebekah's nurse Deborah dies and is buried in Bethel (Gen. 35:8); this seemingly superfluous detail is the last time Jacob's mother is mentioned in the narrative, apart from the later reference to her grave (Gen. 49:31). Finally, Rachel, the younger wife of Jacob who continues Rebekah's strand in the narrative, dies in childbirth before the family reaches the home of Jacob's father (Gen. 35:16-20).

The function of Jacob's narrative as a myth of national origin is to establish boundaries of national identity, moving from what is potential and undefined to what is defined and structured. The mother's land plays an extremely important role in this process. The three successive patriarchs who live in Canaan are the only ones whom the narrative memory associates with God (cf. 'God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob'), and this association lays the foundations of the myth. But in order to initiate the dynamics of national identity the myth seems to require the feminine, the Other, and therefore it introduces Haran, the realm of the Mother. Along the similar lines, Exum has observed that the father in the biblical narrative is a source of unity, whereas the mother is the source of difference; her function is 'to differentiate Israel from (some of) the surrounding peoples'. (Exum 1993, 145) It is significant that none of the forefathers of Israel receives a direct representational value of a nation while staying in the promised land of Canaan; the collective representation appears only in the name of Israel given to Jacob on the way from Haran. The new name reflects the struggles of the Subject on both sides of the 'looking glass': Jacob is called *yiśrā'ēl* as the one who 'has striven (*śārāh*) with God and with men, and has prevailed' (Gn 32:29). This phrase summarises a narrative transformation, which incorporates the metaphors of both the father's and the mother's land and of which the otherness of the Mother is a prerequisite. The narrative status of Jacob on his return is loaded with the connotation of national identity, and so is the status of his children; one could argue that their special role of the forefathers of the

twelve tribes of Israel is related to their being born in Haran, the land of the Mother.

Forms of binary relationships in the Jacob narrative

The structural tension between Father and Mother that permeates the Jacob narrative translates itself at the level of specific male and female characters. Here the patriarchs control all the initial and final situations, and the function of the feminine is to mediate, to effect transformations without ever participating in the final balance of power. This principle is clearly demonstrated by looking at the patterns of relationships in the story.

It is not surprising that this narrative based on opposition and conflict abounds in binary relationships. The main storyline of the cycle describes an antagonistic relationship between the Subject and his Twin, or between Jacob and Esau. Starting with their struggle in the mother's womb the Subject and his Twin go through a process of differentiation, which leads them through the experiences of deception, theft, anger, fear and exile, to reconciliation and the final establishment of boundaries. The Subject-Twin relationship moves from *confrontation* towards *association*. This final pattern of association manifests itself when Jacob metaphorically returns the blessing to Esau (Gen. 33:11), and when the two brothers together bury their father Isaac in Gen. 35:29.

In addition to this obvious antagonistic relationship the story unfolds another, more subtle type of opposition, namely, the complementary relationship between the Subject and his Double, or between Jacob and Rachel. The many similarities between Jacob and his favourite wife have been widely acknowledged in the scholarly literature. Jan Fokkelman calls Rachel a 'true Jacoba, related by nature to Jacob.' (Fokkelman 1975, 163; cf. Fishbane 1979, 56) Like Jacob, Rachel is the younger sibling, deprived of status, and, like him, she strives to acquire it. Both of them are resourceful and determined, both are engaged in a confrontation with their rivals. Both of them, as Fishbane observes, deceive their fathers and flee from home; moreover, in both cases the intention of the deceiver is to appropriate the patriarchal blessing and inheritance. (Fishbane 1979, 56) Moreover, Rachel's behaviour seems to closely imitate that of her husband on two particular occasions.

First, Rachel buys Leah's mandrakes, presumably as a fertility drug, in exchange for the marital right to Jacob (Gen. 30:14-16); the episode strongly resembles the incident when Jacob buys Esau's birthright for a bowl of soup (Gen. 25:29-34). In both cases an exchange takes place

between two siblings, where both Rachel and Jacob establish the terms of the exchange in response to an expressed need of their opponent; both obtain what they want, but are not reported to benefit from it, whereas Leah and Esau take immediate possession of the purchased right or object (night with Jacob; bowl of pottage). In both cases the opponents (Leah and Esau) have physical desires (sexual desire, hunger) that Rachel and Jacob use in order to acquire a status-related advantage. On another occasion, Rachel steals and hides her father's idols (Gen. 31:33-35), which matches Jacob's stealing of his father's blessing in Genesis 27. Scholars have observed lexical similarities between the two stories (cf. the use of the verb *mašaš,* 'to feel' in Gen. 31:34, 37 and in Gen. 27:22) that seem to highlight the weakened position of the patriarchal figure (Laban and Isaac) as someone who cannot see clearly. (Fishbane 1979, 56; Wenham 1994, 268) If one agrees with the likely suggestion of Fishbane that the idols represent the patriarchal blessing and inheritance,[4] then by stealing them Rachel must be claiming something of the same nature as the blessing of Isaac.

What is the function of this marked parallelism? Indeed, what is the narrator's purpose in introducing another Subject, subordinate to the first and bearing such a close resemblance to it? In this story the hero's journey, like a play of mirrors, seems to generate multiple reflections revealing different aspects of his narrative identity. Yair Zakovitch calls this type of narrative a 'reflection story'. In such a story the narrator 'shaped a character, or his or her actions, as the antithesis of a character in another narrative and that character's actions'. (Zakovitch 1993, 139) According to Zakovitch, this technique is used to guide the reader in evaluating characters. However, it appears to me that narrative parallelism functions at a deeper level than that of pragmatic or ethical characterisation. Rather, reflection stories seem to redress the balance within the narrative; they manifest its inner thematic connections and causal links, and on the whole, together with other forms of intertextuality, reveal a narrative world where everything is a sign of everything else.

While the Subject and his Double display many parallel features, they still stand in opposition to each other. Their binarity is based on the same complementary opposition between Male and Female that governs the metaphors of father's and mother's land. Rachel continues the *mother*'s strand in the story, epitomizing all the features of the feminine known to the biblical narrator: her meeting with Jacob at the well, her beauty, the love of her husband for her, her initial barrenness, and her shrewdness, all these features associate her with Jacob's mother Rebekah and single her out as the one who continues the matriarchal succession. Like Rebekah,

who once took the place of Isaac's mother Sarah in her tent (Gen. 24:67), Rachel takes the place of Jacob's mother in his mother's land.

At this point it may be observed how the narrative setting affects the value of a specific signifier. The parallelism between Rebekah and Rachel is limited, for Rachel's role as a character is restricted to the area outside the promised land. She is Jacob's shadow, confined to Haran, the realm of the mother, the shadow-land of the story. Rachel cannot reach the full stature of Rebekah, whose structural function is that of the Sender and Helper, but she rises from the role of the Object, assigned to her from the beginning (Gen. 28:2; 29:18), to that of the Subject's Double. Her function in the story is determined by her belonging to what is for Jacob the other side of the looking glass, and represents therefore his own inverted programme. This inverted character of Rachel's narrative programme is clearly visible in the wedding scene (Gen. 29:22-26). Here Rachel, the younger daughter, symbolically representing Jacob, is passed over in favour of the elder daughter, Leah, who represents Esau. Rachel's personal tragedy seems to be a direct reversal of Jacob's success. While Jacob in the course of the narrative becomes a chosen heir to the promise, blessed and prosperous, his beloved wife stays unblessed (barren) for a long time, and her own bid for status in stealing her father's idols brings about a curse resulting in her death (Gen 31:32; 35:16-20).

These observations lead to the conclusion that the role of Rachel as the Subject's Double is to reflect and invert the narrative identity of Jacob. In this she resembles the Jungian *Shadow*, the repressed part of the Subject that comes to light when the conscious Self is subdued. This ambiguous role of Rachel determines the pattern of her relationship with Jacob. While Jacob's changing attitude to Esau brings the hero to see God in the face of his brother (Gen. 33:10), Rachel's face for Jacob remains a reflection of his own. Therefore, if the Subject-Twin relationship moves from *confrontation* towards *association*, the Subject-Double relationship follows the opposite pattern, changing from *unity* to *dissociation*. At the beginning the narrator stresses Jacob's love for Rachel, using the root *'hb*, 'to love', three times in the space of twelve verses: 'Jacob loved Rachel', Gen. 29:18; seven years of service seemed to him like a few days 'because of his love for her', Gen. 29:20; 'and he loved Rachel more than Leah', Gen. 29:30. Yet the sphere of affection is restricted by the driving forces of the narrative centred on status and fertility. Therefore, despite the initial affinity and love, the association between the Subject and his Double soon begins to crumble down. First, Jacob's love turns into anger in the face of Rachel's desperate demand for children ('and Jacob's anger flamed at Rachel', Gen. 30:2). Later, having left Haran, the character of Rachel loses

its significance in the narrative, and Jacob effectively sentences her to death, saying to Laban, 'whoever you find your gods with shall not live' (Gen. 31:32). The beloved wife of Jacob is not allowed to enter the land of Abraham and Isaac: she dies in childbirth and the pillar that Jacob erects over her tomb, seals the final character of his dissociation from his Double. But this dissociation also signals the end of Jacob's story. With the feminine presence in the myth gone, the Subject's journey is over. The story of Jacob and Rachel, like that of Adam and Eve, demonstrates the general pattern of dissociation that characterizes the Male-Female opposition in the Hebrew narrative, where love stories do not have happy endings.

It could be said by way of conclusion that the narrative of Jacob validates the feminine as the area of otherness at the level of a general metaphor as well as that of a specific character. David Jobling in his study of Genesis 2-3 said that structural methods of exegesis have a potential, almost fully unexploited, for furthering the programme of feminist biblical exegesis. (Jobling 1986, 19) The analysis of binary structures in the narrative of Genesis 25:19-37:1 shows just how rich that potential can be. What gives the story its psychological depth and complexity is that it is shaped by the structural opposition Male-Female, acknowledging the feminine as a fundamental constituent of existence, yet simultaneously undermining it as a subordinate reality that never quite rises to the status of the Subject. Significantly, out of all the heroes of the Hebrew Bible it is Jacob, the character profoundly affected by the feminine, who is chosen to be the eponymous ancestor of Israel. In this way the earlier stages of formation of biblical myth converge with the institutional framework of its final version.

Notes

1 See also various applications of the method in Jobling (1986).

2 Gunn and Fewell (1993) point to the difference between Isaac's '*authority*, or the right to make decisions and command obedience', and Rebekah's '*power,* the capacity to effect change', 73.

3 Yair Zakovitch (1993) describes this instance of symmetrical inversion as an expression of an 'eye for an eye', 140.

4 The evidence from the archives of Nuzi supports the idea that *t^{e}rap̲îm* symbolised family status and normally belonged to the paterfamilias (see Sarna 1966, 201). For a discussion of different views on the significance of the *t^{e}rap̲îm* see Wenham 1994, 273-274.

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