



Prometheus is a Myth: Response to "Art and Time" by Erich Neumann

Before humans roamed the Earth there were the Titans—so believed the ancient Greeks. Among these gods lived the creator of mankind, Prometheus, who loved man so dearly that he blessed him with the ability to walk upright as the gods did. Greater yet, he delivered to man the divine gift of fire, the spark of human progress (Greek Mythology). Prometheus was a bearer of divine gifts to this mortal class, but fire was not the only treasure the Greeks received from the gods. Inspiration of all kinds was said to have come from above—from the Muses, nine goddesses who reigned over music, dance, and poetry (Theoi). The myths involving Prometheus and the Muses emphasized to the ancient Greeks that above the realm of man's reality there is a divine plane from which the sources of human progress are delivered. In short, the ancient Greek man could lay no claim to any creation of his; rather, he would attribute all creation to the gods, subordinating himself as an instrument of theirs.

Similarly, Erich Neumann argues in "Art and Time" that creativity—the motor behind progress and human achievement—exists in a divine realm known as the Unconscious (Neumann 1). Beyond mortal comprehension, only an individual with the ability to bridge this gap between the divine and the human—the Creative Individual—could tap this mystical realm for inspiration. It is his duty to deliver divine gifts in the form of symbols, such as art and language, to humanity.

Humans, however, are *innately* gifted with the capacity to think and to create. They do not

need to surrender their minds to the divine in order to do so. Born with Consciousness and Creativity, any individual has artistic ability within himself. Therein lies the source of a human self-degradation that has led to mankind's relinquishment of his own greatest faculties.

Consider, first, the capabilities of the human mind from the start of its existence and its features that separated it from the savagery of animals. With no claws or fangs with which to hunt, man taught himself to farm and create weapons. When shelter was needed, a human mind manifested a home. When sickness set in, a human mind was able to find a cure. Man quickly became responsible for his own destiny, his own health, and his own life—a burden larger than any other creature would have to knowingly bear.

In many ways, man was at this point his own god. He was his own source of inspiration, creation, and thought. His life came from the life of another mortal, and he would be the source of a future life and a future mind. But the burden he carried of his duty to life worsened, and he grew more encumbered by a deep anxiety regarding the unknown and his impending death. Soon, the gift of consciousness with which he was born became his greatest stressor, and so he gave it up and relegated its duties to an invented divinity.

For the earliest men, this took the form of attributing personal achievement to one's ancestors. The Great Individuals of a society "never [gave] themselves as individuals credit for what they [had] done but [imputed] it to their inspiring predecessors, to the spirits of their ancestors, to the totem, or to ... the collective spirit" (5). With the arrival of cults and religion, consciousness and its gift of creativity were then attributed to the blessings of deities, as in the case of the ancient Greeks. In every instance, however, man would subordinate his mind, and therefore his Self, to the unconscious, the insentient. By extension, knowing that the unthinking human is a corpse, man had

surrendered his creative capacity to death.

From this Unconscious, however, Neumann concedes that a collective consciousness does indeed arise by virtue of the reinforcement of the individual ego and the development of consciousness (6). Man's increasing mental capacity allows him to take command of a new aspect of his social reality—but Neumann is quick to point out that: "This does not mean that man suspects a connection between his transpersonal world, {the unconscious}, and the depths of his own human psyche" (7). He is still merely the vessel of a greater will. This time, as an upholder of his society's canons and dogma, he is surrendering the very mind that was once his greatest instrument for survival and achievement.

Thus Neumann pits the artist who is a member of the collective consciousness against what he calls the Creative Individual, the one who subordinates his mind to the divine rather than to his society. He argues that the Creative Individual, connecting to the collective unconscious, is responsible for "new developments, transformations, revolutions, and renewals" at the cost of being an isolated, sometimes unwelcome member of his own society, in polar opposition to the standards he was taught to uphold (8-11).

This opposition is, however, not between the champion of canon and the champion of the Unconscious. Excluding the mystical and divine that Neumann assumes, it is more precisely between the artist for the collective consciousness and individual who is a free thinker and creator, independent of the views of his time and culture. The Creative Individual is not one who must subordinate his mind to the divine, but one who acts on the idea that he is divine in his own right—even if he does so unknowingly. The Creative Individual is indeed the artist "whose mission it is to compensate for ... the cultural canon" (11). But he does so consciously, and the realization of

his artwork is the result of the conscious effort of his mind, not a gift bestowed to him from the heavens.

Likewise, Neumann argues that because individuals today relegate to the specialists (artists, poets, and so forth) the translation of experience into symbolic representations, they have lost their connection to the unconscious (13). But it is not unthought that they have given up. It is, in fact, the opposite. Neumann's assertion that at the peak of originality, creators merely tap into a shared resource of divine inspiration suggests a contradiction: that humanity's most original works are also its least original. Worse, it implies that man is incapable of creative thought alone; it is only when he borrows from the heavens that he may achieve. The greatest works are not, as Neumann puts it, "a dialogue between man and the ultimate" (18) but a dialogue between man and his ultimate Self. The divine does not use humans in order to communicate with itself; the human mind is its own tool for the transcendence and achievement of the body and psyche. It is no surprise, then, that Rabbi Nachman whom Neumann quotes says that "the great light [is] of the innermost world" (19). That is to say that the great human abilities to see, to know, to think and then create come from within—not from above, and not from society.

This inner connection to the Self, however, would be severed by the submission to any divine entity, were that entity not also located within the psyche of the individual in question. So, although humans have been creating such awesome works as to only be attributable to the hand of God, their creative ability—though they renounce it—came from within. The ability and inspiration to build the most impossible and ambitious works, from pyramids and cathedrals to the mural above the Sistine Chapel and any of the world's religions' Holy books, from the grandest architecture to the mathematical perfection of the sculpture of David, from Da Vinci's Last Supper to Galileo's

discoveries, all are attributable in reality to the incredible capacity of the human mind to create. The transitive relation of the self, the divine, and the source of creativity determines that, although he refuses to recognize it, the man acting in the name of his God is actually acting in blind submission to his innermost Self.

Sadly, even this connection with the innermost world decays with each coming *ism*. Peaking at the Renaissance which preached that beauty was the world's real form, the connection was weakened by the dawn of impressionism which preached that beauty was the world in an altered form—perhaps the way it would be exhibited in a memory. It suggested that reality was beautiful and therefore needed cosmetic work. The later dawn of surrealism weakened the connection further, suggesting that beauty was found only in other worlds, dream worlds. It asserted that the world as created by the minds of society was not beautiful, and so the active minds were flawed and only in their unthinking state—in dreams—could they attain beauty. Each era was a progression toward the willing refusal of mankind to think. This progression was realized ultimately in modernism, which “denies that it is beauty” (37). If it is impossible for there to be beauty in art, then man has successfully severed his connection with the divine within himself. He has therefore shut off a part of his mind and refused to think. Each consecutive epoch in art evidences the atrophying of man's former creative capacity, leading him to indulge in its opposite: consumption.

If one word can accurately describe the zeitgeist of the present, it is materialism. Our newfound drive to consume and not create is the manifestation of the antithesis of creativity. It is our palpable sanction to the antigod, to Satan or to demons, to that which opposes creation, that we enable our own destruction. The world of today looks considerably like the self-consuming Ouroboros, and so its artists will disappear once consumed. Neumann here agrees stating that today

is marked by “swarms of ‘little artists’” — little artists who never achieve greatness in their works as had the artists of eras past (26).

In order to survive and to progress, it is man’s responsibility to think. He must actively and consciously accept both the rewards and burdens of having a mind. When he has accepted his own divinity as fact, he will have himself to credit for the achievement of creation. When he recognizes the brilliant potential of the effort of his mind, he will be compelled by his own force to create. Mankind will dethrone the gods, and today’s equivalents to Prometheus and the Greek’s Muses will descend into myth.

In the words of Howard Roark from Ayn Rand’s *The Fountainhead*, “The world is perishing from an orgy of self-sacrificing” (Rand 684). But the world of today is not entirely overrun by consumers, or, as she puts it, parasites. There remain creators even in our modern age. Modern art that celebrates the human self above all else and declares itself beautiful can still exist—we just have to be perceptive in order to find it. Take, for example, the almost universally unknown song “Love Is...” by the South African rap group Max Normal.tv. In it, the artist invents his own Spiritual Master, his own God that manifests itself as none other than the person he is. He creates an identity that becomes truer than the one he was born into by looking within to see his own divinity. His Bible is then the words he writes. He is deeply religious, but prays to no deity. He seeks only to create and to continue to love his work. He reminds us that although we are mortals, “young descendants of Eve,” we have it within us to “Invent the future - then manifest it” (Jones). This is the spirit of humanity and the voice of a true creative modern artist. This is proof that man, if willing and conscious, can “Spark something new that’ll last forever” (Jones).

Works Cited

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