The Goddard Journal

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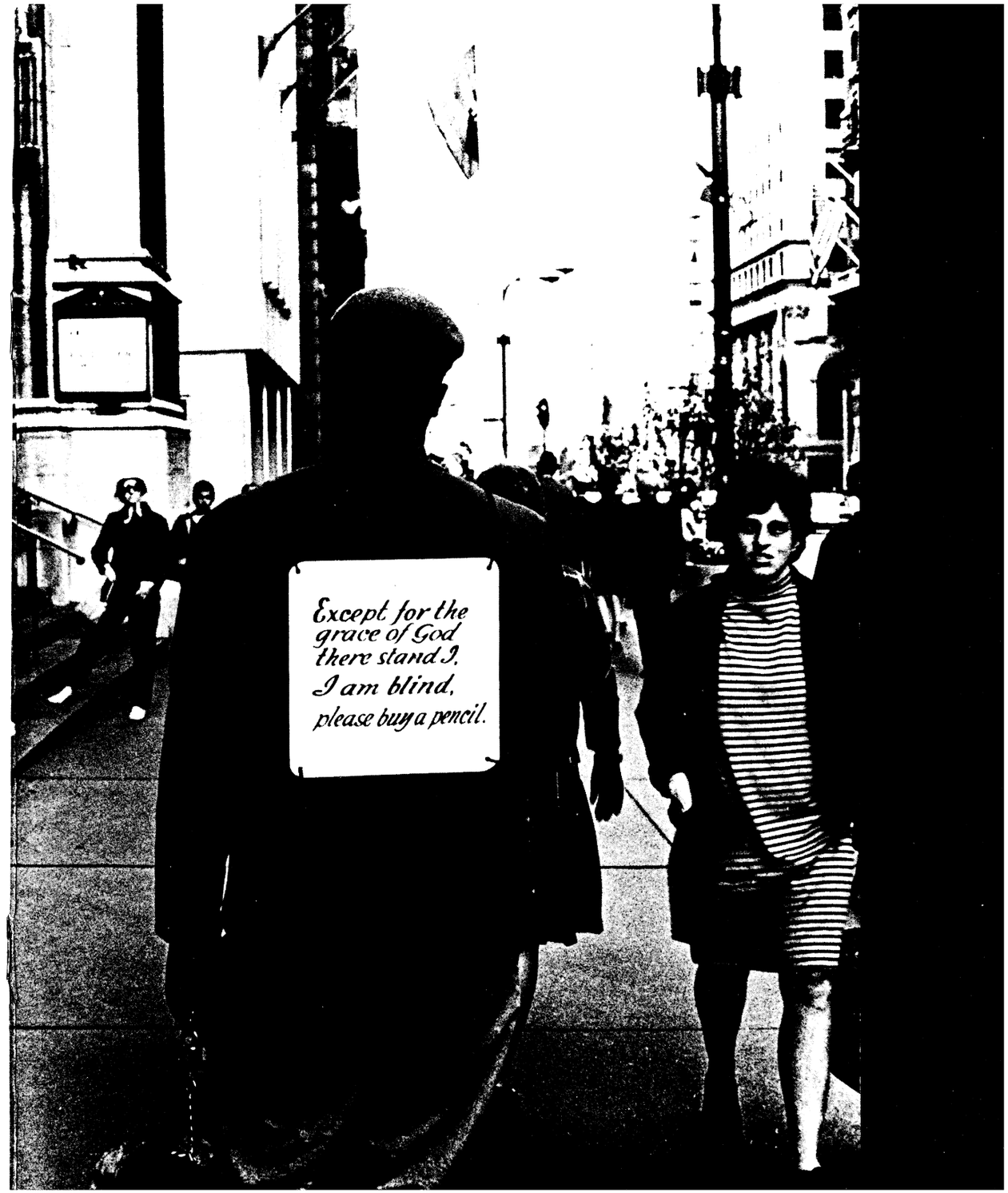

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Contents:

The Editors invite submissions.

Joseph Campbell: An Interview

The following is an edited version of an interview with Joseph Campbell which took place April 18th at Goddard College. Participating in the interview were: Norman Unrau, Ernest Boaten, and Allen Cobb. The entire interview is available on tape at the Goddard College Learning Aids Center.

I: In your studies of mythology, you have used your knowledge of psychology and psychoanalysis to interpret myths. Do you think more might be accomplished if one were to have at his disposal a variety of methodologies?

C: I am very much against methodology because I think methodology determines what you are going to learn. For instance, Levi-Strauss' structuralism. All you can find is what structuralism is going to allow you to find. And an open-ended approach to the facts in front of you is going to be impossible there. He insures himself against illumination, it seems to me.

I: Is it the fault of methodology itself, or the person's inability to use methodology as a tool in a flexible way?

C: Sure, the flexible way is all right. You have to know how to run, walk, stand, and sit down. But if all you know how to do is sit down, then you're limiting your experience.

In the twenties and thirties functionalism was in fashion. You could not make cross-cultural comparisons; you had to interpret everything in terms of what you knew about the local culture. That would be like examining the appendex in the body to determine the condition of modern man. You have to follow it back and find out what its use was in earlier times.

Similarly, many of the elements in a culture are vestigial of earlier uses, earlier functions. And these men, for instance, Radcliffe-Brown in his volume (and I think it is a splendid volume) on the Andaman Islanders, just fails to interpret the myths. Here they are all in front of him, and his approach doesn't answer the questions. All one has to do is make a bit of a comparison, and one finds that the interpre-

tations come out. So, being stuck to one method, he so limits his vision that he fails to interpret the culture.

I: I suppose the tendency to totalize a methodology in science could be compared to a process of totalization in religion, where the chance of a revelation is somehow diminished if not eradicated because the structures are frozen, the rituals are frozen. And the vitality, the inner principle of vitality, seems to be stultified.

C: Well, I personally go with that all the way. And I think this stress on structure, on this method or that method, is a kind of offshoot of monotheism. And I notice that the Jewish scholars are more inclined to it than others. They just **have** to have one mode of interpretation. Look at the Marxists, look at the Freudians — and now along comes Levi-Strauss' structuralism, and nothing else counts. It's amazing. It's just our little team here, and any evidence that doesn't fit in here is not to be regarded. I have a little theory on this. . .

I: I immediately refer in my mind to Freud's **The Future of an Illusion,** where he talks about the origin of monotheism from the family structure, from the father; and we know that the Jewish families have brought this on the father. Perhaps this is one of the psychological roots for that sort of narrow approach to existence.

C: Exactly. In Freuds **Totem and Taboo,** he says, "I admit I cannot explain the mother religions." I forgot the page reference, but it's there in so many words.

I: This is something he can't work on.

C: It doesn't come in, because what he is following in that **Totem and Taboo** is the father horde, then the brother clan, and then the patriarchal religions. That's the sequence there. . . but what about the mother cult?

The Hebrew tradition in the beginning is the tradition of a hunting warrior, not of a settled, tilling-the-land, trading people. You see? And it's from the latter that the origins of higher civilization stem: agricultlre, animal husbandry, not the wandering hunter. The hunters are all male oriented: the male brings in the food. The planters are mother oriented: the woman is the analog of the producing, nourishing earth. So, Dr. Freud, with his sort of patriarchal antipathy to the female principle, just can't handle it.

I: I know that you can't have a tragic action without having a primordial purpose, since without the purpose, there is no chance for re-

versal or even a tragic perception such as occurs in Oedipus. I couldn't imagine **Oedipus Rex** being written by a chinaman, or I couldn't imagine something like **Oedipus Rex** coming out of an oriental culture. How do you explain this?

C: I had a very interesting experience right on that head. When I was in India, I became associated for a while with a little avant garde theater company in Bombay which called itself the Theater Unit. This was a company made up largely of Non-Hindu Indians. The chap that was running it was of Arabian background, and his closest associate was an Indian Jew. You know there's an old-time Jewish community in India. Many of the people participating were Parsees. And what were they doing? They were doing **Oedipus the King.** They had their own clientele who were used to what they were performing. I saw them perform this in front of their own audience in Bombay, and then a couple of months later, I was in New Delhi, and they had just arrived and were going to perform **Oedipus Rex** for a totally Indian audience.

God, you couldn't believe it! There I sat, and I had been in India long enough to participate in the audience's point of view — and the horror! the this, that and the other. Those people were utterly appalled. I've never seen such a wallop come across from the stage. They had never seen a Greek tragedy; they had never read a Greek tragedy; they knew nothing about the Greek tradition.

The emphasis in India is all for wiping out the person: he isn't there. In Sanscrit, there isn't even a word for **individual.** The Indians aren't individuals; they're members of a caste, they're members of the family. They are in certain age groups, they are in certain moods; all of these general things. But here was this personal thing of the most violent and taboo-breaking sort. The audience was just knocked out.

You could see that it was an absolute violation of everything they ever thought should be put on the stage, on every level, because there's no such thing as a tragedy in the Orient. How can you have a tragedy when you believe in reincarnation? The oriental theatre is a kind of fairy-tale theatre: lovely nuances and playful situations, but nothing really serious. That which suffers in the oriental tragedy is what ought to suffer anyhow. Just this impersonable body. Let it get thrown away — who cares?

The hero, the theme of emphasis in the Indian mythology, is not the person; it is the reincarnating Siva which puts on persons and puts them off. And the Greeks shift it to the person. In the Orient, the per-

son who fails in the adventure is a clown, a fool. In the West it is the human being.

I remember years and years ago, when I was writing the **Hero with a Thousand Faces,** whenever I wanted an example of a failure, I looked to the Greeks. For the Greek heroes were the ones who suffered. The oriental heroes are the ones who go cruising right through the myth.

I: I'm trying to think of an oriental equivalent of Greek tragedy.

C: You mean something that would wallop us, like **Oedipus Rex** walloped the Indians?

I: Yes. What occurred to me, though it is not parallel, is the course of the tragedy as in Beckett's **Waiting for Godot.** To my mind, the tragedy in the play is in the audience. He's taken everything but the tragedy, and having left it out it is tragic. It just presents you with bare things, so completely bare that the offense is devastating.

C: Well, I can think of something that would hit Western people just as hard as the Western tragedy hit the Indians, and that is the good raw Indian sacrifice. One of these sacrifices, for example, where one is to skin a goat alive and see to it that the goat remains alive until all the skin has been peeled.

I: That would do it.

C: That would do it, would it not?

I: What about African mythology?

C: Oh, it's a rich mythology. Frobenius' thirteen volumes **The Atlantis** is just terrific. Very rich.

I: Have you done work in that area?

C: Oh, a lot, yes. But it hasn't been well-collected in English. The Germans and the French have done better, I think, than the English. England is more, you know, through the Congo with gun and camera.

I: Stanley and Livingston. . .

C: Yes. The Germans and the French went at it. Now the English are coming in. To me, the most interesting thing in African studies recently is this lining up of Nok culture and the Effie culture, really validating the intuition Frobenius had at the end of the century, namely of the antiquity of that culture complex in West Africa, dating it back to 1000 B.C. Frobenius was the first to recognize and deal with Africa as an historical entity, not just a lot of savage tribes.

I: How is it Frobenius hasn't been translated into English?

C: I discovered Frobenius in my hunting-around period during the depression, before 1932. Around 1939, I was so excited, I gave Frobenius' books to my literary agent to see if a publisher would take them on. I have the letters from those publishers: ". . . might be of some interest to some Negro university, but. . ." So that's why Frobenius isn't there. But the real reason was that the American Anthropological Society did not agree with his propositions — this is another of these monotheistic groups. Frobenius had notions of diffusion, so he was a diffusionist which is a dirty word in the American Anthropological Society. And this man who was greatly respected in Europe is just unknown here.

I have a friend whose book on international political matters went to a publisher that I know very well. That book was rejected by that publisher because she just mentioned Frobenius.

I: I'm curious about your fourth volume.

C: The fourth volume will be out the twentieth of May. One month from the day after tomorrow, and believe me, I'm glad. I worked on this for four years. It took the publishers a whole year to get it published. It was a bit complicated, but you won't know why when you see it.

I: Could you capsulate it?

C: I could. It's a book that deals with what I call creative mythology. In traditional mythology to which the first three volumes of **The Masks of God** are devoted — primitive, oriental, occidental — the mythological symbols are given by the tradition and the individual is supposed to have the experiences as intended. A creative artist works the other way around. He has an experience of some depth or quality and seeks the images through which to render it. This is the reverse. So I'm calling this book **Creative Mythology.**

It deals with first the problem of the aesthetic experience, what I call "aesthetic arrest," and then it presents a review of the traditions of images which the European modern artist inherits. We have the old Bronze Age traditions; we have the Semetic Hebrew traditions; we have the classical Greek traditions. We also have the esoteric mystery cult tradition, and the gnostic tradition; we have the Muslim tradition which was very strong in the Middle Ages; we have the Celtic, Germanic tradition and all that. This is the whole vocabulary; this is the wonderful treasury from which the artist will seek his im-

ages. Actually, they will coagulate to him if he's half a literate man. The images will come and fit in with what he's saying. And then I take as my principle document the tradition of European secular literature from the eleventh to the twentieth centuries. To pull all this together, I have taken literature that deals with common themes. The two common themes that seem to me to represent the dominant influence in North European writings are the Tristan theme and the Grail. I start with this cluster of authors at the end of the twelfth and early thirteenth centuries. Then I present echoes of them, first in Wagner; then the constellation around him: Schoepenhauer and Nietzche; and then following that, of course, are Mann and Joyce. So I go largely back and forth with the wasteland theme.

Boy it's exciting, and what is it? It's conflict between authority and experience. That's my main thing all the way through. And along with that comes the affirmation of the individual in his individual experience which is possible only today in the Western world. Our religion has been imported from the levant with its authoritarianism and even in the Protestant revolution, which was a kind of triumph of the European individualistic spirit, they still hung onto the Bible, so you have to believe that stupid thing from God-knows-when. But the real secular literature breaks away. And the breaking away happens in the Grail. Of course it comes to flower just at the time of Innocent the Third who was the authoritarian of authoritarians, and it's finished — it cuts right off there, around 1225-1230. The Inquisition is brought in in 1232, and we have to wait. There you have this picture of the break-through. Of course, I then have to build a bridge; I have to come down the line. But it is amazing how few the men are to whom we owe everything we've got, who have the courage to say "you're wrong." So I make them my heroes. But I have a female hero who's my first, and she's the one that starts the whole thing going, and that's Heloise. Abelard's Heloise; she's queen of the book. That's the capsule.

I: Did you find it difficult to hold these things together and make these assertions?

C: Oh, no problem at all; it was the mythological material that told me about it in the first place. I had no problem composing the ideas in these books because I've been reading this material for literally forty years. The problem was compressing it into four volumes. My original intention was one volume, I'll have you know, and that is what I contracted for with Viking Press. My head was splitting, and I remember

very vividly one morning I woke up at four A.M., knowing that it was four books, knowing what the four books were I crawled out of bed, headwise, not to disturb my wife, and went into the study and plotted the whole thing

I: Strange that both William James and Freud had similar experiences when they were moving in a creative direction. Freud woke up at two in the morning, James at three.

C: I, at four, you see. . . . that is why I had more to say!

Also, I let myself go a little more passionately than I have in my earlier books because I really think that the clergy now deserve a real walloping. They know that what they're teaching has been left behind, and they keep trying to bring in back. I have recently had some acute experiences in this context. Here I am, someone who's been interested in mythology all his life, and the church now, it seems, is interested in mythology. So they invite me to these dialogues and trilogues and tetralogues and so on. And when I put forward what I know to be traditional Christian belief, even Anglican bishops throw up their hands and say, "Oh, this isn't what we believe anymore." But they're still carrying the Book through. What they believe in now is love and humanity and all that. I say to them: well, you can get that in the Upanishads, in Laotse; you can get that anywhere, so what's your claim? They go on claiming uniqueness, you see. Why, Thomas Aquinas said even a Greek can believe in God, but a Greek doesn't know that there is a father, son, and holy ghost; that the son became man and was crucified and through that crucifixion redeemed man from the first sin. This I brought up only five days ago, and Bishop So-and-So said, "Oh, we don't talk that way anymore." So what do they say? Still, they put forward the claim. They're protecting their belief, they really are — this is a funny thing. This ecumenical movement in the Catholic Church is a joke because they are really holding on to their exclusiveness. They are trying to say, without quite saying it, that you have to get baptized to be saved — they can't say anything else and be Catholics. Man is redeemed by Christ's sacrifice; one participates in the sacrifice by participating in the sacraments, which were founded by Christ himself, and outside of that, "outside of the church, no salvation." And as for the Protestant situation, I always remember what James Joyce's Stephen Daedalus says at the end of the **Portrait,** where he is asked "Are you going to become a Protestant?", and he replies, "I've lost my faith, not my self-respect."