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CHRISTIAN TROPOLOGY OF THE ARGONAUT MYTH

The unbiased study of the culture created on the basis of the history of Christian religion and Christian outlook more and more exposes the erroneous nature of the viewpoint that Christianity irreconcilably opposed ancient world as soon as it established itself. Of course, this does not mean that the instances of hostility did not occur at all; however, they should not be identified with the general stand of Christ's Church regarding pagan civilization and culture. Distinguished thinkers and Church Fathers duly and timely appreciated the merits and significance of the best works of ancient culture on the way of spiritual development of the humankind and did not spare efforts for the creative reception of the works.

For example, in the opinion of Clemens of Alexandria, one of the great fathers of the Alexandrian school, development of spiritual culture was accomplished under the guidance of the Divine Logos and therefore, he believed that every science and art had the heavenly origin.¹

A particularly significant role in the creative reception of ancient culture was played anyway by the Cappadocian school. The understanding of the Christian religion as hostile to the past and in general, to the world around was unacceptable for great Cappadocian fathers. It even may be admitted that they determined the attitude of Byzantine Christian thinkers to ancient culture, finding themselves the rightful successors to its best traditions and advancements. The Cappadocian fathers not only used those achievements in their own works, but also advised others to start education with the study of pagan culture. For example, according to Basil the Great, young people were first to train their eyes by reading the best works of ancient authors, as owing

¹ Лосев А., Философия, Мифология, Культура, М., 1991.

to the 'natural faith' (Saint Paul), which means conscience, they offered many spiritually beneficial and unforgettable examples of high morality.

Basil the Great also specifies what should be learned from pagan culture and what should not. Young people can learn a lot when poets describe the images and deeds of noble characters. They should love them, follow their example and compete with them. But if an author pictures an immoral behavior with sympathy and attempts to make it more presentable, young people should block their ears in the way Odysseus did it so that he could not hear the sweet but disastrous tunes of the Sirens.² So, Basil the Great himself offers a specific and memorable example of what can be taken and learned from ancient literature or mythic characters.

Gregory the Theologian so often referred to ancient mythological plots and characters in his homilies in order to embellish and render artistically his ideas that his works, distinguished by laconic style and requiring explanations, were primarily attached with mythological comments, which survived to our times under the name of Nonnos of Panopolis.³

Of course, such attitude of Christianity towards mythology was altogether unacceptable in the sphere of religious consciousness, and the synthesis of Christianity and Hellenism was likewise out of the way.⁴

Before dwelling on the Christian tropology of the Argonaut myth, it is necessary to first present which particular method and position of its reading I use and support. This method and position was developed by A. Losev, the greatest scholar of our times.⁵

According to this method, the interpretation of the myth should be based on the material offered by the mythic consciousness and not on the personal outlook of a researcher. Although this statement sounds indisputable, the actual fact is that the 17th-19th century scholars tried to study the scholarly reality on the basis of subjectivism, almost neglecting the actuality and objectiveness of its categories and sometimes even taking pride in the arguments such as 'we offer the study of a particular subject, but actually we are not concerned about whether they truly exist or not', which is altogether opposite to the mythic consciousness.

This problem exists in our contemporary academic world as well and compels us to face the following dilemma: 1. We talk not about the mythic consciousness itself, but about either our own, or other scholar's attitude,

² Basil the Great, *Address to Young Men on the Right Use of Greek Literature*, PG. vol. XXXI, 564-590.

³ Georgian translation of pseudo-Nonnos mythological comments was published by A. Gamkrelidze and O. Otkhmezuri, Tbilisi, 1989 (in Georgian).

⁴ Fleury E., *Hellénisme et christianisme*, Paris, 1930.

⁵ Лосев А., *Философия, Мифология, Культура*, М., 1991.

which can be either positive or negative (the myth is wonderful, divine, sacred; the myth is a childish invention, it is unreal and frail in philosophical terms) and 2. we should not be willing to express either our or other's attitude, or even to try to develop scholarly consciousness, but to explain the mythic consciousness itself. If we share the second position, we will not find it difficult to agree with the opinion that myth, naturally, 'for mythic consciousness, which is altogether specific, is the highest, the maximally intensive, and extremely tense reality. It is not an invention, but the most genuine truth; it is an altogether indispensable category of thought and life, standing apart from any kind of chance and arbitrariness.'... 'There is nothing accidental, redundant, arbitrary, invented or fantastic' in the myth. It is not an invention, but has the most firm and definite structure and is logical i.e. primarily dialectical and indispensable category of consciousness and being in general.'⁶

A. Losev provides a convincing argument in favor of the opinion that myth is neither an ideal being, nor a primitive-academic and philosophical string of ideas, nor a scheme, an allegory or a piece of poetry, but in contrast to them is lively perceptible and creatable, material reality, containing its own, non-academic pure mythic truth, genuineness, and distinguished for its own principal norms and structure. It may also incorporate in itself schematic, allegorical and live-symbolic layers. It is a personal being, or more precisely, the image and form of a personal being.

Myth should by no means be regarded as a scheme. If it was a scheme, the supersensible and the ideal in it would turn into an abstract idea, while the sensible as meaning would remain inessential and would add nothing to the abstract idea. Myth always relates not about mechanisms, but about organisms and even more than that, about personalities; its characters are not abstract ideas, but live beings, in which the important thing is exactly the specific, the sensible, the particular, the actual and the figurative.

As concerns the allegory of myth, almost every popular mythological theory puts an accent on the allegorical character of myth, discerning therein personified natural elements or deified historical personalities. In those theories, mythic characters are interpreted in a special, allegorical sense; they point to some other reality, apparently more important and conceptualized, but are not actual themselves. But if we follow the above-mentioned viewpoint, according to which mythic reality is neither metaphorical, nor allegorical or allusive, but is an actual, completely self-existing one, we will come to the inevitable conclusion that it should be perceived as it is, naively

⁶ Лосев., 1991, 24.

and word by word.⁷ Allegory will not facilitate its understanding, as it always implies misbalance between the signifier and the signified; the image is always more than idea, being always embellished and illuminated, while the idea is abstract and unexpressed. As concerns myth, we find a full balance between 'idea' and 'image', 'inner' and 'outer', the ideal and the actual. There is nothing in the image that is missing in the idea. Therefore, the expression can be symbolic, which implies the above-mentioned balance between image and idea. 'Idea' is by no means superior to 'image', and neither is 'image' 'particular' in any way, but is perceived as an abstract concept. 'Image' on its part refers to expressed 'idea' and not merely to 'idea'. It is impossible to discern in the symbol 'idea' without 'image' or 'image' without 'idea'. The symbol is an independent reality. Although it implies two planes of being, they are offered through absolute integrity.⁸ This, of course, does not mean that 'idea' and 'symbol' do not at all differ in myth – otherwise, symbol would lack expression. Besides, as the very fact of 'the inner' is identified with the fact of 'the outer' in symbol, 'idea' and 'matter' are united not simply by conceptual, but also by material sameness. For example, the beasts of a fable, whose actions are conscious and who sometimes even utter philosophical ideas, are allegorical, as nobody believes in the actuality of their actions and speeches; however, the author presents one of the horses of Achilles, which suddenly speaks up and prophesies the approaching death of his master, as real, to be interpreted straightforwardly and accepted with naive directness. Hence, here we have a symbol and not an allegory. So, myth is neither a scheme, nor an allegory, but first of all a symbol, which may incorporate in itself schematic, allegorical and complicated symbolical layers.

Naturally, all diverse methods of myth interpretation accepted in the scholarly community were applied in connection with the Argonaut myth as well. One of such interpretations attributes the act of child-slaughter committed by Medea to the cult of Hecate, the representative of the receding matriarchal culture and to the frequent practice of offering young boys as a bloody sacrifice in the last phase of the matriarchate, in this particular case performed by Medea, the priestess of Hecate. In another opinion, the myth is allegorical and Medea's killing of children implies the state of a new life.

Some scholars go even farther and not only regard Medea as the priestess of Hecate, but even identify her with this Thracian goddess of moon and consider that owing to her special state, she was authorized to have at her disposal the Golden Fleece, which embodied masculine aggressiveness.

⁷ Лосев., 1991, 47.

⁸ Лосев., 1991, 48.

Medea is to be interpreted as the destructive force against the masculine element, as the power which, from the matriarchal point of view, rejects the masculine force. Such interpretation of the myth presents the integrated image of Medea and Hecate as the protector and at the same time demolisher of the masculine.

According to Kerenyi, Jason and Medea, as the representatives of masculine and feminine aggressive cultures, are incompatible as there is nothing that would unite them, which the author of the theory calls 'the hermetic principle'.⁹

It is clear that such and other similar methods of interpreting the Argonaut myth are based on subjectivism; the scholars seem to forget that in terms of mythic consciousness, the mythic reality is an actual and self-existing reality and not a metaphorical or allegorical one, and therefore, myth should be understood as it is, naively and word by word, and its characters should be perceived as actual beings. In these circumstances, Medea and Jason cease to appear as the representatives of feminine and masculine aggression respectively; in fact, the former is the woman skilled in sorcery, whose unkindly intentions are helped by evil spirits, while the latter is a person, who cannot be called a hero despite his heroic feats as he accomplished them with woman's help, and not with his own bravery and intelligence.

The Argonaut myth, as well as its literary versions, captures attention not by the sublime qualities of its characters, but by the psychological truth which underlies them. Their unity is achieved by a firm inner logic characteristic of truly high art and indispensable for the creation of coherent characters – one of the requirements for poets, posed as early as by Aristotle.¹⁰ This logic on its part implies a deep insight into and analysis of the characters' qualities, which motivate their actions.

The characters of Medea and Jason develop in such a surprisingly logical way that this consistency is never violated, and neither of their words or actions bring disharmony into the unity of their characters. In this respect, I dare not agree with the distinguished scholar Grigol Tsereteli, who maintained that Apollonius Rhodius failed to logically develop Medea's image, presenting her in Book 3 as a tender virgin in love struggling against herself, and in Book 4 as a cold, matter-of-fact and implacable witch.¹¹ In my opinion, the psychological authenticity of Medea's character is determined by her actions after she betrayed her father and homeland. For example, there is

⁹ Kerenyi K., *Das hermetische Prinzip in Mythologie*, Zürich, 1943.

¹⁰ Aristoteles, *Poetik*, Leipzig, 1972, 54.

¹¹ Аполлоний Родосский, *Аргонавтика*, перевод, введение и примечания Г. Церетели, Тб., 1964, 14.

nothing unexpected in the fact that she doomed her brother to a brutal death, which repeats in all the versions of the myth. I do not agree with the opinion that Medea did this for the sake of 'the great cosmic love'¹², as love is an integral emotion and treachery and murder, especially of a close person, is altogether alien to those endowed with this gift, and what is more, on the part of those who love, this feeling implies self-sacrifice and not the sacrifice of others.

The emotion, gripping the heart of the king's daughter after she met the strange guest, not only failed to turn into the fire of love, which would be at the same time a light-giving source, but went out, and Medea was possessed by darkness and bleakness. She was doomed to such an agonizing state by herself, when she decided to win Jason's favour and love at the expense of betraying her father and homeland. The virgin, skilled in magic, ruined with her evil deeds the remnants of her tender and beautiful feeling, if there was such, and eventually became a callous witch, provoking fright, or intimidation at best.

Considering the above-mentioned, the fact that after fleeing Colchis, Medea has nothing in common with Jason except crimes is the very evidence of the logical and coherent development of the character. She is not able to love, and is well aware that neither can Jason love the woman, who, although for his sake, has committed so much evil. Therefore, it is quite natural that Medea requires his protection not because of love, but because of the debt which Jason owes her, and shows surprising practicality like those skilled in bargains.

Skilfulness in magic implies help from evil forces and not only kills the gift for love in a person, but makes him/her implacable and ruthless. After the merciless murder of her own brother, the killing of Peleas, Jason's uncle, Creon, the king of Corinth and his daughter because of vengeance is perceived as Medea's normal behaviour, and therefore does not have very strong impact on the reader. But this is not all. The principle of logical development of her character requires of her an unparalleled, the most appalling crime. According to various versions of the myth, Medea either kills her children herself, or they die from the hands of the Corinthians, or because their mother wanted them to join the ranks of the immortals. Euripides had her murder her own children intentionally, to revenge upon Jason. According to R. Gordeziani, this innovation of the playwright proved indeed successful, as following the 5th century, Euripides' *Medea* was almost

¹² Бауер В., Дюмотц И., Головин С., Энциклопедия символов, М., 1998, 155.

the only source referred to as the model for the development of Medea's theme in ancient culture.¹³

Although the first performance of Euripides' *Medea* in 431 failed to appeal to the spectators, horrified with the brutal murder, as soon as the first and the most painful impression was past, the spectators, as well as the readers, easily accepted the psychological authenticity of the character pictured by the tragedian as the evil, which ruins itself, is unable to spare anyone. As neither Jason is distinguished by high morality, his union with Medea is quite logical. It is likewise logical that vainglorious Jason, who did not have enough power to carry out his ambitions, as he failed to recover the throne of Iolcus and decided to become a king in Corinth, once again with a lady's help, through marrying Creusa, abandoned the woman whom he owed the retrieval of the Golden Fleece to his homeland. They more or less deserve each other, which is clearly attested by the dialogue, in which the spouses rebuke each other remembering the service they gave each other.

The above-mentioned reveals that in the characters of the Argonaut myth the idea and the image are assimilated in actual terms, at the level of matter. Neither the idea is somewhat more than the image, nor is the image something particular. According to Losev, such a balance is characteristic only of symbol. That is why Medea became the symbol of betrayal and ruthlessness, and Jason the symbol of an average little man, whose actions are motivated only by ambitions and profiteering, but as he does not have enough power himself, he tries to attain the goal through gaining ladies' favour. This may account for the fact that the characters of the Argonaut myth were less popular in the Byzantine period. Since they could not have served as spiritually beneficial examples to be followed by the Christians, Church Fathers preferred to be reticent about them. Even Gregory the Theologian, who is distinguished among the Holy Fathers for multiple references to mythological materials, does not mention the characters of the Argonaut myth. Their names appear more often in historical writings, whose authors give an account of Colchian events, and each case of such a reference conveys a negative message.¹⁴

¹³ Euripides, *Medea*, translated into Georgian by B. Bregvadze, introduced and commented on by R. Gordeziani, Tbilisi, 1996, 11 (in Georgian).

¹⁴ Georgica, The Notes of Byzantine Writers about Georgia, edited by S. Kaukhchishvili, vol. I, VIII, Tbilisi (in Georgian).