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THE ENIGMATIC LOGIC OF THE ARGONAUT MYTH

- *Why does a stone, thrown up, fall down?*
'In compliance with the force of gravitation',
says Newton.
'Because the stone wants so', says Schopenhauer.
- *But what about the stone hanging over the head of*
Tantalus, which ever threatens to come down, why
does it not fall down?
'Zeus wishes so', mythos answers.

Mythos hides hosts of secrets. Some can be disclosed, while others remain unrevealed even at present. This creative power, imagination exists, although in a hidden way, in the consciousness of poets and philosophers. Consequently, it is possible to have new myths created, which is attested by our contemporary verbal art. This dynamic character of the poetic form of mythos has its structure, the structure of metamorphosis of the poetic images of mythos, which on its part follows a definite logic. This logic is sometimes rational, but more often it is irrational, as a lot remains mysterious for human consciousness endowed with the gift for poetic imaginations. Ancient Greek epos, lyric and tragedy tenderly attended to the mystery of these images and beliefs till the end of ancient times as its own treasure and splendid possession.

Historical-cultural rendering of mythic images, poetic imaginations requires great caution and is often marked with infantilism. The goal of my paper is to consider the world of poetic imaginations of the Argonaut myth and have a look at the logic, which underlies and keeps alive the poetic images of the myth and the wonderful events or the enigmas depicted therein.

First of all, I believe that it would be appropriate to specify what exactly I mean by ‘enigmas’, or more precisely, ‘the enigmatic logic’: the extraordinary world of the Hellenic mythos is material and sensible i.e. perceptible at the same time. All what is spiritual, ideal and mental in it is at the same time material and vice versa: all what is material can appear ideal, imaginary, not following the logic of common sense and transferable into the imaginary world, which also has its own logic. In this case, I share the opinion of Jacob Golosovker that if we try to decipher the imaginary world, if we go deeper into the gnoseology of imagination, we will come to the conclusion that it has its own logic, and this will be the ‘enigmatic logic’.

The Argonaut mythos, which retains hosts of dilemmas for the reader, is imaginative rather than real. Although Tim Severin’s expedition, archeological excavations in Troy, Lemnos, as well as other materials have attested to the possibility of an actual Argonautic expedition, this is only one aspect of mythological studies. I am interested in the axis that supports the imaginative world of the Argonaut myth, and I believe it should be looked for exactly within enigmatic logic. More specifically, it is the voyage in time and space, both being imaginative in their essence. Allow me to remind you that the correspondence between Aea of the earliest legends and the countries located on the East Black Sea coast has not yet been unquestionably attested; legendary Aea is considered to be located in either Greece itself¹, or the west Mediterranean², or Mesopotamia³, or Ethiopia⁴; there is an assumption regarding the Anatolian version of the Golden Fleece as well⁵. The complete route and exact duration of the Argonaut expedition has not been detected, etc.

Besides, I should also mention that it was the voyage with obstacles, as the central element of the narration was always a wondrous person, event or thing. In my opinion, the whole myth is based exactly on the axis of wonders. Such axis is the Golden Fleece hanging in a gorgeous grove of Aea the wonderland, and protected by the sleepless dragon. Around this axis lie magicians, magic tools and magic events. In support of this statement, I will cite a fragment from A. Losev’s and A. Takho-Godi’s paper: ‘If even

¹ Я. Э. Голосовкер, *Логика мифа*, Москва, 1987, 19.

² W. H. Roscher, *Ausführliches Lexika der griechischen und römischen Mythologie*, Leipzig 1884-1937. See also Pauly’s *Realenzyklopedie der klassischen Altertumswissenschaft*, Stuttgart, 1893-1972.

³ M. C. Astour, *Hellenosemitica*, Leiden, 1967⁸.

⁴ Der Kleine Pauly, *Lexikon der Antike auf der Grundlage von Pauly’s RE*, hg. K. Ziegler, W. Sontheimer, 5 Bde., 1964-75.

⁵ Cf. G. Giorgadze, ‘The Fleece’ in the Hittite Sources and It’s Ancient Parallels, *TSU papers*, 227, 1982, 287ff.

wonders live in actual terms, they live only on the soil of the most exotic land of Colchis, where they fill the palace of Aietes, where wonder and monstrosity is almost indistinguishable, neighboring with each other, and where the heroic human character is fully capable of confronting a monster and working a wonder.⁶ Not only the Colchian part, but the whole myth of the Argonauts' voyage abounds of wondrous plots, which, as I have already mentioned above, make up a certain system. Now I will only focus on three determining aspects of this system, which I find especially relevant. They are a) The possibility of scholarly treatment and explanation of enigmas; b) Functional implication of enigmas; c) The aesthetic aspect of enigmas.

a) The mystery of enigmas

Scholars have always attempted to explain an event presented in the myth and adjust it to a historical context. Sometimes this is justified, but sometimes such reasoning is tinted with infantilism. In my opinion, scholarly approach to such plots as 'Jason's adventure in Colchis' contains discrepancies. It includes the unity of two sub-plots: a) Accomplishment of Aietes' tasks; b) Taking away the Fleece. The episode is rich in enigmas. One of the scenes belonging to it is the fight against the dragon, which has several versions. The comparison of these versions reveals some discrepancies. Two dragons appear in the myth: one, whose teeth Jason is to sow, and the other, who guards the Fleece. Realizing that two dragons could not be related to the same plot, ancient authors offered their own versions: either Jason killed the dragon on the king's order, or the teeth belonged to the dragon killed by Cadmus.⁷ Some authors even neglected the episode with dragon's teeth. Even such an early source as the Fourth Pythian Ode of Pindar, which thoroughly enough presents Aietes' task, is reticent about the dragon's teeth.⁸ There are several hypothesis connected with the retrieval of the Fleece or the origin of the Argonaut myth. The majority of scholars support the so-called Greek-Caucasian hypothesis, according to which the archeological material from western Georgia attests to the high level of metalwork, high production rate

⁶ A. A. Тахо-Годи, А. Ф. Лосев, *Греческая культура в мифах, символах и терминах*, Санкт-Петербург, 1999, 605.

⁷ According to the tradition, after killing the Dragon, Cadmus retained part of its teeth, and Pnixus (or some other deity) took the rest of the teeth to Aietes. This version was especially favoured by ancient authors. It was also used by Apollonius Rhodius (III, 869; IV, 214). For a detailed account of the episode, see *The Argonauts. The World of Greek Myths*, related and commented on by R. Gordeziani, Tbilisi, 1999, 104 ff. (in Georgian).

⁸ According to Pindar, '...Aietes positioned in their midst the plow made of adamant and the oxen that were breathing the flame of blazing fire from their tawny jaws and pawing the ground in turn with brazen hoofs, he led them and brought them to the joke-strap single-handedly. He stretched straight furrows as he drove them and split open the stretch of clodded earth a fathom deep' (223-230).

of agricultural tools, and consequently, the episode of yoking fire-breathing bulls and of ploughing the field is subjected to an ontological and not enigmatic logic. In my opinion, such an approach, to put it softly, is disputable. Finding links between the fire-breathing and brazen-footed bulls and the production of agricultural tools bears the signs of infantilism in the same way as the detection of parallels between the mythos of the armed men, the Spartans, sprang from the ground after dragon's teeth were sown, and agriculture, as well as between their fight and the act of scything. The grounds for such parallels are very simple: an attempt to connect the unusual to the ordinary, belonging to the sphere of daily life, or to a historical fact.

In the same way, no matter what the Golden Fleece may embody⁹, whatever symbols it may be supposed to convey, it primarily was the symbol of power (or welfare) of a country in mythological world, which after being moved away from Colchis, lost its function and was rendered uninteresting to mythos.

b) The absoluteness of the functions of enigmas

The wonderful world of mythos has its own symbols, directly based on the absoluteness and perfect nature of the functions of creatures and things found therein, whether deities, monsters or magic items.

The function of a magic creature or thing is infinite; as the energy it issues is absolute and is put into use or stopped at the will of its owner (it suffices to mention Apollo's unfailing arrows and Heracles' club). If the absoluteness of the function of the items or beings is lost, the latter are annulled – they are rendered invalid to accomplish their function, lose their essence and perish away from the mythical scene.

This exactly happened to the Golden Fleece, which was carried away by the expedition of the renowned heroes from whole Greece. Symplegades, the Clashing Rocks, which were not supposed to be passed through by any ship, also disappeared from the mythic scene. After the Argonauts managed to overcome this wonder, the rocks lost their function¹⁰, while the mythic world lost interest in them.

c) Enigma as an aesthetic game without moral

Logical understanding or interpretation of a wondrous event was not at all important to ancient world. The Hellenes perceived this wonderful event without any questions. They accepted the body made invisible by an invisible hat as just invisible; while the representative of modern European civilization, H. G. Wells, was to comment which chemical solution was responsible for

⁹ The Argonauts. The World of Greek Myths, related and commented on by R. Gordeziani, Tbilisi, 1999, 107 ff. (in Georgian).

¹⁰ This episode is replicated in the Homeric *Odyssey*.

making a body invisible so that it remained palpable otherwise. However, it should also be mentioned here that neither a modern reader takes much interest in the techniques of man's transformation into a spider.

The Hellenes perceived a wonderful event as an aesthetic reality, which did not rule out an appropriate logical ground. The logic of an enigmatic event is easily understandable, for example, in such a classical plot as the birth of Athena (wisdom) from the head of Zeus. This fact is based on a logical ground, which is sufficient for mental reality (i.e. a logical element) to become ontological. Here we enter the world of enigmatic reality, where everything is possible and no one is surprised at this. All depends of one's will or artistic effort, which also has its own logic – nothing is impossible for it.¹¹ No one but Peleas' daughters were surprised at Medea's hacking an old ram into pieces, putting them into a boiling water, and then taking out a lamb from the water – because Hellenic world did not take interest in 'why?', it found relevant the fact itself, the power of sorcery as an aesthetic reality (according to certain sources of the Argonaut myth, when Jason arrived, his father Aeson was still alive. Medea rejuvenated him¹², and did the same with his husband).¹³ This axiom of a wonderful event also has its logic: the important thing here is not whether the fact is convincing or not, but the essence of it as an aesthetic game, which does not have moral. This is the basis for any wonder, magic events or magic things. Just one wish is enough to have the unimaginable accomplished, although nothing is unimaginable for Greek mythos.

As the process of myth-creation is unlimited in ancient Greek world, which the dynamic character of the poetic form of mythos fits so well, no one was surprised at adding new traits to the interpretation of Medea's image. I mean the intensified tragism of this ever tragic image. If child-slaughter, committed by Medea, was not in the initial version of the mythos and is believed to be included later, the creative genius of the author placed it anyway in the sphere of enigmatic logic, in the string of indescrepant discrepancies – the dismembering of Apsyrtus, the boiling of Peleas, and turning Creon and Creuse into ashes. A modern reader may have a lot of questions: why is not Medea punished? Or if she revived a hacked and boiled ram as a lamb, why did not she wish to bring her children back to life? And so

¹¹ Although ethic are very important in Greek mythos, in this case, first the desire is fulfilled (no matter how blasphemous it may be), and then punishment follows (Tantalus, Sisyphus, Ixion, etc.).

¹² The Returns, fr. VI; Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, VII, 159 ff.

¹³ Pherecydes, fr. 74; Simonides, fr. 204 and others.

on. But this infantilism vanishes at once when we recall that an event is more important to a creative genius than its interpretation.

Accomplishment of unimaginable feats and labors is a fabulous motif. It has moral as well as aesthetic implication. However, here we once again encounter certain logic; it also has its own logic. In particular, a wondrous being makes wonder with the help of or through another wonder: yoking brazen-footed and fire-breathing bulls, beating the armed men that sprung from the ground after the dragon's teeth were sown, putting to sleep the horrifying guard of the Golden Fleece, acquiring the symbol of power of the Colchian king, and so on is impossible for an average mortal to accomplish without a magic force. What happens in mythos is pre-determined. The secret of the future is obvious, but the ways of accomplishing it are not revealed. This aesthetic game is also intrinsic for enigmatic logic.

So, the goal of the present paper was to show with respect to the Argonaut mythos that the enigmas existing in the mythic world have their own logic. To be concise, this is the logic of unimaginable imaginations, which, although presented in time and space, exists without time and space; is placed in the chain of discrepancies, but works without any discrepancy. This is the free logic, which is equivalent to a creative effort. The world of imaginations, mythos implicitly offers the reason and cause of an event. They are linked to each other with an absolute freedom – the creative will, which may even be unconsciously guided by ontological logic.