

Chapter Fourteen

The Metaphor of the Eternally Young Hero

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Metaphor is a way of knowing--one of the oldest, most deeply embedded, even indispensable ways of knowing in the history of human consciousness. It is, at its simplest, a way of proceeding from the known to the unknown. . . . Metaphor is our means of effecting instantaneous fusion of two separated realms of experience into one illuminating, iconic, encapsulating image.

-- Robert A. Nisbet

I shouted out, "Who killed the Kennedys?," when after all, it was you and me.

-- Lucifer, in Mick Jagger and Keith Richards' "Sympathy for the Devil"

The Language of Images and the Imagination

In almost all the ancient myths of young gods and in so many of the world's stories of heroes, death comes early. Even in the instance of Jesus, his death was prefigured into his drama: he knew that in order to fulfill prophecy, he would need to be sacrificed. Of course, at one level this makes perfect sense: the eternally young god or hero must, in order to stay young, die young. In his classic study of magic and religion, *The Golden Bough*, Sir

James Frazer revealed that primitive peoples sometimes believe that their safety and even that of the world is bound up with the life of one of these god-men or human incarnations of the divinity. Naturally, therefore, they take the utmost care of his life, out of a regard for their own. But no amount of care and precaution will prevent the man-god from growing old and feeble and at last dying. . . . There is only one way of averting these dangers. The man-god must be killed as soon as he shows symptoms that his powers are beginning to fail, and his soul must be transferred to a vigorous successor before it has been seriously impaired by the threatened decay. Eternal youth and its magical qualities must be maintained at all costs.

The hero's death makes sense on another level, too. A psychological and spiritual transformation that so completely marks a departure from one's common, known condition can perhaps only be alluded to by that great, unknown thing we call death. Death is here a symbol for inner death and rebirth. The death and resurrection of Christ speaks to such transformation and the Christian mystics always knew that "death" and "resurrection" were intended to be experienced while one was living and not just when one literally died. The goal of the mystic was to imitate the heroic journey of Christ and internalize it as his or her own.

The eternally young hero who has attained immortal status because he or she has died young is a major source of fascination and fantasy for the American psyche. History and imagination merge together here to create new myths of the hero, or at least to recast old, perennial myths with new hero figures that make the myths contemporary. These reveal not only the American preoccupation with eternal youth. They also cast a light upon the difficult juncture America appears to be at vis-à-vis a collective death-and-rebirth experience of its own. This would naturally seem to revolve around the heroic ideal itself. Thus, the eternally young hero is a metaphor for a particular drama going on within the American soul or psyche, a drama that, because of its spiritual nature, *must* be told in the language of images and the imagination as well as the more factual language of historical and current events. The metaphor and the underlying drama are always consistent; merely the faces of the heroes and the particular facts and details of their lives change according to circumstance.

The Myth of JFK and the Conspiracy Theory

Few figures in American history have assumed so large a place in the American imagination as John Kennedy. He continues to be a magnetic

personality who inspires curiosity, political idealism, and an all-round sense of the extraordinary. He is one of the most beloved presidents of recent times, in spite of the fact that new material about his shadier characteristics and dealings keeps coming out. Much has been written and accepted as historical fact concerning Kennedy's sexual escapades, his connections to people in organized crime, and his father's illegitimate use of money and influence to advance the young politician's career. Yet Americans find a way to hold such information together with what they know as his better qualities and with what they love about him. Perhaps in this regard--in the fact that his is a heroic image of extremes--he is a perfect embodiment of the American character itself. On the surface, he radiates the possibilities of greatness, youth, and innocence, but underneath there lurks an underside which one prefers not to look at too closely.

The Kennedy myth has evolved with such ebullience that *Time's* Richard Lacayo has charted seven periods that reflect the types of books that have been written about this man and his life. (By 1997, the number of books hovered around 265.) The seven periods, some of them overlapping with each other, include the Golden Era of books that tended to be sentimental and celebratory (1964-69); the Assassination books that tried to reconstruct the events around Kennedy's death (1965-68); the Conspiracy Era (1965-93) in which dozens of titles as well as Oliver Stone's film "JFK" explored the possibility of a conspiracy; the First Revisionist Era which presented a cooler and more realistic view of Kennedy as a person and a politician (1971-79); the Second Revisionist Era in which more books exposed Kennedy's character and private indulgences (1988-present); the books of the Analysts who focused on how President Kennedy made policy (1992-present); and finally, the period of Nostalgia for Kennedy and the Camelot era (1995-present). The latter was provoked by the death of Jacqueline Onassis. Clearly, this history of the public's interest in Kennedy concludes where it began; Americans have completed a full cycle and returned to a sentimental and celebratory view of Kennedy. This speaks to the power of what historian Mircea Eliade called the "mythicization" of historical personages, that is, the "metamorphosis of a historical figure into a mythical hero."

What can explain this enduring fascination with Kennedy? As Elizabeth Gleick wrote, even "the desire to own third-rate objects that Kennedy and his wife Jackie once merely touched can set off a frenzied auction. . . ." Indeed, Kennedy is revered as the eternally young man-god and hero. His mythicization, one might suggest, began with Jackie Kennedy herself. The journalist Theodore H. White interviewed Jacqueline Kennedy

days after the assassination. It was in his subsequent article in *Life* that the term "Camelot" was first used to describe the Kennedy years. "For one brief shining moment there was Camelot," was its memorable conclusion. Camelot was of course the town where King Arthur held his court and the Round Table. It was a magical time of glamorous heroes and brilliant young men, a time of grace, good taste, and courage. In his posthumously published notes, White documented how the First Lady thought of using this analogy and even insisted upon it. She was, he says, obsessed with her husband's place in history and worried that the "bitter old men who write history" would not do him justice. Kennedy's image was purposely cast as a noble young hero so that the cynical authority figures who write history would not tarnish his image.

It is doubtful that this image of Camelot would have stuck the way it did had Kennedy not been killed. The nation's grief and the painful fact that Kennedy had been cut off in his prime created a void that only the human heart and imagination could fill, with no less than an image that would immortalize him. His tragic, early death guaranteed him the status of eternal youth. Strangely enough, this mythic pattern of great promise cut short was dramatically reenacted with the deaths of his brother RFK and his son, JFK, Jr. Millions lined the railway tracks to watch RFK's memorial train travel across the nation, so bereaved was the public. The national outpouring of grief for JFK, Jr. also strongly resembled the anguish people felt when the president was assassinated, and there can be no doubt that their father-son relationship contributed to this. Just as JFK, Sr. became the fallen king of America's Camelot, JFK, Jr. now evoked the image of America's fallen prince. Tragedy and early death tend to go hand-in-hand with the mythicization of a person. The same process may also be observed in the case of Lincoln. Lincoln, as the historian Michael Burlingame points out, was mythicized as the quintessential figure of authority, that is, a wise old man. This is quite the opposite of Kennedy. Yet because of his tragic death, also from assassination, he was immortalized in the American imagination much the way Kennedy was later on.

The fascination with Lincoln and Kennedy cannot be separated from the fascination with Thanatos, the principle of death. As much as their life accomplishments, the tragic way they fell into the hands of Thanatos is the stuff that their myths are made of; Thanatos has raised their lives and deaths to heroic stature. The fascination with Thanatos here is really no different than the kind that compels a crowd to gather around an accident or ambulance scene. Partly this involves the feeling of "There but for the grace of God go I," but mostly, it is curiosity about the inexplicable mystery of

death and how death can suddenly seize us and remove us from life. There is no way to tell when it will strike, and when it strikes a figure like Lincoln or Kennedy, our awe of that figure becomes mixed with our awe of death. In the same way that one who courageously risks death is glorified as a hero, a person who is already a hero, for whatever reason, is glorified even more if death prematurely claims him. The person did not go gently into the night in his old age; death descended and took him, making something of a martyr out of him.

It is therefore not unlikely that conspiracy theories would evolve around a figure like Kennedy. The fact that he died the way he did is an endless source of mystification. As Shakespeare illustrated, conspiracy is as much a universal motif in the imagination as the death of the hero, and often the two go together. Something has to explain the evil which would cause death to come in this unseemly way, and if explanations of a higher, otherworldly kind are no longer sufficient as they once might have been, worldly ones will do just as well. They have the advantage that they can be attached to concrete persons or parties, but curiously, they are so slippery that in the end they seem as out-of-this-world as the otherworldly explanations. No doubt, it is difficult to explain in any fashion how two bullets could have caused eight wounds between JFK and John Connally. Even President Johnson admitted on his White House tapes that he did not believe in the lone gunman theory. Yet astute investigators like Gerald Posner, Vincent Bugliosi, and Walter Cronkite continue to express the view that there is little or no basis for the conspiracy theory.

But to pursue a discussion of the conspiracy theory based on its pros and cons is not of relevance here. For our purposes it makes little difference whether there was a conspiracy or not. Our interest in the conspiracy theory is in its significance as a public fantasy and in what this fantasy says about the American psyche. The conspiracy theory is another metaphor, a statement of something other than the occurrence of an actual conspiracy. It is a "fable in brief," to use the philosopher Giambattista Vico's definition of metaphor. If the conspiracy theory continues to thrive in the American imagination with such wide support--over 60 percent of Americans believe in it, according to one poll--then its significance lies as much in the belief, in the fable, as in any facts related to its possible occurrence or verity. It is already *as if* the "conspiracy" were a real occurrence. As the philosopher Hans Vaihinger explained, fictitious inventions of the mind that operate on an as-if basis, *as if* they were true, express "fundamental psychic forces." If the fictions do not tell us anything real about the world, they at least tell us something very real about those psychic forces. Just as important as any

possible conspiracy "out there" is the conspiracy "in there." This may not be a comfortable way to think about this matter. Indeed, as Hillman said, "It is easier to bear the truth of facts than the truth of fantasies."

What is the truth of the fantasy behind the JFK conspiracy theory? In one regard, as indicated above, the conspiracy theory makes a martyr out of Kennedy and assures that he will be forever revered in the American imagination. But in another regard, it functions as a counterweight to bring the pendulum of that imagination back to an equilibrium from its tendency toward extreme innocence. If Kennedy carries America's projections of innocence, then the conspiracy theory offsets those projections by seizing upon the dark side of human nature. The perpetual fascination with the conspiracy theory seems to be the psyche's way of balancing the excessive innocence Americans attach to Kennedy. In this way the theory functions in the culture very much like those revisionist books that show the dark side of Camelot, to borrow Seymour Hersh's phrase. If the glorified Kennedy is Adam before the Fall, then the revised Kennedy is Adam after the Fall. Similarly, if Kennedy and his administration (which launched conspiracies of its own against Cuba and North Vietnam) are perceived as having a halo, then the conspiracy theory reflects some other part or parts of the government as the complementary, shadowy underside of this innocence. The conspiracy theory appears to be the collective psyche's mechanism for regulating its own overblown innocence. It is because the conspiracy theory assaults the American psyche's basic presumptions of innocence that it is accepted so ambivalently by the population. As Guilford Dudley wrote about the film "JFK," "No wonder the film has been excoriated in the media, for it reaches right to the root of the nation's mythic nerve."

The fantasy of the conspiracy theory does indeed seize upon the dark side of human nature. By saying that the government cannot be trusted, it is saying that *authority* cannot be trusted. That authority is the focus of such profound distrust is to be expected. A culture under the spell of innocence is dominated by the spirit of youth, and therefore it will also be subject to a split between the spirits of youth and authority. Fragmentation and extreme polarization will occur. If youth is all-innocent, then authority will, either in perception or fact, tend to be all-malevolent, that is, evil. The conspiracy theory is usually dependent upon an evil authority structure for its story line. Certainly, in the film "JFK," everyone was "in" on the conspiracy: the Mafia, right-wing extremists and Cuban exiles against Castro, the CIA, the FBI, the U.S. Army, the Dallas Police Department, the Secret Service, the Warren Commission, and even Lyndon Johnson. Oliver Stone, one might

think, had Shakespeare's words in mind when he made this film: "Hell's empty. The devils are all here."

The paranoid style of this film, however, can be observed elsewhere today in the media and the culture. Conspiracy theories have become a television and film genre, and are integral to the ideology of certain cults and militia groups. This further suggests that what we are dealing with here is a widespread metaphor and not a phenomenon isolated to JFK. Government conspiracies are portrayed as being responsible for anything and everything that has gone awry in the nation. As one character on "The X-Files" said in regard to how much suspicion should be harbored about covert government activity, "You're not paranoid enough until you're paranoid too much."

A culture insulated by innocence will be prone to outbursts of paranoia and hysteria not only in its attitude toward authority but also, as the McCarthy hearings and Nixon's "enemy list" demonstrated, in the exercise of authority. When the innocently paranoid come into power, they merely do to the public what the public already fears they will do. The public fantasy about conspiracies becomes a public fact, and paranoia becomes a natural part of the culture. This only intensifies the phenomenon of a divided society and its divided heroic ideal. The society does not recognize that, in its innocence, *it* is its own worst enemy, and as such either projects its dark side *onto* its authority structure or, indeed, lives its dark side out *through* its authority structure.

Why Elvis Presley Won't Die

After John Kennedy, Elvis Presley is in recent times perhaps the most beloved and immortalized figure who tragically died young. In fact, one could argue that the quality of Presley's immortalization surpasses even that of Kennedy. There has been something almost divine about Elvis Presley from the beginning. As Paul McCartney said about what the youth of his day felt when Presley first appeared on the music scene, "the Messiah has arrived." Indeed, Presley is treated by his fans like a divine monarch--he is called "the King"--or like a saint who has left the earth and been canonized. There are, worldwide, some 480 Elvis fan clubs. Public tours of Graceland, Presley's mansion in Memphis, draw approximately 750,000 visitors a year and generate over \$20 million in revenues per year. This is more than the number of people who visit Jefferson's home at Monticello or Washington's home at Mount Vernon. Before "Trekkies," there was an Elvis cult that claimed innumerable devout followers. And Presley's fans are not limited to

the “wanna-bes.” Shortly after he made the cover of *Newsweek* in 1975, Bruce Springsteen climbed over the walls of a highly guarded Graceland in an effort to meet the King himself (Presley died in 1977). Also without limit are the absurd forms of fan worship. In the 1970s, vials supposedly containing Presley's sweat were marketed, and shortly thereafter a British retailer called "Elvisly Yours" was selling edible Elvis panties.

Clearly, if Elvis is treated as a saint, it is as a Dionysian saint. As a man-god, Elvis Presley was the incarnation of Dionysus, the Greek god of vegetation, fertility, wine, ecstasy, and sexuality. Along with Marilyn Monroe, another tragic figure who died young and became a sex idol for millions, Presley tapped into the primitive, Dionysian elements in the Western psyche that were resurfacing after the long hibernation they underwent during the Victorian period. As the journalist David Halberstam wrote about Presley and Monroe, "Each radiated a powerful, almost magnetic, sexual force, made far greater by the fact that they arrived in the mid-Fifties. . . [in] an America still capable of being shocked." The ancient cult of Dionysus partook in orgiastic festivities whose aim was mystical communion with Dionysus and whose religious frenzy was induced by wine, music, and dance. These celebrations were of particular importance at the beginning of spring, when they marked the return of life after winter. They were thus death-and-rebirth celebrations, and it is in light of this that Dionysus was a god who died young but always rose again. In this there is a parallel to Christ, who also rose at springtime, as celebrated during the Easter holiday.

From this it should be apparent what inspired the hysterical screaming of young women attending the concerts of not only Elvis, but Frank Sinatra before him and the Beatles and Rolling Stones after. These concerts were modern Dionysian rites. The singing gods had to fear for their lives should they fall into the hands of their entranced worshipers. Their clothing would be torn off and their hair pulled out as these possessed young women attempted as nearly as possible to cannibalize them. Of course, we are not speaking here of possession in the way the prophets of the Hebrew Bible were gripped by visions of God, but rather of a merging with the forces of nature such as what occurred in the pagan mystery religions well before the emergence of Judaism and Christianity. Elvis was in fact a very ancient god.

Also apparent should be the reason for the erotic cult that has mushroomed around Presley. Men and women alike have a romantic kind of relationship with him in their imaginations; that is, his significance is charged with romantic meaning. He is a great purveyor of love--the love of music, the love of women, the love of life. He is as popular after his death

as before, if not more. Professional and amateur Elvis impersonators compete in regional and national contests and conventions and earn their livelihood in Las Vegas officiating at weddings. The University of Mississippi even held a symposium in 1995 on Presley's impact on American culture. Paraphernalia connected with his image has become such a booming business that his former wife registered a trademark to regulate his family's rights. One sees his image everywhere in the culture, and it even seems to take precedence over his music. Like Dionysus, he has risen. Accordingly, it is no wonder that people claim to have had "Elvis sightings"-at the corner grocery store late at night, hitchhiking at a truck stop, fishing at a lake. Like UFO reports or repressed memory syndrome, these apparitions are a contagion myth, or what Jung called a visionary rumor: they have spread through the culture like wildfire, seemingly leaping from person to person on the level of the collective unconscious. Elvis won't die because his death has made him an eternally young god, a hero who lives on in the imagination and culture forever and who moves people's souls so powerfully that he appears to them in visions as real as anything in their physical world.

Rock 'n' Roll and the Dionysian Death

Dionysus died from dismemberment, and, in a manner of speaking, so did Elvis. Drugs, insomnia, exhaustion, the struggle to force his body to stay forever young and trim, and an insatiable appetite for adulation but a debilitating emptiness within, all contributed to his depression and falling apart. A Dionysian death raises the hero's demise to dramatic proportions as unequivocally as would an assassination, thereby also assuring his immortality in the public's memory. The hero who dies from having surrendered to the passions would in olden times have been looked upon as having made the ultimate self-sacrifice to the gods, or at least to the god Dionysus. In modern times, although such an act is condemned as a waste, it is, paradoxically, still held in awe. This is because a life that is so engulfed in passion that it leads to death is one that for many is secretly attractive. So naturally, the hero who has lived and died in this way attains a special mythic status. Kennedy's image, though tarnished, is simultaneously enhanced by the sexual passion and indulgences the revisionist books claim gripped him. Marilyn Monroe needs no introduction as a goddess who, at least in the public's imagination, lived and died according to the Dionysian code. James Dean, the object of an entire generation's fantasies of dark brooding passion, could for all intents and purposes be considered as having

been dismembered in a fatal car accident. And of course, we should not forget the host of other Hollywood stars, ranging from Rudolph Valentino to River Phoenix, who were tragic young hero figures.

The escalating number of such deaths among young American culture-heroes since Kennedy is truly remarkable. Rock 'n' roll offers a litany of fallen young heroes and heroines. This should not be surprising: rock is a return to Dionysian roots par excellence, and the Dionysian life has a greater likelihood of ending prematurely because of the inherent difficulty of moderating the excesses to which it is prone. Jazz too is an original American art form that has for the same reason numerous dead Dionysian heroes --Billie Holiday, Charlie Parker, and Chet Baker to mention just a few. But nothing quite surpasses rock 'n' roll. In addition to Elvis, we may include the following among the many who died young: Buddy Holly; Bill Haley; Ritchie Valens; Rick Nelson; Phil Ochs; Otis Redding; Jackie Wilson; "Mama" Cass Elliot; Jimi Hendrix; Janis Joplin; Jim Morrison; Brian Jones; Keith Moon; John Bonham; John Lennon; Dennis Wilson; Duane Allman; Bob Marley; Marvin Gaye; Andy Gibb; Harry Chapin; Jim Croce; Stevie Ray Vaughn; John Denver; and Kurt Cobain. Of course, not all of these died a Dionysian death, a few were not American, and others were only on the fringes of what is considered rock. However, by popular standards, all were talented people, and they compel us to wonder about the adage that "only the good die young."

Of those above, Jim Morrison is of particular interest. Characterized as a satyr and notorious for his alcoholism, he epitomized the Dionysian life. As illustrated in Oliver Stone's film, "The Doors," he had a consuming obsession with Thanatos, seeking it out as an escape from ordinariness and toying with it in repeated acts of defiance and inflation. Eventually, his alcoholism and love affair with Thanatos caught up with him, and he died a Dionysian death. Like many other rock stars, his was not a sudden, violent suicide, but one prolonged through self-indulgence and -neglect. (It is curious how Stone picks tragic and eternally young heroes as subjects for his films; even his film "Nixon" was about a man who, like Kennedy, could not complete his heroic mission and became immortalized for the tragic way he was stopped short.) What makes Morrison noteworthy, however, is the fact that he became considerably more popular after his death than he was before it. He has even become a cult figure, which he most likely would not have become had he lived. Not even John Lennon, whose music almost consistently had a timeless quality and who was assassinated, became a cult idol after he died. The factor that has catapulted Morrison to a cult status seems to be his Dionysian death. It is *as if* the youth culture itself has

glorified the principle of Dionysian death *through* Jim Morrison, as it has made not only a hero out of him, nor just a death-hero, but a Dionysian death-hero. This marriage between the cult of passion and the cult of celebrity is steeped in the innocent belief that a life and death ruled by passion is noble because it is instinctual and pure. The glorification of the hero who lives the life and dies the death of Dionysus is an extreme form of cultural primitivism.

Death-Heroes and the Wish for Transformation

The culture's awe of young heroes who have died tragically was captured comically but truthfully in a 1986 episode of the television show "Saturday Night Live." In a skit involving a rock musician and his manager, a meeting is arranged with a business consultant because the musician's career has been in a steady decline. At the meeting, the manager and consultant, using a chart with a bell curve, try to convince the musician that the record sales of Buddy Holly, Jimi Hendrix, and Jim Morrison had soared since their deaths. The punch line, of course, was that for the musician to pull his career out of its slump, he should kill himself.

On a more serious note, this worship of death-heroes begins to make sense when we understand it in light of the suicide impulse. This is essentially what has motivated most death-heroes as well as the culture's fascination with them. It is basically the same as what Freud called the death wish. But the death wish is not always a wish for literal death, though it may appear that way. It is often, as discussed in the last chapter, a wish for psychological death and rebirth. It is a wish for spiritual transformation. Even as early as with the ancient Ionian tale of Amor and Psyche in Apuleius' *The Golden Ass*, such transformation is connected with suicide: every time Psyche--with whom the idea of the psyche or soul is obviously connected--was faced with a transformation, she went into a suicidal frenzy. Inner transformation and death are closely related. Something old must die before something new can be born, or as Picasso said, "Every act of creation is first an act of destruction." Psychological death is usually a painful experience in which something of the self must be destroyed or abandoned.

Adolescents often mistake the pain they are going through and the impulse behind it--an impulse aimed essentially at growth and only incidentally at destruction--as an impetus to annihilate themselves. Instead of destroying *something* of the self, they destroy the self. The experience of inner death becomes concretized as literal, physical death. To the extent that American culture worships heroes like Jim Morrison who concretize the

death wish in a glorified act of suicide, it exhibits this adolescent mentality and mistake. However, we must not fall prey to the tendency of becoming too literal ourselves. Perhaps the culture's fascination with young and innocent thanatotic heroes is less an identification with them per se than an expression of the death wish for its own heroic ideal, of which the heroes are merely symbols. Could this death wish be a necessary first step in a larger death-and-rebirth process which our culture is about to undertake? Similarly, one may wonder whether rock groups with names like "Arrested Development," the "Dead Kennedys," and "Suicide," or the nihilistic, violent features of punk and rap music, merely glorify destruction and death, or if they also point to this larger process.

However, transformation is always dependent upon consciousness. A society's critical reflection upon its own need to change is a crucial ingredient for such change. America seems to be largely unconscious of the dynamic behind its fascination with eternally young and innocent death-heroes. This dynamic consists of the society's own youthful innocence and a death wish that would quite appropriately end that innocence. America must face the end of its innocence in order for there to emerge a heroic ideal that is more suitable for a maturing nation.

Unfortunately, the American heroic ideal remains hinged upon the notion of innocence. It is true that the JFK myth in its revised versions and the conspiracy theories attempt to unhinge this notion. However, most public fantasies revolving around eternally young heroes--whether Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, or Jim Morrison--are idealizations and idolizations of people who were actually very troubled. Each of these people mirrored society's problems and then suffered as its scapegoat--"scapegoat" not in the modern sense of being blamed for society's problems, but in the ancient, sacrificial sense of carrying the sins of society and, supposedly, relieving it of them. They became victims of the same adoring society that had idolized them insofar as they became, willingly or not, the objects of that society's innocent but thanatotic fantasies. To make matters worse, their woundedness has also been glorified, and thus there is now an all-enveloping shroud of innocence from which the culture has almost hopelessly left no way out for itself. A wound, Hillman tells us, usually marks the end of a consciousness that is too young. It kills innocence with reality. But America will not accept the wounds of its heroes or its own wounds for very long; these too it converts into the high drama and innocence of eternal youth.