

Uncolonising the Imagination by Charlotte Du Cann

'The thing about Finnish is that it's not linear, it's orbital,' said the ticket collector on the 10:35 train to Leeds. 'The language comes from the land. You have to find the object in the sentence and then everything else around it will make sense.' Here is the original conversation I held with the mythologist Martin Shaw for the latest Dark Mountain journal #11. We ran a shortened version for a DM blog series on the 'mythos we live by' in March, asking six writers who work with story to explore what a mythological response to an age of converging crises might look like. Follow us as we traverse a territory that includes underworld metis, praise-giving and the dynamic skill of storytelling. Oh, and a dragon of course...

We sat open-mouthed, as he then changed linguistic tracks and recited a verse from a Sami poem where an old woman is singing out to the dark forest.

What you have to remember is that, in both these languages, the word for art and knowledge is the same... the train to Hebden Bridge will depart from Platform 12.'

One thing I knew for sure was that a conversation with Martin would not be straightforward. That although we would be speaking in English, a language hewn from a mix of many cultures, his stories come unexpected, feathered, leaved, rain-wet and roaring, from a collective language that has no borders. Mythologist and writer, he has been telling his wild alchemical tales to Dark Mountaineers for years now, in his books, his teaching (at the Westcountry School of Myth and Storytelling) and most strikingly at our annual events - and from all these emerge a depth, a heart, a clarity, a connectedness, that you cannot not find in modern cynical end-of-the-world narratives.

I have a notebook page open on the topics in order but of course they get mixed up, as his answers jump like roe deer out of the thicket and twist like a shoal of lapwings in a darkening sky. You gaze in wonder at the shape and movement of it all and then you laugh, realising you are already there, right in the thick of it.

Here is a question that I hold like a ticket to the North in my hand: how can the act of telling and listening to a story liberate us from our disconnected, data-driven perception of the world and shift our attention towards what Iain McGilchrist calls the vast universe of the 'right hemisphere'? How can myths give us a language, a technology, to navigate a time when dragons and ugly sisters rule, in a culture now broken open by consequence?

When you pay attention to the archaic stories that Martin relates, you realise they are not there to reflect the power and glory of an empire, to provide escape or entertainment at the end of a hard-working day. They exist as a reminder of our place and meaning on the Earth; a reminder of what we have to undergo to become truly human, with a culture where art is the same as knowledge.

Where in order to find the answer to that question you must sit, like a hare in a field, listening to the landscape all around you, and wait for the object to reveal itself.

CDC: Martin, at Base Camp you said: 'The radical power of story is to open us up to our uncolonised imagination.' How is the telling of a myth part of that?

MS: The thing that distinguishes oral storytelling from, say, modern novels or theatre, is that the listener has to do an awful lot of work. Good storytelling is a skeletal activity and what is happening in a room is a hundred people are leaning forward, because their imagination is having to work very hard to conjure flesh out of the wider story. Even listening to stories is not a passive experience. You are meeting the energy of the teller and the images within the story, so the energy is triangulate.

CDC: Do you think mythology plays a particular role now in a world which is becoming increasingly fragmented and meaningless?

MS: Yes, myth has something direct to say. Many of the stories we need now arrived perfectly on time about 5,000 years ago. Old mythologies contain not only stories about our place on the Earth, but have the Earth speaking through them, what the Islamic scholar Henry Corbin termed the mundus imaginalis - where the human imagination is open to what David Abram describes as the more-than-human world. So with myth, you are working not just with imagination but with the imaginal, what many aboriginal cultures would call the Dreamtime. In other words, as we turn ideas around in our head, we're not just thinking but we are getting thought.

What does it mean to get thought?

For the last 20 years I've been taking people out into very wild parts of Britain, and for four days and nights they are absolutely alone, and often towards the end of that time, the participant will touch the edge of that experience. It's very hard to talk about the imaginal in conventional language. The most fitting language to address it is poetry or imagery or mythology. If the language is too psychological it reduces the mystery. It makes the mysteries containable and safe.

I'm tired of tame language addressing wild things. We seem to be frantically creating handrails in and out of desperately mysterious situations. And so to come back to the question: myth is a robust and ancient way of addressing a multiplicity of consciousnesses that abide in and around the Earth.

What is so powerful about an uncolonised imagination, a mythic intelligence, is that it connotes but does not denote. It doesn't tell you what it is. Its images have a radiance that reveals different things to whoever is beholding them. In storytelling, I know that when I say even something as definite as a crow that is in the room, we are all seeing 30 different crows. It is important that I don't hit a PowerPoint presentation, and say this is the crow we're talking about. Everyone's imagination is being stirred, where they are remembering and catching a glimpse of crows in their lives before that.

CDC: So storytelling and myth also have a relationship with time?

MS: Yes, and memory. Stories with weight to them have what C.G. Jung terms 'the lament of the dead', which in our frenetic culture we can no longer have time to hear. Most indigenous cultures will tell you that this world belongs to the dead, that's where we're headed. So mythology for me involves a conversation with the dead, with what you might call ancestors.

Whatever we are facing now we need to have a root system embedded in weather patterns, the presences of animals, our dreams, and the ones who came before us. Myth is insistent that when there is a crisis, genius lives on the margins not the centre. If we are constantly using the language of politics to combat the language of politics at some point the soul grows weary and turns its head away because we are not allowing it into the conversation, and by denying soul we are ignoring what the Mexicans call the river beneath the river. We're not listening to the thoughts of the world. We're only listening to our own neurosis and our own anxiety.

CDC: Much of your work calls for a return to bush soul and for us to remember. Do you feel these myths are resurfacing so we can relearn our ancestor training that has been shut down for a very long time?

MS: I would say: if you don't have ancestors you have ghosts. At the moment many of us are so impoverished and lacking in a cultural root system that what is around us are not ancestors supporting us but ghosts depleting us. So one of the things we could do is to reach out to stories, to practices – such as working on the land or a good art form – that require skills, diligence, a willingness to be bored and to lose our addiction to constant excitement. Myth and story put you into the presence of the old ones who have told the story before you.

When I've been with the Lakota Sioux or other Native American groups, I've seen that rather than telling stories from beginning to end like a Western narrative with a wedding at some point, they can enter the story wherever they want, like walking into a stream, and at that moment an image or scene in the story gets told and that is the story. It's just that glimpse that gets into the lion's blood of your imagination.

So I would say don't worry about the whole of the story. Look for the moment that speaks directly to you. Because like an acupuncture point, that is your entry point into the great stream of the story. You don't need to dam the thing off at the beginning and the end. It's more promiscuous than that, there are buddings everywhere.

CDC: When you told the story of the 'The Crow King and the Red Bead Woman' at Base Camp there were certain points where people were feeling very moved and in tears. What is that upwelling of sudden feeling in us all when we hear the story being told like that?

MS: One answer would be that this is a moment where we collectively experience what William Blake used to call 'a pinprick of the eternal' or the anthropologist Victor Turner 'communitas', where often through grief there is a kind of permission given in the room to feel something deeply in public. These days that's quite rare. We tend to grieve and emote away from other people. But that's not the way traditionally it's done.

Folk tales told well have the power to be tacit ritual. In other words they have the strength to put their arms around the whole room and create a container that for an hour you can cook in the images of the story. You can allow yourself, bidden or unbidden, to be provoked by the images. And somehow it is safe to go deep within it.

It's really also to do with the skill of the teller. You might be an accomplished storyteller technically but if you haven't lived through some of the travails of the story, there will be a gap between the telling of the tale and what actually transpires. When those feelings happen in the room you know the storyteller is synched up to this story: she's not saying it's her story, but she has moved through the dark wood. She knows what it is like to carry precious red beads in her mouth. She knows what it's like to be ignored and left for dead. She knows what it's like to discern the difference between a seduction and a courtship.

When you see somebody effectively trying to tell the truth, it seems to have a deep, profound effect. So I think it's partially to do with the way a room is held, the feeling that you're in the presence of something ancient, which these stories are, and a readiness in the listener to allow themselves to just be carried by the power of the thing.

CDC: Are these complex Siberian myths ones that you're focusing on at the moment, or do you have many myths that you're working with at a time?

MS: I work with a wide variety of myths. Over the years, I have told a lot of stories that have come out of the Gaelic or Arthurian world, or European fairy tales, Russian fairy tales and Siberian folk tales. When you go into Siberia, you're not really in the same terrain as the Russian fairy tales any more. There's a different quality to them. You are dealing with stories that carry a lot less of a European influence in them and more of the kind of nutritional complexity that you find in Native American or Inuit stories.

One of the ways you notice it is that their stories end in unexpected places. They do not follow the kind of climactic Western narrative that we're used to now.

I read a lot of stories for example from India or from Africa or from South America, but I don't feel equipped to tell them. When I'm working with people who are training as storytellers, one of the things I say is find out what kind of weather patterns live within you, find out what kind of animal you are, find out what your ecosystems are. Because some stories you will find yourself naturally attracted to, and others you can simply respect and admire.

For example, in a lot of Scandinavian or Icelandic stories, a formal, incantatory, memorised way of telling the story really suits it and is encouraged. But because I'm so improvisational as a teller, because I have such a long-standing interest in wild things, one of the wildest things I think you can do is to go on without a script. So that is why lots of unexpected things tend to erupt when I'm telling. There'll always be a beginning and a middle and an end. But how we get there each time can be slightly different.

The sense of the story is what you as a teller bring that day. You're watching how the audience is responding, you're seeing their eye contact, the moments where they are leaning forward, when they're pulling back. And that to some extent tunes the telling of the story. Also you have the story tapping you on the shoulder all the way through, and saying 'Ah, ah, ah... I really want you to slow down now, and describe in detail the yurt of the old woman.' And so I follow the direction of the story itself, but also what's happening in the room.

CDC: You wrote once, in your book *Scatterlings* I think, that we were not sure what story we were in as a culture. If there were a story that could speak of our present situation, that held in its talons, if you like, or in its heart, a feeling for regeneration or return, for making sense, for bringing together, for waking us up, what might that be?

MS: I do have a story. It's called the 'The Lindwurm'. It's a story that suggests that you and I have an exiled, slightly older sister or brother, who was hurled out the window the night they were born, and has sat brooding in a forest for many, many years, and has now returned.

And somehow contained in the psychic nerve endings of this story, I feel is a lot of information about what we're living through both ecologically and politically right now.

CDC: It has an active female protagonist who transforms everything, is that correct?

MS: Oh yes. Without the ingenuity of a young woman working in tandem with an old woman (who's really a spirit of an oak tree) we are going to be incinerated by the furious returning sibling, who devours everything that comes into its grip. It takes the ingenuity of the young woman, with the advice of the older woman, to not just defeat the serpent, but to free the serpent. That's what's so beautiful about it. The days of conventional hero myths are not serving us. What is being called for now culturally is a word you find often in Ancient Greece: metis. Metis is a kind of divine cunning in service to wisdom.

We can't be naïve in times like this, because we are in the presence of underworld forces that will do one of two things: they will either educate us, or annihilate us. And in fairy tales whenever the movement is down - and the movement culturally is down right now - you have to get underworld smart, have underworld intelligence, underworld metis. I have a strong feeling that a lot of what wants to emerge through many ancient stories is a kind of wily, tough, ingenious and romantic force that needs to come forward at this point in time.

CDC: Mythology often has what I call the Princess Problem. You know where there is a passive, beautiful young female being, and then the man, the hero, appears and does the noble thing. So I'm always alert to stories where there can be a female protagonist to balance out all the hero action and worship that got us into this fine pickle in the first place.

MS: I couldn't agree more. Sometimes when I'm telling ancient stories though I become aware that people in the audience are almost auditioning the stories for some contemporary concern. And while I'm sympathetic to the concerns of the time, the story itself is a living, powerful, breathing ancient being. It radiates its strange, troublesome intelligence out into the hearts and minds of everyone there and does its work.

But there are stories that are explicitly about the resurgence of a feminine that is not defined by what the troubadours call 'the far-distant lady'. So you're not the lady in the tower, where some young man is singing madrigals to you day and night; you are up-close, wild, occasionally brilliant, filled with opinions, big gnashing teeth, appetite, desire, with hooves that have trodden the ground of the underworld.

My book *Snowy Tower* looks at the Grail story of the knight Parzival, which superficially could be seen to be about a young man becoming an older man. But underpinning that story is his relationship with powerful, potent, active females, the most extraordinary of which is a being called Kundrie. Kundrie has tusks. She has breasts that lactate deadly nightshade; she has eyebrows so long she has to plait and tuck them behind her ears; she has the snout of a boar and the ears of a lion. But she speaks three languages, and (I rather love this detail) she has a hat from Paris. And most importantly she is the one who, often in a fairly harsh manner, pushes Parzival in the directions he needs to go to be in the presence of the Grail again.

So those stories are there. When I see people chopping up, cutting and pasting ancient stories to make a new story with a very active female character that has been taken out of three other stories, what we get is a mythic image, but we don't get a myth.

Now mythic is something that can be created in the imagination of a Jeannette Winterson or a Tolkien. But myth itself is connected to time and space. It has to pass through many mouths and many communities, until it takes on the kind of weight that means it's authentically a myth.

So my challenge for anybody is to regard themselves as a kind of a mythological scholar in training. And to go out and to look through the old anthologies, get a library card, and try and collect these stories that are waiting to say something vital about the nature of our times.

And the second part of that challenge, the most crucial part of the research, will be your individual expression of that story. It doesn't have to be an oral storytelling. It could be something you write down, or paint. You could craft a boat from an image within the story. But one way or another you need to let the story have its way with you.

CC: Ah yes, so that it becomes creative and externalised rather than inward and psychological. Talking of Parzival, there's a line in *Scatterlings* where you ask, in respect to medieval culture: 'What replaces the chivalric viewpoint and creates anchoring for humans?' There are not many myths that consider a band of people working together, except perhaps Robin Hood and his Merry Men, and Arthur and the Knights of the Round Table. In terms of the future, it's clear we can't be held in an individualist story, but one that brings community into it, or a bigger relationship. And I wondered if you had any thoughts about that?

MS: It's as if they are folk memories of times when we were living in much more closely knit relationships, both with each other and the Earth; where at some point the leader, the king or the queen, has to marry the wild for the health of the land. But you're right, not only should we accept that we need other people around us collectively, working and banging into each other with our ideas, our feelings and our passions; but also that myth says that within you is a multiplicity of intelligences, who all want different things from you.

In many tribal stories and indigenous tales, there is an implicit understanding that what we call psyche or soul does not live in a person, but that we live within the psyche or the soul. And the tribe, collectively, respond to and develop their lives through that awareness, which is usually a very ordinary experience. It's not a question of belief, it's a question of experience. However, in the West, we have had such a different fate over the last few hundred years that there is now a collective amnesia to the idea that we have a soul at all - whether there's a soul inside us, or that we dwell within one.

So when someone talks about the individual journey of someone in the West, they're having to make that journey because they do not have around them the cultural certainties that a tribal group would have, to affirm that yes, we are living within this wider thing, the mundus imaginalis, the soul of the world, and your dreams and your opinions are connected to waterfalls and jaguars and lightning storms.

It is a lonelier place for us to be because what is surrounding us does not confirm an Earth-centred consciousness. So that's why I think the individual has been such a pronounced thing in myth and story over the last few hundred years. But if we cannot get back to a more collectively understood relationship with psyche, with Earth, with matter, with trees and rocks and wolves and bears, with our neighbours, then we will be caught in an enormous malfunction.

CDC: This brings me to a question I've wanted to ask about the wild setting for such psyche and soul, as you have described it. When so many of us are living in cities and urban areas, in depleted and industrialised landscapes, how can we recover our relationship with wild things and reconnect with that world?

MS: It's a question I've been asked a lot from people who are reading my books and are living in Detroit or Birmingham or Prestatyn. Initially my response is 'don't be size-ist'. Twenty years ago I was living in southeast London, and it was a great consolation for me that William Blake had found a lot of what he needed, as a human and a thinker, in London. He could kneel down and see a little grey thistle and he knew it was a smiling little man waving at him.

It was a way of not just seeing but beholding things. And when I lived in cities I would pay particular attention to what we rather naïvely call weeds. Or I would go out to a small park next to the video shop in Brockley, where there was a rather dejected-looking rowan tree. And I would spend an enormous amount of time just attending to this rowan. There's a lovely line by the French philosopher Gaston Bachelard, where he says something like 'the Earth seeks to be admired by you'.

So if you do nothing else, admire the thing. Learn to give it praise. Learn to speak its 12

secret names. You hear about the Inuit having all these different names for snow. Well, I thought, what are the 12 secret names of those old-growth oaks that I see down near Greenwich docks? My advice really is what the Hindus call the 'joyful participation in the sorrows of the world'. You have to get amongst the cities. You have to glean what you can, praise what you can, raise up what you can. I used to bemoan the fact that I didn't have 400 acres of prime old-growth forest on my back door, until I realised that this was just a surly child in me - one of these mythic characters I was talking about.

So, I told myself: 'you're going to go out and become a praise-maker. You're going to go out and praise and be generous to things.'

You asked a question about chivalry or gallantry earlier on, and when I was a little kid, one of my favourite books was called *The Book of Chivalry*, and I got my mum to make me a little cape. And I would wander around, constantly throwing this cape over puddles - it's very embarrassing...

CDC: Oh, that's sweet!

MS: But I now realise I was right. I wasn't throwing capes over puddles to maintain a patriarchal system of domination over women, I just wanted to behave in a beautiful and good manner to the Earth and its inhabitants. In the face of 1980s Thatcher's Britain that was my response - to get my little cape out. And I realise now in my mid-40s that absolutely nothing has changed in me.

CDC: Your cape is still on the back of the door, Martin?

MS: Yes, it absolutely is. Anybody with a cape gets into the School of Myth!

So, what I'm saying really is: soul doesn't end with a tree or a stream. If you're interested in animism, everything is alive. So how is a city alive? There's a wonderful storyteller and mythologist called Michael Meade, who grew up in New York. And he has a great description of being a kid on the subway. And every time he went up the stairs of the underground, he was in a different district of New York with a radically different ethnicity. So he goes up one set of stairs and it's Little Italy; he goes up another it's China; he goes up another it's Poland. And he said: I realised that the city itself was teeming with its mythologies, that over a couple of decades, those two cultures of the Poles and the Irish would inexorably start to weave parts of their lives together, and this third thing would happen.

My attention has been on the diminishing tracts of wilderness in Great Britain. But it can't

stop there for many of us, because that's simply not the environment we are living in.

CDC: I wanted to ask you finally about breaking enchantment, about breaking the spell, which is a predicament in so many fairy stories. Many of the illusions that we've been brought up with are now being cracked open. Do you feel that the myths contain insights that we might reach out for, not as a handrail but as a tiller, so we might steer our way through these choppy waters ahead?

MS: First of all, I would say again that the word enchantment, which ironically is often used about hearing a myth or a story, is the opposite of what's actually taking place. A story like 'The Red Bead Woman' and its effect on a room is not an enchantment, it's a waking up...

CDC: A disenchantment...

MS: Yes, if you've done your job well as a storyteller, your story itself has a magical sensibility to ward off enchantment and to raise up. Secondly, people often prefer to dismiss myths, saying: it's not true. But a way to think about myth is as something that never was and always is. Or as a beautiful lie that tells a much deeper truth. But one way or another when we lose our mythic sensibility, the powers in this world that may not wish us well have a greater purchase on us, a greater hold.

I notice that several times a day I go into what you could call a mild trance state. I'm not talking about ouija boards here! I'm just talking about falling under the influence of advertising, or various politically engineered neuroses that might be floating around. But I recognise I have come into a kind of enchantment. And the way I recognise it is that I feel less than grounded. I feel I'm not in the realm of imagination, I'm in the realm of fantasy. So the imaginal is not present; the Earth as a lived, breathing, thinking being is not present. What's happening is I'm simply fretting - to use my mother's language - I'm spinning my wheels. And so actually I think stories have a capacity to wake us up.

We are living in a time when we need symbolic intelligence, not just sign language. We are being fed signs, and signs that frighten us, and then paralyse us, and then colonise us. And imagination, through myth, wants to give you symbols to raise you up.

A story is not just an allegory, or a metaphorical point. It's a love affair, and one of the most wonderful ways of breaking the trance states being put on us at this point in time, is to figure out what you love. Figure out what you're going to defend. And develop the metis, develop the artfulness, to bring it out into the world.

Images: A different drum: Martin Shaw telling the Yakut tale of 'The Crow King and the Red Bead Woman' at Base Camp, Embercombe, Devon [Photo: Warren Draper]; cover of 'Snowy Tower'.