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## Mytho-poetical thought as described by Ernst Cassirer and Lucian Blaga: a comparative approach applied to works of poetry

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**In the present paper we would like to investigate the concept of mytho-poetical thought as defined by two philosophers, Ernst Cassirer<sup>64</sup> and Lucian Blaga<sup>65</sup>, and the way in which the term may be applied to a chosen corpus of poetry from Romania, Wales and Ireland.**

In the volume of poetry *Another Language* by Diarmuid Johnson<sup>66</sup> in the poem *Singing*, we read of a man singing on a bridge, while another, the poet, listens to the song. The river too sings. In the following verses, this singing assumes a significance of its own as a part of the poet's vision:

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<sup>64</sup> Ernst Cassirer (1874-1945) was a German philosopher and a historian of ideas. He was born in the city Breslau, now Wrocław Poland. One of his main works is the multivolume *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen* (*The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms*) (1923–29), which presents a philosophy of human culture, based on types of symbolism found in myth, language, and mathematical science.

<sup>65</sup> Lucian Blaga was a Romanian poet, playwright and philosopher. He developed a “speculative” philosophy that includes books on epistemology, metaphysics, aesthetics, philosophy of culture, philosophical anthropology, philosophy of history, philosophy of science, and philosophy of religion. His philosophy is closely interrelated with and reflected by both his poetic and dramatic works. His main philosophical works are: *Trilogia cunoașterii* (*The Trilogy of Knowledge*) (1943), *Trilogia culturii* (*The Trilogy of Culture*) (1944), *Trilogia valorilor* (*The Trilogy of Values*) (1946). An important volumes of poetry is *Poemele luminii* (*Poems of Light*) (1919).

<sup>66</sup> Diarmuid Johnson was born in Wales (1965) and educated in Ireland. He writes primarily in Irish, regularly in English also, and occasionally in Welsh. His work is influenced by his reading of medieval ‘Celtic’ literature, and by a knowledge of major European languages, principally French. Reference is made primarily to work from the collection *Another Language* (Motivex, Poznań 2009), and from *The Birth of Trystan* (Reintregirea, Alba Iulia 2010). Reference to certain hitherto unpublished texts shall be to the following authorised Internet address:

<http://www.diarmuidjohnson.net/poetry.html>.)

*A man stands on a bridge  
In deference to none who pass  
He voices his quiet song.*

*I take his singing to heart  
A singing destined for none  
But as I listen  
Hunger stirs inside me.*

*I shut the world out  
A world blunt with sound  
And listening again now  
Another singing rings loud:  
River under bridge.*

(Johnson 2009: 59)

Through the man's singing the listener departs from 'a world blunt with sound' and thus becomes aware of the singing of the river. Subsequently, attracted to the beauty of the songs which echo within him, the listener, no longer part of the world he has departed, wishes to become part of the new world, the world of the two songs which, by the end of the poem, will have become one. The river, sensing this wish, speaks as follows:

*Wade me now and see as I do  
Swim your way into my singing.*

(Johnson 2009: 59)

The two lines above are an invitation for the listener to become part of the world of song, and as such represent a moment of tension in the poem in which the essence of the text is to be found.

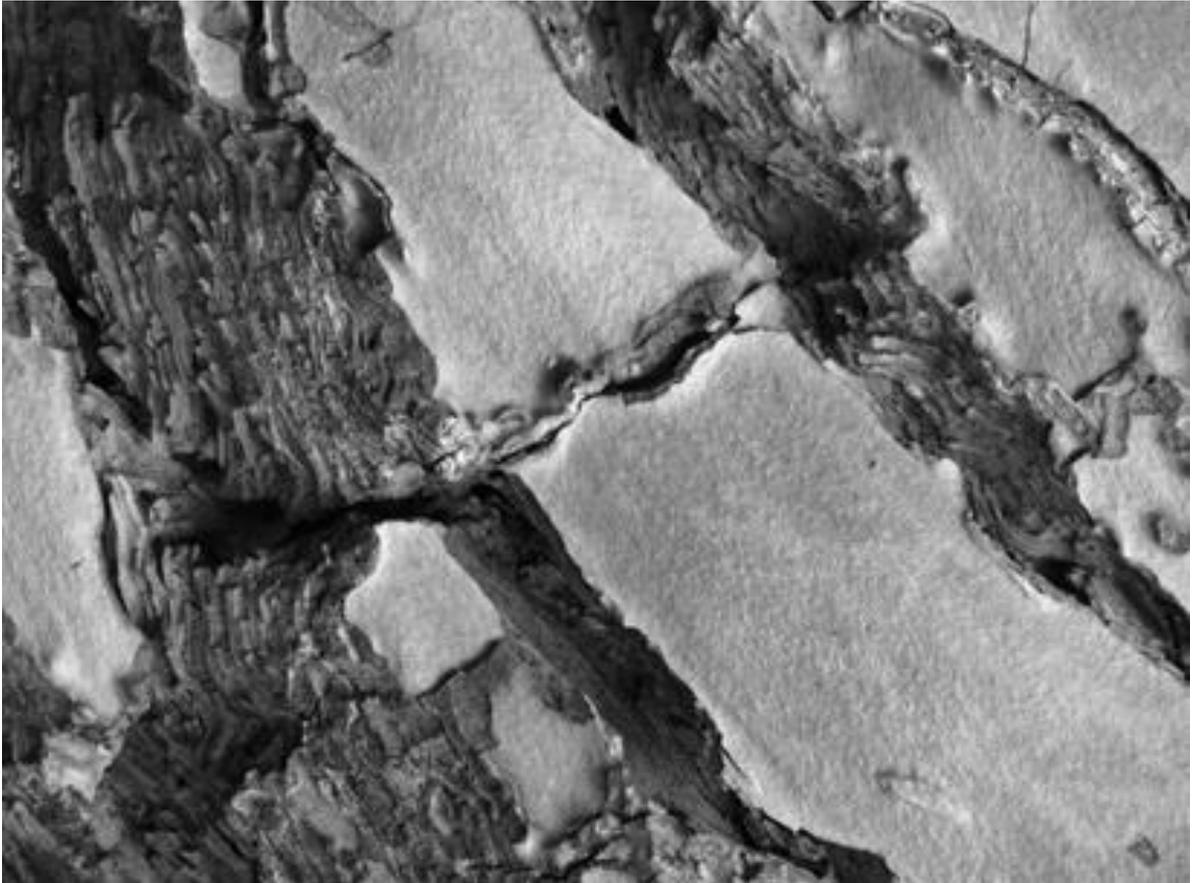
Singing is one of the emblematic elements in the poetry of Diarmuid Johnson, an element through which the world manifests itself and also through which the world may be perceived. It is song that links man and world together. In another environment, in the woods this time, in the poem *Axe*, man lights a fire with wood cut by a seemingly magic Gaelic axe that sings with the tongue of a lark. The axe, a symbol here of the same world of song as in the poem *Singing*, also represents creation as it enables man to kindle the fire only after he has learnt the tongue of the little axe. The reader here is given the impression that man is initiated into the world of song:

*And to the wood, into the wood  
I went to learn the axe's tongue  
to learn the tongue the axe speaks.*

*[...]*

*The axe sang there with a lark's tongue  
a lark-tongued axe  
lark in the empty skies.*

(Johnson 2009: 41)



(this and other photos come from the archive of Diarmuid Johnson)

When man finally learns the tongue of the axe, which thus enables him to kindle the fire himself, he is already part of a long forgotten world, a world he has seen through the chopped firewood that now draws him back through sleep into the past years, into the mystery of the world of song.

We encounter the singing axe once again in the poem *The Birth of Trystan*. Here it is the hunter's axe, which "at dusk [...] sings for the deer" (Johnson 2010: 38). Here the song of the axe is the song of the hunter; and man and axe sing together for the rekindling of life, because the deer, whose meat the hunter will bring home, is that which sustains life.

In the same poem, the mirror of the woman sings of buttercups. She says the name of her child-to-be must sing of the hunter, his bow – “a yew branch/waxed and wintered”, of the arrow – “bold as a bee, tail-feathered sweet and angry”, and so of all elements that constitute the world of his father, the hunter. Consequently, we note, when reading the poetry of Diarmuid Johnson, that we find ourselves in a world made up of singing elements, a world which sings, a world in which man is not a stranger, but rather part of the song of the world which he both contributes to and partakes of.

What kind of world can this be? What kind of world is a world in which man takes the form of a tree waiting for wonder to nest in him, a world in which he becomes a tree rooted in the earth, which, most importantly, accepts his rooting. Here is a gloss of the original Irish text:

*I sat where the tree once grew  
My eyes became two roots  
My mind a thing young and nameless.*

*The earth spoke to me:  
'You are no longer featherless  
Now you shall be nested in.*

*To be as a tree: that is my wish  
Two roots instead of two eyes  
Wonder to nest in the branches [= in the limbs/body] again.*

(Johnson: 2011)

We can seek answers regarding the nature of the singing world in the work of an Irish-Welsh poet in lines written by the Romanian poet and philosopher Lucian Blaga, who evokes a similar world. I use poems by two poets from two different regions, from opposite sides of Europe, to show the relevance of what Lucian Blaga called a stylistic matrix: The stylistic matrix is, according to the philosopher Lucian Blaga, an unconscious complex made up of four elements: the spatial and temporal horizon, the axiological emphasis, the anabasic/catabasic/neuter attitude, the formative expectation. The stylistic matrix represents thus the constant substratum for the lifetime creations of an individual and/or a community. It is a structure constituted by the above-mentioned elements at the level of the unconscious. Here, as Blaga recommends, the unconscious should not be understood in psycho-analytical terms but rather as being a structure similar to the cosmos which does not exist because or through the conscious but rather as a parallel world. Hence he recommends that the unconscious be described by an adjective formed similarly to the one derived from chaos, chaotic, so cosmos, cosmotic i.e. having the structure and consistency of the cosmos. As Blaga goes on to say, the stylistic matrix, and consequently, the style are never the product of an individual con-

scious reality but rather the secret, mysterious product of an anonymous reality. Nevertheless, there are stylistic matrices that can meet through one of the four elements, which constitute them, and there are authors whose creations go beyond the stylistic matrices of their cultures, the unconscious in their creations being the meeting point of several styles. (Blaga 1969 : 105-115).

We can thus see the similarity between two stylistic matrices – one Celtic the other Romanian, which seem to produce, in the case of both poets, similar creative and spiritual spaces. The meeting point between the two writers is due to the fact that both seem to reach beyond the boundaries of these matrices and explore the depth of the creative space of the collective unconscious. Thus, both poets outgrow their respective stylistic matrices and meet at the level of man's relation to the cosmos, creation and life. Their *cosmotic* creations concur and occupy the same space. The poem *Biography* by Lucian Blaga begins as follows:

*I know neither when nor where I first appeared in the light  
In the shadows I tempt myself to believe that the world is a song<sup>67</sup>.*

The statement in the poem – *I tempt myself to believe that the world is a song* - represents the poetic credo in which man, as part of creation, stepping forward into the light, humbly and in the shadows as it were, acknowledges the world as being a thing of wonder: '[...] *my sense of wonder makes me feel complete*'. In this world, perceived as song, the sense of wonder is the one which allows man to renounce his individual consciousness and let him be integrated into the singing world, the world of his ancestors: *With my ancestors I exchange mysteries*, writes Blaga. At the end of the poem, he integrates his own song into the song of the singing world:

*I have sung and still I sing the great passage of time  
The slumbering world, the waxen angels.*

Consequently, we may state that in Diarmuid Johnson's poetry, we encounter a similar vision of the world as in Blaga's poem. The song of man joins the song of the world, and man piously accepts the mystery of the world to which he belongs, a mystery he endorses with his own song, combining thus, in the terms of Rudolf Otto, *mysterium tremendum et mysterium fascinans*, the daunting and the fascinating at the same time (Otto 1889: 31). In Johnson's poem *Singing*, the listener is attracted to the song of the river, he feels hunger for the mystery of the song and becomes enrapt, so he is both fascinated and daunted by the mystery as is the lyric voice in Blaga's poem, who is tempted to believe in the mystery of the world and is at the same time overwhelmed by wonder. Such a poetic consciousness is a consciousness that confirms the mystery of

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<sup>67</sup> The English translations of Lucian Blaga in this article are by Diarmuid Johnson and Emilia Ivancu. The Romanian texts are from Lucian Blaga, *Poezii*, Editura Eminescu, București, 1975.

the world in and for which man lives, that is, in Blaga's words, the existence within mystery and for the purpose of revelation (Blaga 1969: 261-396). Blaga explains that the existence within mystery and for the purpose of revelation qualitatively means something totally different from simple existence in the world. Through the first mode of existence, that within mystery and for revelation, man dedicates himself to a creative destiny full of revealing intentions, while through the second mode of existence, that of simply being in the world, biologic man would simply remain attached to the given facts of this world (Blaga 1969: 380). Creation and the mystery of creation lie at the very basis of Lucian Blaga's philosophy, and thus at the core of his poetic and dramatic works. Man, whose spirit contains the seed that was laid within him to ascend to the absolute by the main metaphysical factor named by Lucian Blaga *Marele Anonim*<sup>68</sup> may assume a creative destiny. In his destiny, leading towards the absolute, he attempts to overcome the transcendent censure imposed by 'Marele Anonim' to protect itself and the world of mysteries. (Blaga 1969: 21-29). A creator himself, man thus finds himself in the hypothesis of being caught between the desire for absolute truth, which is to be found in the realm of 'Marele Anonim', and the transcendent censure interposed between man and 'Marele Anonim'. This induces in man a sense of the tragic which can be seen very well in Blaga's poem, *Biography*:

*My smile seems foreign here, I climb as one enthralled  
Standing at the centre of the world, my sense of wonder makes me feel complete.*

*Sometimes I utter words in which I am not to be found  
I love things sometimes that do not respond to me.*

*My eyes are filled with wind and with dreams of greater deeds  
I walk as any other  
Now with a sense of guilt on the roofs of hell  
Now blameless over the lilled mountain.*

*With my ancestors I exchange mysteries  
And am at one with them encircling a single hearth  
They, a people washed by water under stone.*

*At night again I listen softly  
To tales of my kin, long since forgotten,  
Rising in flood within me over and over.*

*I bless bread, I bless the moon  
By day I live as one in the clutches of a storm.*

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<sup>68</sup> Rather than coining English terms, we prefer to adhere to the Romanian original. The words *Marele Anonim*, literally translates as the Great Anonymous.

*Words dampened on the tongue  
I have sung and still I sing the great passage of time  
The slumbering world, the waxen angels.*

*From shoulder to shoulder, uttering never a word,  
I shift my star as one might shift a burden.*



In the first poem by Diarmuid Johnson quoted here, *Singing*, the listener renounces the status of simply existing in the world, assumes a creative destiny first through fascination with the two songs, the song on the bridge and later the song under the bridge, then by renouncing the blunt world of sound, and ultimately by swimming his way into the singing of the river. We have the same type of renunciation in the poem *Sitting*, where man becomes a tree, and reintegrates himself into the world of wonder. This type of consciousness, open to mystery and ready to become even an extension of this mystery, was qualified by the philosopher of the myth, Ernst Cassirer as being *das mythische denken* (Cassirer 1955). The English equivalent, which I choose here, in spite of its limited expressivity when compared to the original German, is *mythical thought*. This is a term that Lucian Blaga also went on to use, especially to refer to *Marele Anonim*, and the mystery of creation, although Blaga drew a further distinction between 'mythical thought' and 'magical thought'.

In the second volume *Das mythische Denken* of his thorough study, *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms* dedicated to mythical thought, Cassirer however does not give a con-

crete definition of the concept but rather dedicates almost three hundred pages to a description of its characteristics and structure. Neither does he give a clear definition of the concept in other studies. Nevertheless, one important idea on which Cassirer's whole philosophy of myth relies is that the four symbolic forms i.e. myth, art, language and science. These are forces each of which produces and posits a world of its own (Cassirer 1946: 8). He also adds elsewhere that myth, which lies at the basis of mythical thought, is connected to mystery, more specifically 'its true significance and depth lie not in what its configurations reveal but in what they conceal' (Cassirer 1955: 37-38). Lucian Blaga, on the other hand, in his study *Gândirea magică – On Magical Thought*, (Blaga 1992) when making the distinction between mythical thought and magical thought, states that the myth is an attempt to reveal a mystery through imaginative means, in an effort to convert the mystery of existence. For Blaga magical thought would be, on the other hand, a prolongation of the mystery, magical thought implying either the idea of magical substance or magical power (Blaga 1992: 7-8). Nonetheless, the two types of thought, mythical and magical, can be complementary and do not exclude each other. Consequently, we can see that both Cassirer and Blaga connect myth and mystery, and mythical thought. For Blaga the assumption of creative destiny, that is the existence within mystery and for the purpose of revelation, presupposes mythical thought. Such an existence is a cultural act, an act of poetry. (Blaga, 1969: 309-343) For Cassirer myth and language, which seem to originate from the same source<sup>69</sup>, can be embodied in poetry, which is for the philosopher 'not only rooted in mythic motives as its beginnings, but keeps its connection with myth even in its highest and purest products' (Cassirer 1946: 99).

Consequently, combining the visions of the two philosophers, mytho-poetical thought (the Greek *myhpoeia* i.e. myth creating) would be man's assumption of his creative destiny, which is the existence within and for the purpose of revelation, the creative act through which he makes an attempt to convert the mystery of his existence through revelatory and metaphorical means.

Important categories borrowed from Ernst Cassirer's philosophy of mytho-poetical thought include: time, space, image, word and language, the relation *pars pro toto* (the part-whole relation), and ultimately the creative act itself. The act of creation stands at the centre of mythological thought because it is through the act of creation that man assumes his creative destiny, which echoes the initial primordial act of creation. (The repetition of the primordial act of creation also implies magical thought, which, as Blaga says, in most cases comes in combination with the mythical thought.)

Starting from this brief analysis of terminology regarding mytho-poetical thought, and having already seen that one major characteristic of the work of both Lucian Blaga and

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<sup>69</sup> Cassirer fully develops the idea in his book *Language and Myth*, (1953) (1946) Translated by Susanne K. Langer, New York: Dover Publications Inc..

Diarmuid Johnson is the perception of the world as a song, which man joins with his own singing thus assuming his creative destiny. This also implies the assumption of the sublime and tragic at one and the same time. We can now state that these major traits of mytho-poetical thought offer the premise to read our poet's work from a mytho-poetical perspective. Consequently, our objective as of now is to detect the structure of the mytho-poetical thought of poets who bring to poetry the rich heritage of their cultures both at the level of content and at the level of language, and the way the perception of the world as a song ultimately becomes poetic text. However, our approach will not aim to deprive the texts of their mystery by deconstructing them, but rather to enter the world of *mythopoeia* and see how its categories (time, space, creation etc) give the texts mytho-poetical shape and content.

Today we live in a secularised society in which individual consciousness is profoundly embedded. Most cultural products are secularised, even if sometimes they do evoke mythical worlds, because they lack one *sine qua non* condition for them to be the product of mytho-poetical consciousness. Most poetry written today is secular, as it comes from a secular and secularised consciousness, which, in turn, aims at the individualisation of the lyric voice as opposed either to the whole world, to the act of creation, or even to the creator i.e. the poet himself. There is no need to give examples here, because the secularised act of creation is commonplace, and the present statement is not intended as a judgemental one. Consequently, the *sine qua non* condition for mytho-poetical thought to exist was characteristic of the traditional societies i.e. the relative absence of individualisation of man, or, in other words, man's approval to be part of nature, and thus of the singing world, and man's life as part of the cycle of the life of the universe. This type of consciousness, or better said the absence of an individual consciousness, meant knowing the world from a mythical perspective in which categories such as time, space, creation held symbolic value different to that held by the secularised mind.

In the case of the poetry of Diarmuid Johnson, we have seen several texts in which man retreats into this world of song as he becomes aware of the secular world, 'the blunt world of sound' (*Singing*). On the other hand, in the poem *Sad Philologist* where man, aware of the uselessness of a secular hypostasis, that of actually worming his way into words, is simply "sad".

*I am a sad philologist  
Digging in the etymon field  
My spade glances off the petrified core  
Its dull blade severs a root.*

(Johnson 2009: 58)

Subsequently, the poet chooses to renounce further digging in the field of words, and the mind, as well as the body, becomes consumed by one of the four primordial elements of nature, the water of the river:

*The man spoke to the river  
'Consume the mind,' he said.  
The river did  
And, in full flood, [it] broke its banks.  
Now the mind spoke:  
'River,' it said, 'consume the man.'  
The river did and the limpid waters grew black.*

(Johnson: 2011)

Again man returns to nature, in other words he confirms the cyclic course of life that typifies nature. This can be achieved only if man can still perceive himself as part of the cycle. And with this idea we touch on a fundamental category of mytho-poetical thought i.e. time. For the secular mind, time is flowing, irreversible, and erodes the man who becomes its victim, and for whom the beginning is in his birth and the end is in his death. For the mytho-poetical mind, time is cyclical, and it can be renewed through different rites and rituals, and beginning and end are cyclical: a beginning and an end of a temporal period, marked by rituals and rites are all agents of the regeneration of time (Eliade 1954: 52). Through the regeneration of time, man is saved as is the world, recreated, of which man is part. Consequently a cyclical view of time means a cyclical view of life. This view of the cycle of time, nature and time is very well illustrated in Diarmuid Johnson's poem *Salmon Speaks*. This can be read both as a continuation of the cycle *The Birth of Trystan* or as an independent text in its own right. In the text, there is the hunter, father of a child, who hunts the salmon in the pool:

*The salmon speaks:  
I have wintered in the cold green salt  
There I sensed the tug of April moon  
From the wave a path I wove – to the wood  
Where, brittle and sea-less, a hunter is afoot.*

*Your shadow is simple, brother,  
As a prayer it moves on the pool  
The shadow speaks to me:  
'I have a son, my son needs meat.*

*I saw the tree grow whose whittled branch you finger  
In times past I fed on its fruit.  
Cast it gleaming through the gloom!*

*I saw berries redden on the leafless shaft you clutch:  
Cast it hungry through the dusk!  
My flesh was formed from its root.*

(Johnson 2011)

The poem is set in *illo tempore*, and the atmosphere is mythical. The salmon here echoes the medieval Irish tradition where the motif of a salmon bearer and giver of knowledge (Irish 'bradán feasa') occurs. The salmon eats the nuts of the tree, which grows on the banks of the river, thus gaining knowledge. He who consumes of the salmon's flesh will in turn become bearer of this knowledge. Thus, Finn (Fionn) (Mac Cumhaill), as a boy, inadvertently tastes the salmon's flesh, and acquires the gift of foresight, Irish *fiús*. The salmon, most probably a symbol of sovereignty in the context of Gaelic literature, occurs in other prose cycles in medieval Irish. Cu Chulainn, protector of the tribe of Ulster hunts the fish in the river Boyne (Chevalier, Gheerbrant 1969: 849-850)



In the poem *Salmon Speaks*, we encounter in point of fact two types of cycle of nature and life. Firstly, there is the cycle of nature that is a cycle of life: the salmon once fed on the fruit of the branch now turned into a spear. The wise salmon knows that it is time it returned to the tree in the form of its physical death that is not perceived here as death but as a renewal of life. This is one cycle of nature and life and it is in direct relation to the second cycle, in which man's life is integrated into and reminds us also of the primordial act of creation. Mircea Eliade says in *Le mythe de l'éternel retour* that every sacrifice - here the salmon sacrificing itself and being sacrificed - is the repetition/mimesis of the initial act of creation. (Eliade 1954: 11). Here we note the creation of life i.e. the son. Moreover, the cycle of life can take place because all elements of nature -salmon, branch become spear, leaf and wave, wood and water – give their consent for the performance of the sacrifice and the continuation of life. The salmon first returns to the earth and wood which helped him live, moreover by dying, it will permit life, the hunter's son, to live. Thus the salmon itself continues living.

Crucial to the lexicon of the poem is the word 'brother' used by the salmon when addressing the hunter. This points to the fact that man is still part of nature, both physically and at the level of consciousness, and that this is why he has the consent of nature to hunt the salmon. This places the poem in a mythical time and space when death did not mean mortality, but rather immortality, through the renewal of the elements of the world. Moreover, the elements come to life and return to nature in different forms, and even the salmon continues living through the child that will consume its flesh. This child might later say, as did Taliesin, the Welsh bard: *I existed in many forms before attaining a state of freedom*<sup>70</sup>.

The life of man does not lie outside the cycle of nature, but follows the laws of nature. The birth of the child as related to and reflected by the salmon is not without meaning. The Welsh poet, R. S. Thomas<sup>71</sup> writes in his poem *Song for Gwydion* of another stage in the coming of age of a boy. Here again we find reference to the sacrifice of a fish. Innocence, mingled with the joy of life, celebrate, through sacrifice, both man and nature:

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<sup>70</sup> Taliesin was a Welsh bard of the 6<sup>th</sup> century. Here are lines from one of his poems, *Kad Goddeu*, which speak of man's part in the cycle of nature: 'I existed in many forms before attaining a state of freedom I have been a sword, long and flecked [...]' (Johnson 2008 : 5).

<sup>71</sup> R. S. Thomas (1913-2000) was born in Cardiff and spent his early years in Holyhead, by the island of Anglesey in north Wales. He was ordained in 1936 and spent his career as a clergyman in rural Wales. His work spans half a century during which time he published over a thousand poems in over twenty collections. His early work describes rural life as he observed it in Manafon. During the final decades of his life, religion and questions about the nature of divinity, man's perception of divinity, and the possibility of expressing this perception through language, become paramount in his work.

*When I was a child and the soft flesh was forming  
Quietly as snow on the bare boughs of bone,  
My father brought me trout from the green river  
From whose chill lips the water song had flown.*

*Dull grey their eyes, the beautiful, blithe garland  
Of stipples faded, as light shocked the brain;  
They were the first sweet sacrifice I tasted,  
A young god, ignorant of the blood's stain.*

(R. S. Thomas 1986 : 14)

As Ernst Cassirer puts it, 'For mythical thinking, generation and birth are not purely natural processes subject to universal and fixed rules; they are essentially magical occurrences. (Cassirer 1955: 180). Moreover the association of man and salmon in the cycle of life is also a sign of the mystery of their existence: 'the unity of mythical species is rather of a fundamentally magic origin'. (Cassirer 1955: 181) This magic, mysterious origin accounts for man's life and its rhythm as foreshadowed and announced by signs in nature; that is also the reason why even the dark moments are announced or known by birds or trees – the 'bird a-wing in a keen sky' (Johnson 2010: 28), the root of the tree which listens to the woman's dream and knows the future as it hears it through the earth. The whole universe is thus meaningful and echoes mystery – 'The wind here smells of dusk/Of apples I will make a sheet/ The stars wait/The stream is a book full of light' (Johnson 2010: 24). The world is full of wonders, it sings, and hearing its song, man knows that mystery must not be uttered: 'Give no name to your knowing' (Johnson 2010: 28). The whole Trystan cycle, and especially the poem *Salmon Speaks*, places man in the spinning wheel of the mystery of life and present him in a strict magic relation to the wonders of the world. The texts evoke a mythical time, the *illo tempore* when man did not distinguish himself as a separate species from nature but was as 'a link in the chain of life as a whole by specific primacy of value he knew himself, within which each individual creature and thing is magically connected with the whole, so that a continuous transition, a metamorphosis of one being into another, appears not only as possible but as necessary, as the 'natural' form of life itself.' (Cassirer 1955: 194)

Consequently, the way the hunter is acknowledged by the salmon as his brother, and the way death changes into life through the sacrifice of the salmon can be read as a similar view upon the world to that of Lucian Blaga evoked in the poem *The wonders of this world are a crown of petals I will not crush*. Lucian Blaga's principle of preserving the mystery of the world that is to be found in every element of the world speaks of his mytho-poetical mind according to which the world should not be deprived of its mystery. Mystery can be preserved only if man remains a part of it, if he remains a light that will increase the mysteries of the world, only if he remains a link in the natural course of life:

*The wonders of this world are a crown of petals I will not crush  
And never will my mind bring death to the mysteries  
[That] I discover in a flower, in the eye, on the lips or on the graves [of man].*

*The light shed by others overbears the unfathomable charms hidden in the  
depths of the dark, but I, with a light of my own, bring grandeur to the mystery of the  
world.*

*But I with a light of my own, bring grandeur to the mystery of the world  
And just as white shafts of moonlight in no way diminish but rather  
intensify the shudder of night*

*So I enrich the dim horizons of mystery, vibrant and sacred  
And all that is little understood In my seeing becomes still less understood  
For I love flower, the eye, the lips and the graves [of man].*

Blaga's poem contains quintessentially his philosophy regarding the two types of cognition: luciferical and paradisiacal. The man who assumes a creative destiny, that within mystery and with the purpose of revelation also assumes the Luciferical cognition, i.e. that of not depriving the mystery of the world, but rather enriching it with his own creation. Consequently, we can see that for a mythical mind, it is necessary that man perceive himself as a bearer of the Luciferical cognition as well as being part of (the cycle) of nature. We can thus see similarities in the poetical visions of Blaga and of Johnson and in work ascribed to Taliesin. In all three instances, man, a humble creator, mirrors and enriches the creation of the world.

In the poems of Diarmuid Johnson, the hunter has the value and symbol of man as seen by Lucian Blaga at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century as 'a petal of the crown of wonders of the world'. Moreover, the mythical structure of the cycle of life present in *The Birth of Trystan* and *Salmon Speaks* also permeates the work of Diarmuid Johnson as a whole. His poetry spins outward from the moment of man's birth to the moment of his death, in which neither birth nor death are seen as beginning and end but rather as symbolic meaningful and mysterious events which mark the rhythm of man's existence.

If birth is a joyful song performed by man, an act of creation through which he contributes to the renewal of the world, the absence of birth is a mourning song as it occurs in the cycle of poems *Cold Priests and Angels*. This whole series of poems seem to have an inner rhythm that remind one of chant initiation songs in which the magical number nine is sovereign. According to Cassirer, the presence of magical numbers is another characteristic of the mythical thought (Cassirer 1955 : 140). The number nine has various and complex symbols in this series of poems ranging from the nine-month period of gestation in humans, announced by the nine postmen, or messengers, (a symbol occa-

sionally used by the poet in other poems as well) to the view of the world structured in nine strata. Considered a magical and significant number in most cultures and associated with unity, order, perfection, infinite and life, the number nine also has an important value for many rites and rituals. (Chevalier and Gheerbrant 1969 : 663-665). In the poem *Unborn* from the series *Cold Priests and Angels*, we seem to encounter a mourning song for an unaccomplished event, that is the non-birth of a child, in which number nine is that which governs the rites of mourning:

*nine moonless graves  
beneath the unfenced sea:  
the nine months of a cold priest's grief  
the nine grieving apples at his angel's feet  
the nine unborn songs to sing in his tree.*

(Johnson 2009 : 51)

The sequence above reads like a song sung to mourn the unaccomplishment of the renewal of the world through the unborn child, an unaccomplishment which makes the whole world grieve. Nevertheless, the world, even if in grief, does not lose its song, but rather continues singing. The lines above speak of a view of the world in which grief and sufferance is not without meaning and in which they are turned into an act of creation, the nine unborn songs that can still be given voice. Man thus can turn his grief into song and accept a world that sings and mourns with him.

Man contributes to the mystery of the world, joins the song of the world with his own singing through two important gestures that renew the world. One of these is birth, the other is the act of artistic creation. The two acts of creation represent a repetition of the cosmogonic act, which, in Eliade's words are meant 'to annul past time and to abolish history by a continuous return to illo tempore' (Eliade 1954 : 81). Thus, the hunter speaks for the whole world which hopes for the renewal through the birth of the child: "A hook: on it I hang my hope/ I give you apples and a son." (Johnson 2010 : 38)

Moreover, together with the song that is to be heard with the birth of a child, one could hear the song of the soul, that compound of divine differentials of which each individuality in the universe is composed of, according to Lucian Blaga. If man is part of the cycle of nature, and if man's life is not a flowing expression of time, but rather a cycle within another cycle, then the existence of the soul is also seen as a going through these cycles, as in the poem *Liniște/ The Still of Night*:

*Such is the still [of night] that I can all but hear  
The moonbeams against the windows beating.*

*[Now] an unknown voice echoes within my breast  
And within me resounds the yearning of another.*

*Some say that our fathers –  
Cut down while in their prime  
Their blood still youthful in their veins  
Great passion in their hearts unspent  
A passion burning like the sun –  
[Some say that] they return  
Return to live out, in us, the years they were denied.*

*Such is the still of night that I can all but hear  
The moonbeams against the windows beating.*

*Who can tell, soul of mine,  
In some distant time to come,  
Your yearning stifled  
Elation within you broken,  
In whose breast you [in turn] shall sing  
On sweet strings in the still of night  
[And] on the harp of darkness –  
Who, who can tell?*

In many cosmogonies, the world is created through pain and suffering, but the pain, seen as a sacrifice, is meant to restore order. Man, as creator, performs the mission for which he is born, and through his creation maintains the cycle of life, whose mystery is never revealed but sung. Lucian Blaga speaks of the mystery of the gift of creation, which, in his philosopher's opinion, is an undecipherable mystery and which, in its essence, is related to the mystery of the cosmogonical creations (Blaga 1969 : 108). Such is the case, for example, of the Balkanic myth of creation, which has its Romanian version in the building of a monastery. The narrative as follows: a group of masons decide to build either a bridge or a monastery, but whatever they build during the day crumbles and is undone during the night. The only solution seems to be a human sacrifice, more specifically the walling in of one of the masons' wives or sisters in the stonework of the building. The woman whose sacrifice helps the construction of the bridge/monastery is the wife of the master mason, who is also carrying his unborn baby:

*Manole, Manole!*  
*Good master Manole,*  
*The wall squeezes hard,*  
*My frail flesh is marred*  
*Not a word spoke he,*  
*But worked busily;*  
*Up he raised the wall*  
*To gird her withal;*  
*Up the wall did rise*  
*To her ankles nice,*  
*To her bonny thighs.*  
*While she, wellaway,*  
*Creased her laugh so gay,*  
*And would pray and say,*  
*Manole, Manole!*  
*Good master Manole,*  
*Have done with your jest.*  
*`Tis not for the best.*  
*Manole, Manole,*  
*Good master Manole,*  
*The wall squeezes hard,*  
*My frail flesh is marred*  
*Not a word spoke he,*  
*But worked busily;*  
*Up he raised the wall*  
*To gird her withal;*  
*And the wall did rise*  
*To her ankles nice,*

*To her bonny thighs,*  
*To her shapely waist,*  
*To her fair, young breasts.*  
*While she, wellaway,*  
*She would cry and say,*  
*She would weep and pray,*  
*Manole, Manole!*  
*The wall weighs like lead,*  
*Tears my teats now shed*  
*My babe is crushed dead.*  
*Manole did smart,*  
*Sick he was at heart;*  
*And the wall did rise,*  
*Pressed her in its vice,*  
*Pressed her shapely waist,*  
*Crushed her fair, young breasts,*  
*Reached her lips now white,*  
*Reached her eyes so bright,*  
*Till she sank in night*  
*And was lost to sight!*  
*Her sweet voice alone*  
*Came through in a moan,*  
*Manole, Manole,*  
*Good master Manole!*  
*The wall squeezes hard,*  
*Crushed is now my heart,*  
*With my life I part!*

The ballad *Master Manole* evokes the typical mytho-poetical thought characteristic of the traditional societies, which illustrates very well Mircea Eliade's vision of the sacrifice which restores the cosmogonical order of the world. At the same time, the ballad is relevant for the understanding of the mystery that lies behind each work of creation.

A variant of the Balkan myth of the bridge inspired by the novel *The Three-Arched Bridge* by Ismael Kadare, is represented by the poem *Pont-ar-Daf (Bridge over the Taf)*, written in Welsh. Three mason brothers build a bridge that will stand firm only if one of their wives is sacrificed in the wall. Johnson turns this into a foundation myth for Cardiff, now the capital city of Wales, as the river Taf is the river that runs through the city

of Cardiff<sup>72</sup>. The poem represents an example of how the *mythical* mind of the poet employs a mythical structure and adapts it to a new context, thus redefining both the value of the myth and the mystery of creation it reveals, a mystery that is increased by the sacrifice required by creation:



*Daw yn hysbys dan y coelbren  
Arwydd fydd yn sêr y nen  
Daw yn hysbys dan y coelbren.*

*Rhaid aberthu un o'n gwragedd  
Ym môn y bont y mae ei bedd  
Rhaid aberthu un o'n gwragedd.*

*Let us stand under the tree of  
knowledge  
The stars above will send a sign  
Let us stand under the tree of knowledge*

*We must sacrifice one of our brides  
Deep in the wall, she will find her grave  
We must sacrifice one of our brides*

(Johnson 2010: 58)

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<sup>72</sup> Rewriting the tale about the Welsh river, the poet conceived it also as 'a lament of sorts for the waters of Cardiff. At the turn of the millennium, the city council 'walled in' and sacrificed not a human offering, but the river itself. A marina was built, and the Cardiff bay area reconstructed. Tidal waters no longer flow through the city now, but rather a morose and lifeless canal.' (Johnson 2010:

The Balkan mythical vision of creation as related to and derived from human sacrifice skillfully adapted into the Welsh poem by Diarmuid Johnson, enriches the mythical world of the poet and shows the modality in which the mytho-poetical thought represents both a chalice for the myth to live on in, and the substance that makes the myth. Sacrifice as inherent to human existence is that which offers the foundation of creation, and as a consequence death cannot be the end of life but the beginning of immortality through creation. Moreover, the Romanian ballad and the Welsh poem are both relevant for the understanding of the mystery that lies behind each work of creation.

As we have already seen, mytho-poetical works are structured in and based on cycles of life and creation, cycles which begin with birth as renewal of the world, and continue with creation, grief and sacrifice, each a part of a mythical view of the world, continuing with the moment of man's death, either as a sacrifice or as the end of a cycle and the beginning of another.

Another Romanian ballad, which occurs in Romanian territory in more than 2000 variants, even as a Christmas carol, is the ballad *Miorita*, (*The Ewe Lamb*). The Romanian ballad, considered a representative folk creation for the Romanian people together with *Monastirea Argesului*, tells the story of three shepherds, each of them from a different province; Transylvania, Moldavia and Wallachia. The events in the ballad occur at the time of transhumance. Two of them plan to kill the third who is warned of the imminent deed by one of his ewes. The ballad represents a description of his death imagined by the shepherd as his wedding to nature. It is a vision which lacks all fear of death or anger and contains the calm and peace of a man who does not see his death as an end, a fatality, but rather a return, a reintegration into the world from where he came:

*How I met my death,  
Tell them not a breath;  
Say I could not tarry,  
I have gone to marry  
A princess – my bride  
Is the whole world's pride.  
At my wedding, tell  
How a bright star fell,  
Sun and moon came down  
To hold my bridal crown,  
Firs and maple trees  
Were my guests; my priests  
Were the mountains high;  
Fiddlers, birds that fly,*

*Slim as a willow tree,  
With his dear face, bright  
As the milk-foam, white,  
His small moustache, right  
As the young wheat's ear,  
With his hair so dear,  
Like plumes of the crow  
Little eyes that glow  
Like the ripe black sloe?'  
Ewe-lamb, small and pretty,  
For her sake have pity,  
Let it just be said  
I have gone to wed  
A princess most noble*

*All birds of the sky;  
Torchlights, stars on high.  
My old mother, little,  
With her white wool girdle,  
Eyes with their tears flowing,  
Over the plains going,  
Asking one and all,  
Saying to them all,  
'Who has ever known,  
Who has seen my own  
Shepherd fine to see,*

*There on Heaven's doorsill.  
To that mother, old,  
Let it not be told  
That a star fell, bright,  
For my bridal night;  
Firs and maple trees  
Were my guests, priests  
Were the mountains high;  
Fiddlers, birds that fly,  
All birds of the sky;  
Torchlights, stars on high.*

Moreover, the ballad, which is to be found even today in the form of the Romanian song *doina*, is the one which inspired Blaga's theory regarding the mioritic space. This is revelatory for the creative Romanian cosmotic matrix that is to be found also in the Romanian language (Blaga 1969 : 124-125)

In Diarmuid Johnson's work, the poem which best evokes the passage of man into another world is the poem *Sa Reilig Dhom (In the Cemetery)*. The poem, written in Gaelic, very lyrical in both its ideas and form, represents the wish of man to be reintegrated into the world of clay, i.e. to be reintegrated in the elements of nature of which he was born, and with whose memory he departs the world:

*Cuirtear mé míle slí ó fhód mo bháis:  
Is de chré na cruinne mo chuid cnámh.*

*Cuirtear mé faoi chosán 's ní faoi chrois  
Is caomhnú siúil a bheas sa mbeart sin.*

*Cuirtear mé ar bhruach an átha  
Cloisfead scéal na gcos 's na gcrúb.*

*Cuirtear cúl mo chinn le spéir  
Is leor don tsúil cuimhne na réalt.*

We gloss these above lines in English as follows:

*Bury me a mile from the place I die (lit. the sod of my death)  
My bones are [part] of a world of clay*

*Bury me not under a cross but under a path  
In this way my travels need not cease.*

*Bury me on the bank of a ford  
For me to hear tales of hoof and heel.*

*Bury me with my back to the skies  
The memory of stars is enough for the eye .*

(Johnson 2011)

The moment of passage is presented as a natural phase in man's life, not as an end to it. Moreover, all four primordial elements of the world – earth, water, fire and air – occur with their primordial functions, those of creating the image of the world, an imago mundi. Written by the poet in the mountains of Apuseni, the poem seems to have extracted its essence from the same space where the Romanian ballad *Miorita*<sup>73</sup> was born, and of whose existence Diarmuid Johnson was unaware at the time, a fact which proves once more the mythical view of the world which our poet possesses, and the unseen channels of spirituality and creation that are inherent in his work on the level of the creative mystery. The same view upon death seems to be present in Johnson's poem, where, as in the Romanian ballad, the moment of passage is seen in relation with the stars in the sky: the shepherd's death is announced by a falling star, while man's death in the poem *In the Cemetery* by the sunset:

*Cuirtear mé le fuineadh gréine  
Múchfar dhá sholas d'aon mhúchadh amháin.*

*Cuirtear mé mile ó fhód mo bháis:  
Is de chré na cruinne an réalt agus an chnámh.*

*Bury me as the sun sets  
Two lights will be put out together (lit. in one extinguishing).*

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<sup>73</sup> For a full English version of the ballad in the translation of the poet William D. Snodgrass, visit the Internet page <http://spiritromanesc.go.ro/Miorita%20-eng.html>.

*Bury me a mile from the place I die  
Star and bone belong in a world of clay*

(Johnson 2011)

The mirroring of man's death by the movement of the stars in the sky is relevant from two points of view. First of all, it shows again that the most important stages in human life are parts of the cycle of nature, and as a consequence, that they are transcendental. (Even if physically man returns to the world of clay, the soul is reintegrated into the spirit of nature and thus enjoys a form of immortality.) Secondly, it points to the value of space as a category of mytho-poetical thought since the passage of man implies a shift of space which is associated, in the mythical mind, with the opposition between light and darkness. Ernst Cassirer argues that 'the development of the mythical feeling of space always starts from the opposition of day and night, light and darkness.' because this difference is inherent in the cultural development of man (Cassirer 1955: 97-98). Thus, the sunset mirrors man's life extinguished in the rhythm of the movement of the solar star. The poet envisages for himself, as happens in the Romanian ballad, a sort of rite of passage which is meant to ensure his return into the essence of the world: the proximity of nature and the presence of the book, another symbol of man's creation. The poem, even though a poem about man's death, very lyrical and reflexive at the same time, actually has the value of a hymn to celebrate life:

Cuirtear mé gan phaidir an bhéil bháin  
Is méanar don anáil a bhí beo seal.

*Bury me with no word of pious flattery  
Each breath drawn was joy enough.*

(Johnson 2011)

Space in mytho-poetical works, generally occupies alternate parts of a consecrate-inconsecrate duality, whether it be sea, lake, mountain, sky or forest. All types of space that foreshadow Diarmuid Johnson's poems are archetypal representations of the world that, in the course of the regeneration of time, are renewed as well. This is the situation in the ballad *Miorita*, where all elements of the mountain, in conjunction with all elements of the sky, prepare the wedding-death of the shepherd. On the other hand, in the poem *The Mountain (An Sliabh)*, the mountain, which is the archetype of the temple of the world, attracts man who poses a question: *Why do we love the mountains?* The answer lies in the very mystery beyond its symbolism: an axis that unites heaven and earth, 'the point at which Creation began' (Eliade 1954 : 16). The mountain becomes the centre of the world, a consecrate representation of it, another imago mundi characterized by an imposing force, grandeur, and most important, by terror and wonder:

*D'fhéach an duine ar an sliabh  
Thug sé taitneamh don cheo 's don chian*

*The man looked at the mountain  
Its mist held much appeal for him  
As did the [sense of] longing [that the mountain aroused in his heart].*

[...]

*'Féach an sliabh,' arsa an neach  
Tá mealladh súl ann agus mealladh na gcós  
Bíonn an t-iontas agus an t-uafás  
Ag coraíocht lena chéile ann  
Orlach ar orlach, inscne ar inscne.'*

*'See the mountain,' said the voice  
It attracts the eye, it lures the walking  
Wonder and terror  
Wrestle there with one another  
Inch by inch, as male and female (lit. 'gender by gender').*

(Johnson 2011)

The wonder and terror are actually the signs of mystery that the mountain in its sacredness give rise to in man, a combination of *mysterium tremendum et mysterium fascinosum* also present earlier in the poem *Singing*. Man thus lives in a universe that arouses in him fascination and awe, and the mountain, the peak of such a universe, transfers its grandeur onto him. As we have seen, mythopoetical-thought envisages a world which sings for man. It is also a world that encompasses him and his song within its mystery. Furthermore, the spaces inhabited by man are spaces subject to consecration and desecration, spaces that speak or listen to man. This universe in which man's creation mirrors and imitates the creation of the cosmos, a creation often born out of grief and sacrifice, things that give meaning to the creative act, is a universe construed by mythopoetical thought. Nevertheless, as it happens with mytho-poetical creations, and in the case of the work of Diarmuid Johnson, there is an interdependent organic relation between on the one hand a mythical view of the world and on the other hand speech and language. For the poet, the words that constitute the poetic texts, written either in English, Welsh or Irish, are words that transmit the truth of their meaning. To put it differently, the creative consciousness employs words that are faithful to the act of creation itself. Language, in Cassirer's view, is inseparable from myth, as 'they condition each other. Word and name magic do not signify, they are and act.' (Cassirer 1953: 40) Thus,

both the words that constitute the poetic texts and the words within them are words that *are* and that *act*, and they join song and silence, all of them coming from the same mysterious source, the mystery of creation.



The magical power of name and word, as well as of silence, which mirrors the word or music, can be found for example in the poetry of Lucian Blaga, RS Thomas or Diarmuid Johnson. In one poem by RS Thomas, we can see the tension that exists at the level of word and silence. The poem seems to be a vague, mythical remembrance of an immortal time, when sounds were born and heard for a first time:

*No, in the beginning was silence  
that was broken by the word  
forbidding it to be broken.*

*Hush: the sound of bird landing  
on water; sound of a thought  
on time's shore; practice Ur-language*

*by the first human. An echo  
in God's mind of a conceived  
statement.*

(R. S. Thomas 2004 : 77)

In the poetry of Diarmuid Johnson, words reflect magical thought as they have the power to make things happen. The magical power of name and word is to be noticed for example in the cycle *The Birth of Trystan*. When the mother chooses the name for her child, we learn that the name should sing of the yew branch, the hunter's bow, and of the arrow, that is his name should sing of the world that his father that will pass on to him:

*Name him from the wind, my child.  
A hunter, his bow a yew branch  
Waxed and wintered  
Older than antler  
Arrow bold as a bee  
Tail-feathered, sweet and angry:  
His name should sing these things*

(Johnson 2010: 32)

Consequently, the name that the child will bear will act as part of him, and will represent another bond between him and the singing world. Naming a person or thing is something potent in the poem, something not devoid of 'magic', and so too is the word. Magical thought views word as being endowed with power, hence the taboos that surround it in different cultures. Once something is named, the force of that thing is relieved under the power of utterance. The wisdom of the folk that believed in the power of the word manifests itself in the advice that is given to the mother of the child, who knows that mystery cannot be uttered: "Bird a-wing in a keen sky: /Give no name to your knowing." (Johnson 2010: 28)

The poet uses words as a musician uses sounds, they are and act and give meaning to things. Moreover, in the work of the poet, words are sung, and this reminds us of an ancestral time when words and poetry and music were not separated, when they created the world together. (In Welsh today, *cerdd* can still mean both 'poem' and 'music'.) Today, when the poet sings the words, they still do:

*[And] when we speak  
Skylarks fly off the tongue  
The sounds are purple berries  
'Abhainn', 'solas'  
The words tell us things -*

'River' 'light' -  
As words will  
But their meaning is a journey  
To a continent rich in harbourage  
And when we sing them  
The boats race homeward  
On a quick tide.

(Johnson 2009: 34)

One of the well-known philosophers of myth and poetry, Schelling, considered that for a poet to accomplish his destiny as a poet, it was necessary to create his own mythology, his own mythical world, and even if his theory applies and can be read mainly into the key of Romanticism, there lies within it a general truth still valid today:

*Every great poet [is] called upon to create this (mythological) world, which is still in the process of becoming and of which his time can only reveal a part to him, to create of this world, I say, that part of which has been revealed to him into a whole and make out of the material of this world a mythology for himself.*

(Maïke 1998)

In the case of the poet Diarmuid Johnson, we seem to witness the creation of a poetic world with such a mythical structure, in which the poetic consciousness (re)creates and revives myths (*The Birth of Trystan* or *Bridge over the Taf*). To use Lucian Blaga's words, the poet assumes the existence within mystery and for the purpose of revelation, he assumes his destiny of creator, and joins the world of song with his own song.

The mytho-poetic credo of the poet, present in all poems discussed here, is that of man's singing his song: I have sung and still I sing the great passage of time— (*Biography* – L. Blaga), or I sing bold as a nightingale (*The Song of Trystan*) (Johnson 2009 : 189) , which is the song of his people and the song of the world. It is thus through this song that the whole mytho-poetical world is built, a world in which man is born to sing, will sing either out of joy or out of grief, and will continue singing until he returns into the world of clay, thus joining, this time differently, the song of the world.

A creator's total assumption of his destiny, of being caught between the desire for the absolute and the impossibility to go beyond the transcendent censure, as Lucian Blaga has put it, explains not the mystery of creation, but is relevant for the mystery which their works might carry. I would like to end my lecture with a fragment from a poem by Diarmuid Johnson, a poem written in Irish, *An tÉan (The Bird)* the poem presents the man's hypostasis of accepting his destiny within mystery and for the purpose of revela-

tion, a destiny which means following the bird and thus accomplishing his destiny as creator:

*Agus cé acu ba chráite den dá chomhairle*

*Cé acu den dá uafás ba mhó?*

*Cónaí go brách in áit gan iontas  
Nó éalú gan eolas ar lorg an éin?*

*Leanfaidh mé féin scáth an éin  
Leanfaidh mé a scáth thar tairseach na gcnámh.*

*Leanfaidh mé an t-éan go craobh na gealaí  
Leanfaidh mé an t-éan go nead an trútháin.*

*Which of the two [options] is most unbearable?  
Which of these two [things] is most dreadful?*

*To stay rooted to the wonderless rock  
Or to set out unguided in the search of the bird?*

*I will follow the bird's shadow  
I will follow the shadow beyond the threshold of bone*

*I will follow it to the branching moon  
I will follow it to the nest of all longing.*

(Johnson 2010: 80)

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