

The Parallel Structure in Underworld Journeys

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ABSTRACT

Basing itself on Lévi-Strauss' insight that the repetition of a myth across time and space can be attributed to the human unconscious, this study of the meaning and structure of the catabatic journey to the underworld in Virgil's *Aeneid* and Lo Mou-teng's *Voyage to the Western Sea of the Chief Eunuch San-pao* shows that each work can be interpreted diachronically and synchronically in relation to the other. Because a mythic pattern can explain, as Lévi-Strauss says, the present, past and future, for both authors the underworld motif has a developmental function: the experience of death and rebirth embodies the psychological remoulding of the heroes, the necessary prerequisite to the achievement of greater goals. Through their catabatic journeys both heroes, gaining self-knowledge, become more human.

KEY WORDS

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underworld
structuralism
diachronic

synchronic
divine justice
purification

self-knowledge
repetition
rebirth

The catabatic journey is an imaginary trip into the underworld. Across language, time and culture man's vision of Hell has been remarkably consistent. Though the catabatic journey in Virgil's *Aeneid* has often been examined, it has never been compared with the Chinese journey to the Underworld Kingdom Feng-tu. The latter is described in a Chinese Medieval novel, *Voyage to the Western Sea of the Chief Eunuch San-pao*, (hereafter referred to as *Voyage*), written by Lo Mou-teng in 1597.¹ In this classical Chinese text the journey to the Demon Country Feng-tu also provides the adventurers with a view of the human after-life. Virgil locates the adventure to Hades in Book Six, the middle of his epic, while Lo Mou-teng arranges the journey as the last story in his book. Despite this difference both writers have an analogous purpose for their catabatic journeys — first, to lead the heroes to learn a moral lesson; second, to reexamine their past; and third, to discover their future. This essay will examine the symbolic structure of the past and future as it is correlated with the psychological process of the heroes' self realization. In addition, both journeys have the same inner structure, based on a binary opposition between life and death. This structural approach helps to elucidate the universal significance of the imaginary underworld theme. The parallel use of the catabatic journey in two different literary works of both East and West provides an example of the same underlying psychological concepts in the human mind.

Brooks Otis emphasizes the psychological growth of Aeneas's mind. He points out the situation before Book Six, which explains the necessity for Aeneas to take the catabatic journey, as follows:

The fact is that up to this point (the end of Book Five) Aeneas had failed at every great crisis. He had of course been rescued each time by Jupiter but such rescues were after all the index of weakness not strength. He had not stood on his own feet. . . He needed to be reborn, remade, enabled to exercise pietas not as something enforced from without but as something renewed from within.²

The purpose in the Hades chapter is then to solve this problem for Aeneas. Virgil leads him to encounter Dido, his previous lover, and his Trojan comrade Deiphobus, who died in the Trojan war on the Plains of Grief. Dido's coldness and refusal to speak to him fill him with tremendous pathos. Aeneas comes to see both what he had done to harm the beloved and what he cannot undo now. Deiphobus reminds him of the destruction of Troy and he realizes

that he can never go home. To confront the past is painful for him. This effect that revisiting the past has on him is an essential part of his psychological preparation for the journey. By looking back at his past, Aeneas realizes his own weakness as well as the necessity of casting the past away. There is no way for him to regain what he has lost, neither the emotional love nor his old home. This realization is significant in the way that he has survived the crisis of death by overcoming the emotional pull of the re-encountered past. More important, it also marks the point at which he is ready for the future and for resurrection.

The catabatic journey in the *Voyage* takes place after the explorers have had many successful battles in an expedition led by the Taoist T'ien-shih, the Master whose slogan is "conquer the invaders and recover the National Treasure."³ Since up to now they have defeated all of their enemies, and the peace of the country has been assured, their pride has become inflated into blindness. They keep on sailing and exploring randomly, looking for the lost National Treasure, without any idea of where they should go next. Unlike Aeneas, who is depressed before his catabatic journey, the Chinese heroes are overjoyed at the peak of success. However, just like Aeneas, who is bewildered about his mission, the Chinese counterparts are suffering from a spiritual loss. They, too, need to be awakened to their limitations, "to be reborn and renewed from within." Their psychological remolding is necessary before they can be ready to accept their destiny for the future.

There is also an encounter with the past in Lo Mou-teng's book, though the content and arrangement are rather different. The first part of the catabatic journey in the *Voyage* consists of the tour to the Demon Country Feng-tu undertaken by an official, Wang Ming, who is sent there by the two Masters. Just as Aeneas' journey to Hades is guided by the Sibyl, this tour is led by the guide P'an-kuan, the infernal judge. He takes Wang Ming to view every part of the underworld. As a matter of fact, both guides play three quite similar roles in the catabatic journeys: they serve as physical guides, Divine messengers and spiritual leaders.

Furthermore, the arrangement of the imaginary underworld in both books, one from the East and one from the West, is identical. It is remarkable that not only the laws of good and evil, but also the principle of allotments of rewards and punishments in one's after-life, resemble each other in the Eastern and Western classical traditions. As in Hades, moral justice dominates the arrangement of the Chinese underworld system. The map of the Demon Country Feng-tu that I have drawn from the descriptions in the

Voyage shows that Wang Ming begins his trip by entering the gate, seeing first two towers and two mountains. He does not drink the "Oblivion Portion" in the tea shed, on the advice of his guide P'an-kuan, because he is a living person who does not yet want to be transferred into another realm. Similar to Hades' Plain of Grief in the *Aeneid*, the Dike of Despair, which Wang Ming next encounters in the *Voyage*, is inhabited by gloomy ghosts. They had been ordinary people in their lives, people who had not intended to harm others, but they had not followed ethical doctrines or tried to cultivate virtue in themselves. Without high standards, they had indulged their own desires. Their punishment in the after-life is perpetual unhappiness, even though they are not tortured in the eighteen hells.

Parallel to Tartarus and the Elysian Fields in the *Aeneid*, the two side buildings in the *Voyage*, the Hall of Rewards on the left and the Hall of Punishments on the right, are designed to execute the rules of moral justice. In the Chinese underworld system as explained here, everybody has to be drawn into the underworld after death and is judged as either good or bad according to what he or she has done in life. Ten kings serve as underworld deities, with the power to see whatever happens anywhere in the world and throughout time, so they can make correct judgments. They even have the "Book of Sins" which keeps records for everybody on Earth. After the infernal judgments are made, the virtuous souls are sent to the Hall of Rewards and enjoy heavenly happiness there while waiting to be reborn as nobles. The evil souls are sent to eighteen hells to endure various kinds of torture before they are delivered to the Hall of Punishments, where they await rebirth into lower beings such as animals or insects. This narrative reflects conceptions of the Underworld based on a fusion of Buddhist beliefs, Taoist elements, and Confucian ethical laws.

Unlike Virgil, who has led Aeneas into Hades both to learn a moral lesson and to reveal to him his past and his destiny, Lo Mou-teng designs the tour of Feng-tu for his heroes to learn a moral lesson only. In this section, there is no prophecy of the future or review of the past. However, both writers regard it as a necessary step for the heroes' psychological growth. To them the underworld is a device for terrifying the people into avoiding vice and for luring them into choosing virtue.

Most significantly, Lo Mou-teng has planned a past-future pattern as the thematic structure in his hundred-page-long section on the underworld story though in a different way. After the tour to the underworld country, the second part of the story takes place in the court which is held in the Fifth

Palace of King Yen-lo. This, as the map shows, is located in the center of the ten underworld kings' palaces. Instead of meeting dead friends as in the *Aeneid*, Lo Mou-teng's heroes view their past through the complaints of their victims. There are thirty-two complaints about unjust killings; each of these murders has been committed by the expeditioners. When all of the thirty-two complaints have been narrated by the victims, the infernal judge P'an-kuan renders judgments on each victim according to his behavior in the life just ended, and in all previous lives.

On the one hand, divine justice is revealed by P'an-kuan's sentences favorable to the heroes' rigor in restoring peace in the country. Let us take the seventh case as an example: five thousand soliders of Lo-ke Country were burned to death together with their boats by the expeditioners. They claim that Zhuang-yuan Tang, the chief counsellor of the soldiers who schemed to set the fire, should pay for their unjust deaths with his life.⁴ But P'an-kuan says, after he has consulted the "Book of Sins":

You five thousand people were transmigrated from five thousand poison snakes. The Infernal King Yen-lo thought that you would give up evil and return to good. It turned out that you still kept your evil hearts. Therefore, you are doomed to death. The "Book of Sins" says that you will have to turn into pigs in the next life, and into cows in the subsequent life, until you can become human beings in your third life. (*Voyage*, Chap. 89, p. 1125)

On the other hand, the court scene serves to remind the heroes of the sins they have committed as part of their achievements. The following episode of five ghosts who accuse P'an-kuan of imposing unfair sentences shows the expeditioners that their misdeeds are so severe that it is difficult for the deities to control the anger of the victims. However different the procedures are, the heroes in the *Voyage*, like Aeneas, have to learn their own mistakes by revision of the past. Confronting their victims serves as an important lesson they have to learn in their realization of the evil side of their achievements. It is a necessary step to stop them from further blind explorations.

Very different from the catabatic journey in the *Aeneid*, which was undertaken solely by Aeneas, the scene in the Chinese infernal court is viewed by multiple characters. Five generals of the expedition, including the counsellor Zhuang-yuan Tang, intrude into the courthouse in the Palace of King

Yen-lo to look for Wang Ming. These heroes are so haughty as to demand that the underworld Kingdom surrender to them and pay tribute. King Yen-lo warns them:

On your expedition to the sea, you killed thousands and thousands of people by mistake. Their rage is towering to the sky. Now they are bearing the harsh consequences, complaining of injustice and claiming your lives for their lives. Even though P'an-kuan and I rendered hard sentences to them, their anger is towering so high to the sky that it can hardly subside. Your ships and boats are in danger of sinking right now. (*Voyage*, Chap. 91, p. 1172)

Yen-lo's words embody a divine warning to the expeditioners. Proud and blind, they have to be shocked into seeing their limitations. Like Virgil, Lo Mou-teng has created a psychological change in the heroes' mind with the help of the revelation of divine will. The Chinese heroes' consciences are now troubled, no less than Aeneas'. The same psychological process of self-realization has been achieved by their re-examining the evil deeds of their past. The difference, however, lies in the authors' emphasis. Virgil depicts one hero who is burdened with the sorrows of the past, while Lo Mou-teng emphasizes the problems of the whole group. The Chinese book puts more weight on actions than on characterization. There is no individualized protagonist like Aeneas in the *Voyage*. The Master of Heaven and the State Master, the prime heroes of the book, are idealized heroes, like Aeneas, but they mainly engage in planning and scheming, and do not take part in actions.

It is not difficult for us to understand why Virgil and Lo Mou-teng create an imaginary journey to let human beings view their past since the underworld stands in both cases for the realm of the dead. It is amazing, both Virgil and Lo Mou-teng introduce the theme of reincarnation and use the catabatic journey to reveal the future to their heroes as well. Aeneas meets his father Anchises in the Elysian Fields. Before presenting the Roman heroes, Anchises explains that after drinking the water of the River Lethe, the souls undergo a thousand years of purification. He says:

... Therefore they undergo
The discipline of punishments and pay
In penance for old sins: some hang full length
To the empty winds, for some the stain of wrong

Is washed by floods or burned away by fire.
 We suffer each his own shade. We are sent
 Through wide Elysium, where a few abide
 In happy lands, till the long day, the round
 Of Time fulfilled, has worn our stains away,
 Leaving the soul's heaven-sent perception clear,
 The fire from heaven pure. These other souls,
 When they have turned Time's Wheel a thousand years,
 The god calls in a crowd to Lethe stream,
 That there unmemorized they may see again
 The heavens and wish re-entry into bodies."⁵

Anchises emphasizes the process of purification of the souls so that the quality of the future Roman heroes could be assured. He also leads Aeneas to see the future history of the Roman Empire and the coming wars that he has to fight so that Aeneas can perceive and accept his destiny.

As mentioned before, in the Chinese underworld the dead also have to drink a liquid, here a kind of tea called "Oblivion Potion," to forget their past; it is offered by an old lady in the Tea Shed. One difference is that instead of making forgetfulness one of the last parts of the underworld, Lo Mou-teng sets the Tea Shed in the first part of the Demon Country Feng-tu, as shown in the map. Based on the theory of reincarnation, Lo Mout-eng believes, everybody must drink the tea of Oblivion Portion first to forget the past in order to enter into another realm as a ghost. The Greek tradition imagines the process should take place before reincarnation. However, the purpose of drinking a sort of water in both cases is the same—to cast the past away before the new life can begin.

It is more remarkable that the Chinese author also arranges for the revelation of the future to the heroes though in a rather different way from Virgil. However, Lo Mou-teng does not think it suitable to have his greatest heroes go down to the underworld, so he chooses to let the two Masters send a low official, Wang Ming, to take the tour. But his position is too low for the mission in the court scene. Therefore, five generals, sent by the two masters to look for Wang Ming, come to the palace of King Yen-lo to see the underworld trial. There they receive a jade paperweight as a gift, along with a short poem from King Yen-lo for their two masters.

Only the State Master can understand the divine instructions embedded in the poem and gift. Therefore, the third part of the Chinese story takes place on Earth, after Wang Ming and the five generals come back from the

underworld and report what they had seen there. Lo Mou-teng spends three chapters on the State Master's explanation of the implications of the gift and the poem. Finally, he makes it clear to his fellows that King Yen-lo jeered at his visitors' rash bravery. The hidden divine instructions indicate that they should stop their expedition now and go back home to rebuild their own country. Then the Master of Heaven says:

We have been to the Demon Country Feng-tu, which means that we have reached the edge of the Heaven and the end of the sea. Just as it is said that everything including the Earth has an end, how can we have no termination to our trip? The ships and boats have to go back. Even King Yen-lo said that we should stop now. Since the nether world has revealed the truth, why should we still adhere to confusion! (*Voyage*, Chap. 92, p. 1189)

The realization of their destiny has been obtained. The divine will, revealed by the underworld king's gift and poem, has inspired an inner response in the heroes. Like Virgil, Lo Mou-teng has woven a symbolic structure of past and future into the journey in accordance with a plausible psychological development.

Joseph Campbell points out that in the study of myth we should explore "the psychological aspect of our question, to learn whether in the human psychosomatic system there have been found any structures or dynamic tendencies to which the origins of myth and ritual might be referred."⁶ The analogous underworld myths of East and West suggest that the human need for moral justice is universal. It is the ethical concerns of ancient times that explain the similarities of the two different philosophies and religions insofar as the principle of good and evil is concerned. The ideological similarities in these different civilizations are reflected in their nearly identical underworld systems: the two catabatic journeys demonstrate that two different cultures (Roman, Chinese) and two philosophies (neo-Platonic, Confucian) have reached a common ground in the fictional domain of the underworld.

Lévi Strauss observes that "what gives the myth an operative value is that the specific pattern described is everlasting: it explains the present and the past as well as the future."⁷ It is because of the everlasting value of a mythic pattern which can explain the present, the past, and the future that both Virgil and Lo Mou-teng engage the underworld motif to serve their own purposes in their works. In each case, it is the necessity of going through a psychological remolding that requires the heroes to experience death and

rebirth before they can achieve greater goals. Both Virgil and Lo Mou-teng have assigned the catabatic journey an essential role, for without it the heroes would appear flat or two-dimensional, while through it the heroes gaining self-knowledge have become more human. While Virgil following Homer places the Hades chapter at the center point, connecting the first part of the hero's journey with the need to prepare him for his wars in the second part, Lo Mou-teng places the catabatic journey as the last adventure so that the heroes can receive the divine advice to terminate their expedition and turn in a new direction.

In order to examine the deeper structure of the ancient myth and its role in the two works, we should break down the stories and find out the gross constituent units in a relation. The following diagram sets forth the inner structure of the past-future pattern in the catabatic journeys.

Past	vs.	Future	
Fall		Rebirth	
Descend into the underworld		Ascend to the world	
To confront the dead through ghosts		To acknowledge destiny through the divine	
The evil conscience		The noble conscience	
Evil		Good	
Death	vs.	Life	

The underworld stands for the world of death, where the heroes confront the dead who represent their past. Anchises and King Yen-lo represent the divine will and express the divine instructions which lead the heroes to the future, back on Earth. Descending into the underworld and reascending to the surface of the Earth indicate the heroes' experience of death and resurrection. The cycle from death to rebirth is thus completed.

Moreover, the parallel usage of ancient myth in the same pattern by both

writers has become a myth. From a psychological point of view, we can treat the past-future structure as a mirror of the heroes' inner beings. Death stands for the heroes' evil conscience, the divine will for their noble conscience. The internal opposition between evil and good, as well as between death and life, dominates the meaning and structure of the catabatic journey in both works. The two versions of an ancient myth created by the two authors have found an identical inner structure based on the same underlying psychological concepts. That is why the two classical works have to be read and have been read as myths.

Lévi-Strauss points out in the same article:

. . . repetition has its function to make the structure of the myth apparent. For we have seen that the synchro-diachronic structure of the myth permits us to organize it into diachronic sequences which should be read synchronically. Thus, a myth exhibits a "slated" structure which seeps to the surface, if one may say so, through the repetition process. (Lévi-Strauss, p. 443)

The repetition of a myth across time and space can be attributed to the human mind at the unconscious level. This study of the meaning and structure of the catabatic journey motif in two famous works from different cultures has shown that each literary work can be understood and interpreted diachronically and synchronically in relation to the other. Though Virgil and Lo Mou-teng are from different parts of the world, eras, and cultures, and though they represent totally divergent traditions, religions, and philosophies, similar operating systems within the human mind determine the resemblances of their literary creations not only to the ancient myths but also to each other.

Notes

1. Mou-teng Lo, *San-pao t'ai-chien hsia hsi-yang chi (The Voyage to the Western Sea of the Chief Eunuch San-pao)* (written in A. D. 1597, reprinted Shanghai: Shanghai Ancient Letter Publishing House, 1985). This immense, thirteen-hundred-page book is based on historical voyages to the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean (together called the Western Sea at that time) that were undertaken in 1405-1432. The book has not been translated into English. The quotes in the text are my own translations done along with Dr. Thomas O. Beebee, assistant professor in the Department of Comparative Literature at Pennsylvania State University.
2. Brooks Otis, *Virgil: A Study in Civilized Poetry* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press,

1964), p. 280.

3. The invaders here refer to the ancient tribes around the east coast of China, who often harassed Chinese territory at the border. The National Treasure passed down from the ancestors was revered as the symbol of the nation's power and order. It was said that it was lost in some war. The whole nation was humiliated because of the loss; to recover the National Treasure meant to gain back the honor of the country. At the end of the novel, the adventurers succeed in making peace at the border by conquering the tribes, but they never find the treasure. Lo Mou-teng implies the fall of a good past as well as a pessimistic view of the situation of the country.
4. Zhuang-yuan is an official title which means Number One Scholar. It was conferred on the scholar who came in first in the highest imperial examination. In ancient Chinese history, military troops generally had one Zhuang-yuan to help in devising strategy.
5. Virgil, *Aeneid*, trans. Robert Fitzgerald (New York: Random House), Book VI, Lines 741-755.
6. Joseph Campbell, "The Historical Development of Mythology," *Myth and Myth-making*, ed. Henry A. Murray (Boston: Beacon Press), p. 22.
7. Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Structural Study of Myth," *Journal of American Folklore*, 78 (1955): 430.

