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Demonic Dialogues: Cassirer, Aquinas and the Treatment of Demonology as Myth

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ABSTRACT

Mythology has always been a pivotal element in human society, often describing the tensions between humanity and the world around them. Although traditionally defined as stories, myth, according to the twentieth-century philosopher Ernst Cassirer, is in fact an interpretation filled with symbolism in order to navigate the concerns of the human condition. It becomes a dialogue between Man and his environment, in which Man attempts to explain the ambiguities that permeate his everyday existence.

Aquinas, in his treatment of demons in his Summa Theologica, wove together an intricate mythology comprising of discourse and stories about demons. Although a non-narrative format, this treatise became the mythology of the educated elite of the Mediaeval world. By analyzing Cassirer's treatment of myth in his An Essay of Man and applying the theory to Aquinas' understanding of demons in his Summa Theologica, this paper will look at how the ambiguities of the human condition was expressed, how symbols were used to construct a language and how Aquinas' demonology approaches and rationalizes the nature of the Mediaeval world. What we will see is a development of a mythic thought that culminates in constructing a non-narrative mythology.

Key Words: Aquinas, Demons, Cassirer, mythology, non-narrative myth, *Summa Theologica*.

INTRODUCTION

Mythology is often described as a narrative revolving around tensions between the divine and human. After all, when we look at various myths, they are sacred stories in which the key players are in direct conflict with the gods. Fascinating and spellbinding, myth captures the imagination of millions. However, is that all myth is—a collection of pretty, elaborate stories of brave men, helpful deities, beautiful women and spiteful gods? The question that we

must ask ourselves is, what makes a myth *myth*? In other words, what differentiates a myth from a story?

Ernst Cassirer's *An Essay on Man* is a discourse on humanity's ability to create a universe of symbols that shapes the perception of reality. Myth becomes an allegorical interpretation, a shared 'unconscious fiction' in which a universe is built in order to understand nature. Created through a social process, filled with symbolism and becoming a language through which culture can interpret reality, myth navigates the intangibility of human nature. In short, myth is a dialogue between humans and their environment, negotiating the ambiguities of the human condition.

Aquinas, in his application of the role of demons in *Summa Theologica*—a compendium of the Church's teaching, particularly about humanity's relationship about God in the Scholastic tradition of question/answer format—creates (or as we shall see later, weaves) stories of demons in the same vein, creating myth. While the Scholastic format of questions and answers may seem to be non-traditional and counter-intuitive, this non-narrative treatment of demons is a mythological discourse for the Mediaeval educated elite.

Through a careful analysis of Cassirer's *An Essay on Man*, focusing on the section on myth, and applying its theory to Aquinas' treatment of demons in his *Summa Theologica*, this article looks at how the ambiguities of Man's environment are expressed, how the symbols are used to reconstruct languages, and how Aquinas' understanding of demonology approaches and rationalises Mediaeval nature. What we see is both a development in mythic thought and how the 'why' is processed and understood by Aquinas, communicating and constructing a non-narrative mythology.

An important note about language and its use throughout this essay must be made. As English has yet to determine an all-inclusive pronoun, I hesitate to use the default "he" when discussing the individual in Cassirer's work and in a mythological context. I am a feminist in academia, and aim to promote such neutrally. However, as this paper will focus not only on the Mediaeval treatment of demons, but will also examine the nature of myth among the Mediaeval educated elite, a community composed of men, one could safely assume that in their writings, the educated elite referred to themselves. To change "Man" into "Person" or "Individual", or any other neutral term, which would have been my initial inclination, would not only detract the personality of the word Man, but also would be misrepresenting the Mediaeval mindset and would falsify Cassirer's work. In my view, an analysis of Cassirer should use

the same terminology as Cassirer, regardless of my political and social outlook.

Therefore, for the reasons explained above, the term Man will be used. That being said, when discussing the relationship between God and Man, I will not be using a gendered pronoun when referring to the divine. Granted, this will strip away the personality of God; however, I chose to do this for one simple reason. The focus of the paper is on myth, demons and the Mediaeval world as represented in Aquinas' *Summa Theologica*. God was a distant player in Aquinas' treatment of demons—a director rather than an involved actor, and will continue to be so in my analysis.

ANALYSIS AND CRITIQUE OF CASSIRER

German philosopher Ernst Cassirer is often associated with his *Myth of State*. Published after his unexpected death in 1946, the opus argues that a totalitarian state, or more precisely, the idea of such a political entity, was derived from ideas present in Plato, Dante, Machiavelli, and Hegel (among others). Arguing that the regimes of the 20th century, and more specifically Fascist regimes, were the realisation of myths of destiny, Cassirer concluded that the modern totalitarian states were the epitome of irrationality. On the other hand, however intriguing *Myth of State* is, *An Essay on Man*, is frequently considered to be an initiation to his doctrines. Written in English and published in 1944, after his move to the United States, *Essay* was Cassirer's way of introducing himself to his new students and associates. Containing his general ideas about human culture, *Essay* is a discourse on humanity's ability to create a universe of symbols that shapes the perception of reality through science, language, art, history, religion, and myth. What is of particular interest is that Cassirer wrote *An Essay on Man* in English, which was not his mother tongue. He was forced to adopt a language that was not his own, ignoring philosophical conventions that would otherwise hamper the fluidity of his writing. One of the main points emphasised in *Essay* is that Man maintains a constant dialogue between himself and his environment. So too is this work a constant conversation between Cassirer and his readers.

One other minor, although I believe salient, fact: the title of Cassirer's text is *An Essay on Man*, not *The Essay on Man*. This is a small detail, to be sure, but one that is extremely important. Cassirer's text is not definitive, nor does he make that claim. It is composed of his observations, his understanding of the relationship between Man and his environment, and what he considers to be of special philosophical importance. According to what the preface, namely, that it is his "serious wish not to impose a ready-made theory,

expressing in a dogmatic style, upon the minds of my readers” (Cassirer 1944, viii), *Essay* becomes one of the vehicles with which to understand the philosophy of culture. One might argue that it is his lack of a grasp on the nuances of the English language that lead him to use the more general proposition. I believe it is otherwise. German, it must be remembered, is an extremely precise and efficient language. I have little doubt that Cassirer knew what was being inferred through his use of “an” as opposed to “the.”

It would be difficult and extensive to survey the entirety of *An Essay on Man*, despite the fact that it is short and succinctly written. For the purpose of this paper, I focus mostly on his chapter on myth and religion, looking at other aspects of his book when the need arises.

As Man is a creature in constant search of himself, philosophy is often the vehicle that he uses to answer and re-examine himself (Cassirer 1944, 5-6). It becomes a dialogue, although it seems to be inherently a monologue. Is Man speaking through his environment, or is he conversing with his environment? Is Man using environment as a metaphor? Or is he truly in dialogue? Cassirer deftly answers this question by stating that through the creation of symbols, Man adapts himself to his world, and creates a new dimension of reality (Cassirer 1944, 20). This creation of a new reality ceases to be a physical world, and becomes a complex, multi-dimensional universe. Symbols are the language in which Man holds his conversation. While Man can never truly divorce himself from himself, and by extension his environment, he does create another lens with which to view himself. Reason becomes all-important, the new Olympian that replaces the more instinctual Titans. Anthropological philosophy, contextualising Man and his dialogue with his environment, whatever shape that may be, then becomes a clash of the Titans, so to speak. A war is brewing between human passions and reason, and Man struggles to navigate these two entities that threaten to take over.

That being said, according to Cassirer, myth is not a mass “superstition of gross delusions” (Cassirer 1944, 29). It possesses a systematic form, therefore it cannot be chaotic; but by the same token, myth cannot be characterised as rational (Cassirer 1944, 25, 80). Religion, on the other hand, is a natural evolution of myth, a “logic of absurdity,” and although it is not clear, it is still rational (Cassirer 1944, 25). Reason cannot penetrate faith, but faith does not contradict and is commensurate with reason (Cassirer 1944, 12, 72). But before we can truly discuss myth and religion, let us see what Cassirer says about myth.

Myth cannot be universally defined. Although it is a universal phenomenon, its very nature cannot be pinpointed or categorized by strict definitions. It is the epitome of Man's dialogue with himself. Myth is a conundrum: it is at once a conceptual and a perceptual structure, composed of emotions, action, drama, and power (Cassirer 1944, 79). As such, we can only truly discuss the interpretations of mythic thought and not of a myth itself. Myth is, according to Cassirer, associated with primitive religion, which encompasses a primitive mentality that includes not logic, but "sensation, sentiment of life" (Cassirer 1944, 81). This begs the question of whether or not this is an accurate classification. Is myth an offspring of emotion? Cassirer determines that it is. And yet, Cassirer also suggests that myth is a way in which nature can be approached and navigated (Cassirer 1944, 99). This is a contradiction in terms, and one that Cassirer never fully reconciles. While he argues that religion replaces the function of myth within society, that as Man evolves, so does his understanding of his natural world, and that religion alleviates the fear perpetuated by myth, Cassirer nonetheless implies that myth is never completely replaced by religion. Religion is merely the next step in Man's evolution in his dialogue.

Myth transcends space and time. As mythic thought is traditional, collapsing the present into the past, mythic time becomes firm and unwavering—an unquestioned version of the past. To question this past would be to question existence itself; it is beyond sacrilege (Cassirer 1944, 225). In this past, Man finds fluidity. Myth becomes dynamic, never to be explained in static terms, precisely because it is a theoretical approach to his environment. If Man is to understand himself in relations to the dialogue with his surroundings, then the myth must reflect the complexities of life. Myth is the symbolic language created to understand the ambiguities of existence. As Man is the product of functioning unities that is composed of various elements in dialogue with Man, so myth mirrors and preserves that dialogue. The dialogue and the consequent myth liberate Man in order to build up his ideal world, one that acknowledges the complexities of life.

If myth is the unity of the instinctual side of Man, is it primitive? According to Cassirer, yes. Myth is not designed to empirically explain the world, rather it is to explain Man's role in the surrounding world. Myth is the language encapsulated in the words of the symbols. Myth is symbolic. Due to its symbolic nature, myth becomes what Cassirer calls "unconscious, not a conscious, fiction" (Cassirer 1944, 74). Man creates this fiction unconsciously, unaware of his creation. He creates myth because he is driven to understand

his environment and himself and the problematic of the human condition. In order to understand, a theoretical element is born. Myth is not fact, nor is it the hard science. It is observation and digestion of those observations. As such, because of the spontaneity of his work, it is artistic. It is imaginative and creative. Myth paints with symbols a vivid picture of how Man understands his dialogue, thus becoming poetry of images, sentiment, theory, and fluidity.

There are two major aggravators in Cassirer's understanding of Man and his relationship to myth. As Man is a product of his environment, so too is Cassirer a product of *his* environment. I must, however, point to these "aggravators" and try to reconcile them in order to continue with my analysis.

The first, and perhaps most serious of aggravator, is Cassirer's inference to a type of social Darwinism. In the 1940s, Cassirer's decade of operation, this notion of evolution from a 'primitive' to a more 'advanced' society was en vogue. Modern discourse, however, contends that this is also blatantly untrue, or, at the very least, strongly challenged by various post-colonial discourses. To call philosophy a more superior form of understanding, to place what we deem as order and Abrahamic ethics above the moral code of the ancients demeans their societies. Athenian society is a perfect example.

Yes, the Olympians conquered the Titans, but never vanquished them. The Titans continued to be revered in the Athenian society. However, this is where the parallels end. The Homeric era was not a time of loose morality—rather it was a time of differing morality. The ethics of the Homeric time was extremely strict, with an unbending code of honour. The entire Trojan War was fought because Paris broke the rules of hospitality. Similarly, the code of ethics as exemplified in myth was not replaced by religious morality. Instead, ethics, like Man and his environment, changed. So did the myth and religion that preserves these ethics.

Classicists jest that the reason Greeks invented logic was because their gods were so illogical. Perhaps a more precise explanation is that as Man created God in his own image, as Man's understanding of himself and of his relationship to his environment changed, so did Man's image of his god change. Man's understanding of himself evolved on a horizontal plane, and not a vertical ladder. To call the ancients and their myths "primitive" undermines the complexities of that environment which we are only beginning to understand, especially in regards to human behaviour and religious and cultural identities. The truth is, what little we know of the rich imagery and symbolism, our ancients may have been much more sophisticated in understanding and

expressing their relationship with their environment than we are with ours. Given the complexity of symbols, the detailed relationship between the ancients and their environment, and the intricate expression of said relationship, one has to question Cassirer's inference that developers and those who uses myth (as opposed to pure logic) is somehow inferior can be problematic.

The second aggravator found within Cassirer's work is his idea of logic, reason, and theoretical nature. Cassirer declares that myth is not reason; it is a substratum of feeling. Emotion and sentiment are the major hallmarks of myth; yet myth also rationally approaches nature. One has to wonder at this seeming contradiction. Is it either/or—a hard distinction—as at times implied in *Essay*, or are reason and sentiment/emotions harmonious? The distinction is not clear. It is implied that myth, as an “archaic” (to use Eliade's term) or “primitive” form of understanding nature, is somehow lower, whereas religion is a more ethical, rational approach. And yet, myth is a unifying force to rationally approach nature (Cassirer 1944, 70, 75). Myth is action, which can never be fully expressed—a navigation of ideals, embodied in a rational way.

Again, this correlates with Cassirer's distinction of “primitive” Man. Are they truly ruled by their emotions and not by their reason? And furthermore, on whose reason are we basing our definition? Each culture has its own systematic thought. The Japanese concept of honour may be completely foreign to an American, and yet to state that one or the other is not a reasonable concept is absurd. The social process creates a series of systematic thoughts (i.e. reason) that is then preserved in myth.

DEFINITION OF MYTH

The question arises, what is myth? Perhaps this is too simplistic of a question. What truly needs to be asked is: can we clearly define myth? The unassailable answer is no. We cannot. Myth is fluid, it is a human enterprise and it is conditioned as a response between Man and his environment. While Cassirer provided four elements that compose myth, he masterfully avoids to truly and fully defining myth. He does not say that myth is XYZ; he merely speculates on the nature and function of myth. Similarly, Eliade, the scholar whose name is closely linked to the study of myth, skirts the issue, his definition constantly changing throughout his illustrious career. Both Cassirer and Eliade are masters of the non-answer answer, and myth remains undefined.

This inability to conclusively define myth works to our advantage and reflects the true nature of this human enterprise. As Man constantly changes,

so does the definition of his myth. As Man changes his relationship with his environment, so does his dialogue. Without change, Man will perish; myth is similar. To state that myth never changes is factually untrue. What we have are mere fossilized footprints of any given author's understanding of myth as he wrote it in the time that he wrote it. Homer, in his *The Iliad* and *The Odyssey*, did not create the myths; he merely wove *his* interpretation and his vision of the stories of the Trojan War and the epic journey of Odysseus. If the blind poet lived three hundred years later, then his stories would be different. His environment, and the consequent dialogue with his environment, profoundly effected what he wrote. Perhaps the anger of Achilles would not be directed towards Agamemnon when he took his favourite slave away. Perhaps it would be directed towards Ajax of Salamis who confiscated his favourite horse. Perhaps it would not have been the face of Helen of Troy that launched a thousand ships but her neck. Perhaps Circe would not have transformed Odysseus' men into pigs but rather into sheep. While these are facetious examples, they nonetheless illustrate the fluid nature of myth, and the impact of the environment on the myth teller. All Homer, and as we shall see shortly Aquinas, did, was to weave myths together in a subjective fashion. He chose the versions to tell in response to his time and his environment. Perhaps it is not fair to call Homer, Aquinas, Virgil and others story or myth tellers. Perhaps the more appropriate term to call them 'myth-weavers.' They merely wove together carefully selected skeins into tapestries that survive today.

If one cannot properly define myth, then can we truly talk about it? Unlike the definition, we can. While it is impossible to pinpoint an accurate and objective definition of myth, we can summarise what a myth is. This sounds to be a contradiction and an exercise in semantics, but in reality, the distinction is quite different.

The four major elements described by Cassirer are: it is an artistic creation, it has a certain level of fluidity, it is poetic, and it is a unifying force to rationally approach nature (Cassirer 1944, 100-102). In short, a myth, as Eliade states, is a part of a complex language of symbols (Eliade 1957, 163). Using a symbolic language, Man creates myth in order to understand his being, his relationship to his environment in which he builds his society and to navigate the ambiguities that permeate his world. Thus myth is ontological by nature, and it often incorporates Man's relationship with the divine, as he attempts to explain his own nature and his existence.

Are myths narratives? According to Cassirer, and to the definition above, not necessarily. Cassirer merely mentions that they are poetic in nature and

are artistic creations. A mathematical equation can be poetry. After all, mathematics is a language in which to describe the physical universe. The Golden Ratio becomes poetry in which to understand the symmetry that is present in the natural world. Martin Luther King's "I Have a Dream" is non-narrative but an artistic creation. Plato's "Allegory of a Cave" is poetry: fluid, poetic, and rational. Although most myths are narratives, the fact of the matter is that a story is non-essential for a myth to be a myth.

Therefore, in sum, if we must give a definition of a myth, it is a human artistic creation that is poetic and fluid in nature and is a unifying force to rationally approach nature, often set in a re-imagined historic time. While this 'definition' does not truly tell us what a myth is, it describes to us what a myth does. With this in mind, let us turn to Aquinas' treatment of demons.

AQUINAS AND DEMONIC MYTH

We do not have many completed texts of the mythology of demons on which Aquinas bases his work. What we do have is what Aquinas does to the mythology, and more precisely, transposes the myth of demons into his *Summa Theologica* as Homer did to existing stories in *The Iliad*. The *Summa Theologica* is a metamorphosis of a myth as understood by Aquinas, influenced by his society and his dialogue with his environment.

Therefore, before presenting a more detailed analysis, it is necessary to detail Aquinas' context and environment. The Mediaeval view saw the world in relationship with God, and often defined itself in opposition of what it is not (Stephens 2002, 26, 27). A Christian is not a Jew; a member of the clergy is not one of the laity; and a knight is not a peasant. This dichotomised worldview helped to shape angelology and demonology in which one of its primary aims is to define each being in relation to the other. An angel is therefore not a demon and vice versa. Although always present in Christianity, the respective fields of angelology and demonology grew exponentially, so much so that by the thirteenth century, the University of Paris demanded that angelology be part of theological curriculum (Keck 1998, 3, 5). The nature of angels and demons were carefully defined, studied, expounded, and debated. Questions on whether an angel or a demon could—and should—be implored in magical aid was argued (Ridler 2006, 76-77); theories on how one can classify an angel or demon blossomed; and ideas on the nature of both angels and demons was considered not only academically popular but pervasive in the everyday social aspects of mediaeval Western European society (Keck 1998, 3). Most of these treatises were written by clerics, both ecclesiastical and monastic, who were

likely literate, educated elite (Miller 2000, 1095-1130). Clerics, and monks especially, were gravely concerned with the spiritual welfare of the people and all that could lead them away from God. Demons, as Satan's operatives, were adversaries of God and of all God's creation, and their primary goal was to tempt people to sin (Pagels 1995, *xvii*). Not only as the educated elite, but as God's special forces, monks were at the front of the spiritual war between good and evil.

Thomas Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* is not often mentioned as an exemplar of myth. A treatise accepted not only by the Roman Catholic Church but by other Christian faiths, the *Summa* contributed greatly to the understanding of demons and consequently to the development of demonology. Specifically in his *Prima Pars* (first part) of his *Summa*, Aquinas discusses God's existence, the creation of the world, the existence of angels and demons, the nature of humanity, and perhaps more importantly, the presence of evil. I ask the question, then, is Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* myth? While in the traditional sense, the article does have a beginning, middle, and an end, it is not a story that one can recount as didactic entertainment. What it is, is a dissection of an understanding, using stories from other sources (such as the New Testament). Unlike traditional stories, in which the players are clearly defined, the active characters in Aquinas' article are God, angels, demons, the objector, and Aquinas himself, with references to other characters, such as The Philosopher (Aristotle) and The Commentator (Ibn Rushd) who are the supporting, albeit somewhat passive, cast. The story is rather dry, without drama or theatrics typical in many myths. The moral is obvious as opposed to covert disguised. However, while the *opus* is a systematic analysis, in his logical examination of the nature of demons (*Prima Pars*, Question Sixty-Three), and whether or not they are forever damned (*Prima Pars*, Question Sixty-Four) quickly made its way into the so-called "accepted" form of demonology. Aquinas has determined that demons are unmoving in their will and their desire to sin. By using Cassirer, and more precisely, his understanding of myth as a form of consciousness, one can see that while Aquinas' *Summa* is not a myth in a narrative sense, it is nonetheless a myth that uses symbols in a language that becomes a "story held together by the monistic principle of emotional unity" (Strenski 1987, 39).

If mythology is "a discourse of myth" and an "archaic mode of understanding" (Strenski 1987, 25), then Question Sixty-Four, article two of the first part is mythology, in itself both a discourse and a mode of understanding. If myth is an understanding of the world, as implied by

Cassirer, then article two gives us an understanding of a particular aspect of the world, and that is the non-changing nature of evil. However, article two is also a discourse of that understanding. In other words, through his explanation of evil that permeates and exists in society, Aquinas provides a discussion of the myth. It is both mythology (the discourse) and myth (understanding of the world), using symbols to link the mythology and myth.

Symbols are spontaneously created within a particularly society, the members of which agree on their meaning. Evil is not tangible. It cannot be verified through scientific means. Demons become the tangible embodiment of an evil that a particular civilisation agrees exists. Aquinas' treatise on the demons' eternal evil nature further exemplifies the belief that has been created by society. Demons became a symbol in which to discuss the unchanging nature of evil.

Cassirer's next point in his description of what is myth is emotional unity. According to Cassirer, mythic thinking is emotional rather than logical. Although Aquinas is a scholastic, and attempts to order his universe in a very cogent manner, he nonetheless brings an emotional reaction to considerations of sin.

One could make the argument that this illustrates what was described as "an archaic mode of understanding" (Cassirer 1944, 99). If evil, like any other human enterprise, is not found in nature, it becomes a fabricated entity. Today, we might explain the notions of evil through psychiatry, with diagnoses of mental illnesses caused by chemical imbalance, treated with pharmacotherapies. In the Mediaeval era society might be able to explain the problem of evil through a mythic environment.

Granted, this brand of demonology was not organically developed, as it is often the case with symbols and their place in myth. We can trace the construction of these particular ideas to a single source: Aquinas. Nevertheless, the fundamentals of demons and evil were present before Aquinas, and very much part of the enveloping culture. The debates of the source of evil and whether or not the *symbols*, that is demons, are obstinate in evil was not first proposed by Aquinas but rather was a prevalent theme within the Mediaeval world.

Is Aquinas' *Summa Theologica* then a myth? Or more precisely, is Aquinas' treatment of demonology myth? In an unconventional sense, yes it is. It is a search for Man, as described by Eliade, a language filled with complex symbols as we have seen above. It is the conception of being and reality of Man

(Eliade 1971, 3). Through his careful, meticulous descriptions, Aquinas describes the nature and power of demons, carefully navigating the ambiguities of Man's environment, approaching the problem of evil that existed in his time, but that also, one could make the argument, exists throughout history. Through his poetry, through his emotional unity, through his fluidity and by unifying demonology in a way to rationally approach a fundamental aspect of human nature, Aquinas developed a system that can only be described as mythology.

Aquinas was a part of the Scholastic tradition, writing in a very logical, dialectically didactic manner. There is simplicity and beauty in his logic, an element of theoretical artistry. Like Homer, Aquinas did not compose the myth; he merely wove them into a coherent study of understanding Man's relationship with a particular aspect of the environment. In this case, Aquinas is navigating the ambiguities of evil.

What does demonology tell us about the educated elite of the Mediaeval world? Why were these men so obsessed with not just the problem of evil, but also the physical embodiment of that very evil, and its nature? If demonology can be considered as myth, and as we have seen above, the treatment of the myth by Aquinas is akin to Homer's treatment of *The Iliad*. As Homer took various stories and carefully wove them together in order to create the myth that is embodied in *The Iliad*, so too did Aquinas take the stories of demons and bound them together in his *Summa Theologica*. Demonology was the concern of the educated elite; therefore it is only natural that Aquinas wrote about that concern. His interpretation of demonology and its myth is a systematic, theoretical understanding of his environment. He wrote about the problem of evil in the way he knew how. Yes, the *Summa* is a theological doctrine, born to deconstruct the values of the time and to better understand the nature of Man and the nature of God. And yet, the few articles devoted to demons are mythologised. They are beyond time. It uses a highly symbolic language, acknowledging its fluidity. And finally the very nature of the articles mirrors the dialogue that Man has with his environment. Aquinas is in midst of a dialogue between himself and his environment that is filled with the embodiment of evil. In his dialogue, he is trying to achieve a very rational purpose: to understand the nature of demons in order to combat them and avoid the temptations that they present.

The argument may be made that Aquinas' treatise and his treatment of demons is not very creative nor is it poetic. I beg to differ. As a mathematical equation can be a beauty, so is the *Summa*. Aquinas' working on demons,

placing them into a dialogue with God and God's creation, is mathematical poetry. Aquinas carefully investigated and theorised this understanding and wrote it down in poetry of logic. This artistic creation is not of the visual arts, but rather of simplicity. His treatment of demons is presented in clear lines, rationalising what is incomprehensible and navigating the ambiguities of the human condition. Aquinas unified the sentiments, and through a careful reconstruction, approached the nature of demons in his environment, creating a clear mythological system.

Let us look at Question Sixty-Three, 'The Malice of The Angels With Regards To Sin,'¹ of Aquinas' treaty. This is of particular interest, as the theologian specifically addresses the nature of sin in angels, asking whether or not angels (and demons) are able to sin, and what are the consequences of sinning. What is particularly fascinating is that the modern perceptions of the genesis of demons, that is how did demons came into being—through the sin of pride—is explored.

Divided into nine questions, Aquinas in his first article asks, "whether the evil of fault can be in angels?" After all, as the second objection stated, if demons were originally angels, and "angels are higher than the heavenly bodies. But philosophers say that there cannot be evil in the heavenly bodies. Therefore neither can there be in the angels" (Q63, Art. 1, obj. 2). If angels, as Aquinas acknowledged, are more than "heavenly bodies" and if heavenly bodies cannot have any evil, then angels cannot sin. And yet, Aquinas points out that "there is the action of free-will in the angels, by reason of which evil may be in them" (Q63, Art. 1, reply 2). Therefore, because free-will defines a rational being, an angel, despite its heavenly nature is also rational, is capable of sin. This question is of particular importance as it defines the parameters of Aquinas' construction of demonology. By establishing that any rational creature has free-will, and that free-will is necessary in order to sin, Aquinas concretely showed that angels, through their free-will, are capable of sinning.

In the same question, Aquinas posits that "the angel [who will, as we shall see, become the devil] sinned by seeking to be as God... It was in this way that the devil desired to be as God" (Q63, Art. 3, reply). The angel that would eventually become the devil desired to be like God—not God-like, which is the unattainable goal of every rational being, but rather to live without the grace of

¹ I will use the translation of the Fathers of the English Dominican Province. For the following discussion, all quotes are taken from this translation (<http://www.newadvent.org/summa/1063.htm>, accessed August 15, 2013).

God and “to have dominion over others” (ibid). Aquinas, through his composition, rationally unified the fundamental *cause d’être* of demons, creating a mythology that reflects his time.

Through a systematic discourse, Aquinas weaves a mythology of the genesis of demons. He theorises that angels are very much capable of sinning, and the Devil, through the desire to be like God—that is, not be subjected to the will of God, sinned. It is this sin of pride and envy that lead to the devil’s downfall, and that the nature of demons are due to their choosing to be evil, not through their inherent nature.

And yet, one must ask, “Is this myth?” If we are to apply Cassirer’s fundamental principles of mythology, that is, myth is a dialogue between Man and his environment, then yes. Aquinas presented a literal dialogue; however, it is not only this aspect that makes a piece myth. Aquinas clearly defined his environment, incorporating its complexities and nuances.

As myth is fluid, connecting Man to a distant past, so too is Aquinas’ demonology as presented in his *Summa Theologica* fluid. Aquinas connects the concerns of his time—the existence of demons—to their very creation. He details their genesis and their continued existence to his present and, as he has stated numerous times, demons are very real. It is that realness that Aquinas addresses. Whether or not demons, in actual flesh and blood, were considered to be factual is not the prime importance. Like Homer, in his weaving of *The Iliad*, personified the values and concerns of his society, so too Aquinas personified the values and concerns of his society. Rather, Aquinas gives voice to a very real concern of his time: the existence of evil. He address the nature of evil as well as explaining its genesis: that through free-will, even angels—higher than heavenly beings—are capable of sin. The devil chose to sin by desiring to be like God. If Man is to survive, he must understand the very intricacies that govern his environment—not only the visible societal laws of hierarchy and physical limitations of his physical existence, but also the complexities that are outside of his conscious understanding: the good, the evil, and the ambiguous in-between.

What the *Summa* is not is a narrative, and this is a clear distinction that must be made. Cassirer, and later Eliade, never fully discussed the element of narrative. They emphasised the symbolic value of myth. Aquinas’ comprehension of demons is highly symbolic, as it seeks to understand the nature of evil in the world through the use of demons. For example, Question 109, Article 1 asks whether or not there are orders (hierarchies) among

demons. After a detailed listing of the objections, Aquinas concludes that due to the fact that demons were angels that fell from grace, and that all angels were created in grace, they are still in orders. This wonderfully mirrors the need of orders and classification in the Mediaeval world, a symbolic understanding the dichotomy present, as well as explaining a fundamental aspect of the nature of demons. Its poetic language, the theoretical element is exemplified in this dialogue.

What we have seen is a development of mythic thought within the Middle Ages, one that is woven and interpreted by Aquinas. Demons and the existence of these creatures were unquestioned. They existed. Their nature and place of Man in this environment is what Aquinas explored. Aquinas, as a prominent member of the Mediaeval educated elite metamorphosed demonology into a myth that he can understand, preserving the dialogue that he had with his environment. He did not replace the existing mythologies; rather he has transcribed them in a language of symbols that is native to him. He preserved his understanding of the dialogue that took place between the Mediaeval Man and his environment.

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