

Review of DANIEL DEARDORFF'S *THE OTHER WITHIN:
THE GENIUS OF DEFORMITY IN MYTH, CULTURE, AND PSYCHE*

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Daniel Deardorff's *The Other Within: The Genius of Deformity in Myth, Culture, and Psyche* is a curious though elegant narrative of "The Path of the Wanderer" as he, a stigmatized outsider within his own culture, is offered the opportunity of symbolic transformation. This mythopoetic process, in the vein of Joseph Campbell and Robert Bly, involves a socially marginalized individual engaging with the Other inside himself to negotiate multiple "spheres of reality" to attain "lost" collective knowledge and reinvent his identity.

Deardorff draws on a considerable number of concepts and ideas from a myriad of sources, including literature, psychoanalysis, anthropology, and folklore. The first part of the book deals with identifying Otherness within society and the self, as well as introducing the reader to Deardorff's interpretation of Victor Turner's ritual process. Here we learn of a dichotomy between "civilization" and wilderness, or the unknown, or Otherness. These are later all expressed as a recurring series of structuralist binaries (i.e.: village/forest) and elaborated upon with analogies to barbarian "dog-headed people" outside the wall and the oppression of the state within.

In the second part, Deardorff attempts to connect abstract concepts of reason and authenticity with specific sections of the human brain, as well as further the "Path of the Wanderer" where the outsider, engaged in a liminal state, must essentially adopt "shamanic" practices of uncertain provenance to discovering the "wound" her had been given by society actually makes him *wyrd* (possibly in the historical Anglo-Saxon sense

of the word?). The final section of the book concerns genius and imagination. In this section Deardorff, to his credit, eloquently ties the vast array of previous concepts together and describes the underlying power of myth as a creative, albeit forgotten, force that functions to maintain a healthy culture. Through following The Wanderer's Path, the marginalized can gain access to symbolic insight and begin "singing" the process of mythopoesis (myth-making) that is, according to mythopoeists, integral to human existence.

If this summary strikes the reader as odd, it is because Deardorff's book is itself a curious weaving of textual analysis, social science, New Age spirituality, and psychoanalysis: or, mythopoeics. From a folklorist's perspective, the most immediate issues in this book are the lack of fieldwork and context for the many generalized, essentialized, and universalist assumptions made. The term "civilization" is frequently used and he defines it as very tangible tool of governmental or "church" oppression (20; 28); a universal binary analogous to order/chaos (65); a modern state of being in opposition to "pre-civilized native wisdom" (93); and the "mass culture" that produces "massmen" who apparently have no agency – a strawman construction that he rails against (16). Claims such as "the civilized choice is either black or white; good or bad" (17) seem to be primarily based on Deardorff's own beliefs and reveal a problematic Eurocentrism that runs throughout the text.

To support some of his points, Deardorff engages in a textual analysis of various myths (and some folktales he identifies as "myths") but, as in common in mythopoetic works, omits a description of the cultural context from which the myth was created. It is difficult to interpret the embedded meaning of folklore, particularly of myths, without

context; when interpreting a Sumerian myth is Deardorff eliciting the meaning as understandable to a contemporary Sumerian, or is he selectively reading with a 21st Century gaze? This is not to mention the issues involved with different versions and transmission of folklore.

While Deardorff's prose is sophisticated and flows well, it is also heavily romanticized. Following in the tradition of Robert Bly, part of Deardorff's argument revolves around seeking a lost "authenticity," hidden alongside the "lunacy of the moon" and "mysteries of the forest." Myths, he says, summon us to "the wilds and a long forgotten authenticity" (92) and contain "pre-civilized native wisdom" (93), leaving the reader to wonder, "Which natives? Where?" Deardorff decries the "narcotic oblivion of [modern] mass-identity" (17) yet constructs a romanticized nostalgic lineage to "the ancient shamans" (170). He rightly notes that we cannot idealize past cultural groups (92), but instead writes a romanticized universal pre-history for humanity that never actually existed. He complains of the homogenizing effect of mass culture in the present, but nostalgically does the same to the past.

Viewing reality in "archetypes" neglects real people and everyday life. It was out the everyday lives and worldviews of historical (and pre-historical) peoples that myths, legends, and all other manner of folklore were created. Despite some problematic theory and method, Deardorff does manage to communicate his basic premise: the need to understand Otherness not only beyond the boundaries of our folkgroup or culture, but within ourselves, is an important one.

Deardorff, Daniel. *The Other Within: The Genius of Deformity in Myth, Culture, and Psyche*. 2004. East Montpelier, VT: Heaven & Earth Publishing LLC, 2009.