

THE ACQUISITION AND CONTROL OF FIRE

(1932)

In a footnote to my *Civilization and its Discontents* I mentioned - though only incidentally - a conjecture which could be formed on the basis of psycho-analytic material, about primal man's acquisition of control over fire. I am led to take up this theme again by Albrecht Schaeffer's contradiction (1930) and by Erlenmeyer's striking reference in the preceding paper to the Mongolian law against 'pissing on ashes'.¹

For I think my hypothesis - that, in order to gain control over fire, men had to renounce the homosexually-tinged desire to put it out with a stream of urine - can be confirmed by an interpretation of the Greek myth of Prometheus, provided that we bear in mind the distortions which must be expected to occur in the transition from facts to the contents of a myth. These distortions are of the same sort as, and no worse than, those which we acknowledge every day, when we reconstruct from patients' dreams the repressed but extremely important experiences of their childhood. The mechanisms employed in the distortions I have in mind are symbolic representation and turning into the opposite. I should not venture to explain all the features of our myth in this fashion; apart from the original set of facts, other and later occurrences may have contributed to its content. But the elements which admit of analytic interpretation are, after all, the most striking and important - viz. the manner in which Prometheus transported the fire, the character of his act (an outrage, a theft, a defrauding of the gods) and the meaning of his punishment.

¹ This refers no doubt to hot ashes, from which fire can still be obtained, and not to ashes which are quite extinct. - The objection raised by Lorenz (1931) is based on the assumption that man's subjugation of fire only began when he discovered that he could produce it at will by some sort of manipulation. As against this, Dr. J. Hárník refers me to a remark made by Dr. Richard Lasch (in Georg Buschan's compilation *Illustrierte Völkerkunde*, 1922, 1, 24), who writes: 'Presumably the art of conserving fire was understood long before that of kindling it; we have evidence of this in the fact that, although the present-day pygmy-like aborigines of the Andamans possess and conserve fire, they have no indigenous method of kindling it.'

The myth tells us that Prometheus the Titan, a culture-hero who was still a god¹ and who was perhaps originally himself a demiurge and a creator of men, brought fire to men, having stolen it from the gods, hidden in a hollow stick, a fennel-stalk. If we were interpreting a dream we should be inclined to regard such an object as a penis symbol, although the unusual stress laid on its hollowness might make us hesitate. But how can we bring this penis-tube into connection with the preservation of fire? There seems little chance of doing this, till we remember the procedure of reversal, of turning into the opposite, of inverting relationships, which is so common in dreams and which so often conceals their meaning from us. What a man harbours in his penis-tube is not fire. On the contrary, it is the means of

quenching fire; it is the water of his stream of urine. This relationship between fire and water then connects up with a wealth of familiar analytic material.

Secondly, the acquisition of fire was a crime; it was accomplished by robbery or theft. This is a constant feature in all the legends about the acquiring of control over fire. It is found among the most different and widely separated peoples and not merely in the Greek myth of Prometheus the Bringer of Fire. Here, then, must be the essential content of mankind's distorted recollection. But why is the acquisition of fire inseparably connected with the idea of a crime? Who is it that was injured or defrauded by it? The Promethean myth in Hesiod gives us a straight answer; for, in another story, not itself directly connected with fire, Prometheus so arranged the sacrifices to the gods as to give men the advantage over Zeus. It is the gods, then, who were defrauded. We know that in myths the gods are granted the satisfaction of all the desires which human creatures have to renounce, as we have learnt from the case of incest. Speaking in analytic terms, we should say that instinctual life - the id - is the god who is defrauded when the quenching of fire is renounced: in the legend, a human desire is transformed into a divine privilege. But in the legend the deity possesses nothing of the characteristics of a super-ego, he is still the representative of the paramount life of the instincts.

¹ Heracles, at a later time, was a demi-god, and Theseus wholly human.³

Transformation into the opposite is most radically present in a third feature of the legend, in the punishment of the Bringer of Fire. Prometheus was chained to a rock, and every day a vulture fed on his liver. In the fire-legends of other peoples, too, a bird plays a part, and it must have something to do with the matter; but for the moment I shall not attempt an interpretation. On the other hand, we feel on firm ground when it comes to explaining why the liver was selected as the location of the punishment. In ancient times the liver was regarded as the seat of all passions and desires; hence a punishment like that of Prometheus was the right one for a criminal driven by instinct, who had committed an offence at the prompting of evil desires. But the exact opposite is true of the Bringer of Fire: he had renounced an instinct and had shown how beneficent, and at the same time how indispensable, such a renunciation was for the purposes of civilization. And why should the legend treat a deed that was thus a benefit to civilization as a crime deserving punishment? Well, if, through all its distortions, it barely allows us to get a glimpse of the fact that the acquisition of control over fire presupposes an instinctual renunciation, at least it makes no secret of the resentment which the culture-hero could not fail to arouse in men driven by their instincts. And this is in accordance with what we know and expect. We know that a demand for a renunciation of instinct, and the enforcement of that demand, call out hostility and aggressiveness, which is only transformed into a sense of guilt in a later phase of psychical development.

The obscurity of the Prometheus legend, as of other fire myths, is increased by the fact that primitive man was bound to regard fire as something analogous to the passion of love - or, as we should say, as a symbol of the libido. The warmth that is radiated by fire calls up the same sensation that accompanies a state of sexual

excitation, and the shape and movements of a flame suggest a phallus in activity. There can be no doubt about the mythological significance of flame as a phallus; we have further evidence of it in the legend of the parentage of Servius Tullius, the Roman king. When we ourselves speak of the 'devouring fire' of love and of 'licking' flames - thus comparing the flame to a tongue - we have not moved so very far away from the mode of thinking of our primitive ancestors. One of the presuppositions on which we based our account of the myth of the acquisition of fire was, indeed, that to primal man the attempt to quench fire with his own water had the meaning of a pleasurable struggle with another phallus.

It may thus well be that, by way of this symbolic analogy, other elements, of a purely imaginative sort, have made their way into the myth and become interwoven with its historical elements. It is difficult to resist the notion that, if the liver is the seat of passion, its significance, symbolically, is the same as that of fire itself; and that, if this is so, its being daily consumed and renewed gives an apt picture of the behaviour of the erotic desires, which, though daily satisfied, are daily revived. The bird which sates itself on the liver would then have the meaning of a penis - a meaning which is not strange to it in other connections, as we know from legends, dreams, linguistic usage and plastic representations in ancient times. A short step further brings us to the phoenix, the bird which, as often as it is consumed by fire, emerges rejuvenated once more, and which probably bore the significance of a penis revived after its collapse rather than, and earlier than, that of the sun setting in the glow of evening and afterwards rising once again.

The question may be asked whether we may attribute to the mythopoeic activity an attempt to give (in play, as it were) a disguised representation to universally familiar, though also extremely interesting, mental processes that are accompanied by physical manifestations, with no motive other than the sheer pleasure of representation. We can certainly give no decided answer to this question without having fully grasped the nature of myths; but in the two instances before us, it is easy to recognize the same content and, with it, a definite purpose. Each describes the revival of libidinal desires after they have been quenched through being sated. That is to say, each brings out the indestructibility of those desires; and this emphasis is particularly appropriate as a consolation where the historical core of the myth deals with a defeat of instinctual life, with a renunciation of instinct that has become necessary. It is, as it were, the second part of primal man's understandable reaction when he has suffered a blow in his instinctual life: after the punishment of the offender comes the assurance that after all at bottom he has done no damage.

A reversal into the opposite is unexpectedly found in another myth which in appearance has very little to do with the fire myth. The Lernaean hydra with its countless flickering serpent's heads - one of which was immortal - was, as its name tells us, a water-dragon. Heracles, the culture-hero, fought it by cutting off its heads; but they always grew again, and it was only after he had burnt up the immortal head with fire that he overcame the monster. A water-dragon subdued by fire - that surely makes no sense. But, as in so many dreams, sense emerges if we

reverse the manifest content. In that case the hydra is a brand of fire and the flickering serpent's heads are the flames; and these, in proof of their libidinal nature, once more display, like Prometheus's liver, the phenomenon of re-growth, of renewal after attempted destruction. Heracles, then, extinguishes this brand of fire with - water. (The immortal head is no doubt the phallus itself, and its destruction signifies castration.) But Heracles was also the deliverer of Prometheus and slew the bird which devoured his liver. Should we not suspect a deeper connection between the two myths? It is as though the deed of the one hero was made up for by the other. Prometheus (like the Mongolian law) had forbidden the quenching of fire; Heracles permitted it in the case in which the brand of fire threatened disaster. The second myth seems to correspond to the reaction of a later epoch of civilization to the events of the acquisition of power over fire. It looks as though this line of approach might take us quite a distance into the secrets of the myth; but admittedly we should carry a feeling of certainty with us only a short way.

In the antithesis between fire and water, which dominates the entire field of these myths, yet a third factor can be demonstrated in addition to the historical factor and the factor of symbolic phantasy. This is a physiological fact, which the poet Heine describes in the following lines:-

Was dem Menschen dient zum Seichen

Damit schafft er Seinesgleichen.

The sexual organ of the male has two functions; and there are those to whom this association is an annoyance. It serves for the evacuation of the bladder, and it carries out the act of love which sets the craving of the genital libido at rest. The child still believes that he can unite the two functions. According to a theory of his, babies are made by the man urinating into the woman's body. But the adult knows that in reality the acts are mutually incompatible - as incompatible as fire and water. When the penis is in the state of excitation which led to its comparison with a bird, and while the sensations are being experienced which suggest the warmth of fire, urination is impossible; and conversely, when the organ is serving to evacuate urine (the water of the body) all its connections with the genital function seem to be quenched. The antithesis between the two functions might lead us to say that man quenches his own fire with his own water. And primal man, who had to understand the external world by the help of his own bodily sensations and states, would surely not have failed to notice and utilize the analogies pointed out to him by the behaviour of fire.