

## From the opening of Part III of The Matter with Things by Iain McGilchrist

A thing without oppositions *ipso facto* does not exist ... existence lies in opposition.

—CS Peirce<sup>1</sup>

It is the hallmark of any deep truth that its negation is also a deep truth.

—Niels Bohr<sup>2</sup>

The heart's wave would never have risen up so beautifully in its cloud of spray, and become spirit, were it not for the grim old cliff of destiny standing in its way ...

—Friedrich Hölderlin<sup>3</sup>

According to an ancient Iroquois legend, the gradual fading of eternal power and light in the cosmos made necessary the activity of a creator god whose task was, for the sake of the whole universe, to bring into being the earth and all its creatures. His name in the Onondaga language, *De'haě'hiyawǎ'kho'*, means He Grasps The Sky With *Both* Hands (my emphasis); and in the legend, he represents the power to remember one's higher identity in the midst of action in the world. He has, however, a twin brother who declares: 'I am not thinking about the place from where I came ... It is sufficient that my mind is satisfied in having arrived at this place ... This place will become exceedingly delightful and amusing to the mind ... I trust in the thing which my father gave me, a flint arrow, by which I have speech. This I will use perhaps to defend myself so that I will not think of that other place.' His name is *O'ha'a*, which means He Who Is Crystal Ice, He Who Is Flint; subsequently he is referred to simply as Flint. He represents 'evil in the form of forgetfulness, intentional forgetfulness of the higher identity'.<sup>4</sup>

He Grasps the Sky With Both Hands begins creating living creatures. Flint sees the animals that his brother creates and how good they are; and he is jealous. He gathers all his brother's animals together and puts them in a cave. Troubled by this, He Grasps The Sky With Both

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<sup>1</sup> Peirce 1931–60, vol 1, §457.

<sup>2</sup> As quoted in Delbrück 1986 (167). A similar formulation – 'you can recognize a deep truth by the feature that its opposite is also a deep truth' – is sometimes attributed to physicist Frank Wilczek, because he included it in an account of Bohr's philosophy in his 2015 book *A Beautiful Question: Finding Nature's Deep Design*; but the context makes clear that he is (appreciatively) paraphrasing Bohr.

<sup>3</sup> Hölderlin, *Hyperion*, 'Hyperion an Bellarmin VIII': » *Des Herzens Woge schäumte nicht so schön empor, und würde Geist, wenn nicht der alte stumme Fels, das Schicksal, ihr entgegenstände.* «

<sup>4</sup> This account is derived from a landmark of Onondaga literature, dictated in 1900 by the Onondaga orator and priest, John Arthur Gibson, to his collaborator, JNB Hewitt, who was gathering material for his *Iroquoian Cosmology* (1903, 1928). In this passage I am relying on a substantial report of the myth contained in Needleman 2003 (204–12), who in turn was dependent on Hewitt: all quotations here are verbatim from Needleman, including any emphasis. I am grateful to Robert Bringhurst for helping me understand the provenance of this account. Bringhurst points out that the names of the two brothers in current Onondaga orthography would be *Tháęhya-wá'gih* and *Ohá·æ?*. I am also grateful to the anthropologist Stefano Fait, who noticed 'a number of impressive parallels' between the story and the structure of our brains, for bringing this remarkable passage to my attention.

Hands tries to cut himself off from his brother. Flint then tries on his own to imitate his brother. He creates his own birds, flowers and fruits. His brother is more troubled than before. But his realisation is that it is only when Flint is cut off from his brother that he does wrong. So He Grasps The Sky With Both Hands rescinds the act of separating himself off from the evil, and returns to his brother to see what he has done.

It turns out that Flint has created not birds, but flies and bats; not flowers, but thistles; not fruit, but thorns.

Seeing this, the good brother embraces his brother's work, giving all that Flint has made their proper names (that is, assigning them their proper role in the scheme of things) and declaring, 'All this shall assist me. The flies shall assist me. The thistle will be food for small animals, the thorn will be food for game animals ...' The mind of Flint was gratified. But Flint goes on attempting to imitate the works of creation, and He Grasps The Sky With Both Hands comes to understand that it is right that he maintain a *small distance* from his brother, while at the same time keeping his attention upon him, neither letting him drift too far from his awareness, nor letting him blend with him. The good brother understands full well that Flint will forever attempt to destroy his rule.

He Grasps The Sky With Both Hands consults an 'Ancient One' who confirms this: Flint will aim to destroy his benign superintendence of creation.

He Grasps the Sky With Both Hands goes back to the most primitive source of being. From it he brings the light of the sun into the world. He starts to create human beings, a man and a woman. Into each he sees it is good that he should give some of his own life, his breath, his mind and his power of speech.

But all is not well. Seeing what his brother has done, Flint decides that he too can make human beings. Flint's experiments, however, result only in strange, anguished, misbegotten creatures that run from him and hide. So he turns to his brother for help.

As Flint prepared to cross once again the narrow channel that separated him from his brother, he was startled to see that He Grasps The Sky With Both Hands had already crossed the water and was coming towards him. Flint greeted him, saying, 'I have come to meet you because I desire your aid in causing the human being to live'.

He Grasps The Sky With Both Hands agreed and went to the place where the human being was. He Grasps The Sky With Both Hands took a portion of his own life and put it inside the human being. So also he took a portion of his own mind and enclosed it in the head of the human being. And so also a portion of his own blood and enclosed it inside the flesh of the human being. And so too did he take a portion of his own power to see and enclosed it in the head of the human being. So also he took a portion of his power to speak and enclosed it in the throat of the human being. Finally, he also placed his breath in the body of the human being. Just then the human being came to life, and he arose, and stood upon the earth present here.

Turning to Flint, He Grasps The Sky With Both Hands spoke: 'I now have aided you in this matter. And now, I see that *this* human being will become hostile to me. What will come to pass because of that?'

Flint quickly replied, 'Since both you and I took part in completing this human being, let both you and I have control over it. In that way you will have something to say concerning these human beings who will dwell on this earth.' He Grasps The Sky With Both Hands agreed to

that, adding: ‘That human being whom I alone created, who is the first human being to become alive on this earth – we shall call him real human being. And this human being whom you and I have now created and is now alive on this earth, we shall call him the hatchet maker, the bringer of strife.

In time, the moon is created, initially under the power of Flint and evil, but it eventually comes under the power of the good brother. The brothers depart the realm of this earth. But He Grasps The Sky With Both Hands, before he leaves, warns that there are two minds in human beings; and that if they pursue strife, rather than peace, they will end

in the place where my brother dwells. And there you will see great suffering, and you will be famished, and you will be without liberty, and you will share the fate of my brother. I have confined him, and I have kindled a fire for him, and for this purpose I used his anger. This fire is hotter than any fire you have ever known; and this fire will burn eternally in that my brother even now desires to control all minds among human beings.

‘Whichever mind you choose, you must obey it’, he says. If mankind forgets, He Grasps the Sky With Both Hands will try to intervene twice on behalf of mankind, but

if a third time it comes to pass that you forget, then you will see what will come to pass. The things upon which you live will diminish so that finally nothing more will be able to grow ... It will be my brother who will do all this, for he will be able to seduce the minds of all human beings and thus spoil all that I have completed. Now I leave the matter to you.

This extraordinary legend appears to me to be one of the most remarkable intuitions of the structure of mind and its influence on human destiny ever brought forth from the depth of the human imagination. There are many close parallels between its message and the account of hemisphere difference expounded in the course of this book, as will be obvious to the attentive reader.

Further, though a creation myth, it is one with an important difference. It is not merely a myth of a completed act of creation, dealing solely with origins, but an account which also looks forward: to creation as continuous. What’s more, being an account of creation (of how worlds are brought into being) provided by a legend that intuits the structure of the mind, it concerns not simply ‘the world’ in a more limited sense, but the phenomenological world, the world that comes into being by the engagement of the human mind with whatever-it-is-that-exists-apart-from-ourselves: the only world we can ever know. At the risk of encroaching on the beauty and wisdom of myth, I will, with some misgivings, point to it from time to time as being a more vivid expression of an understanding of the world that also finds less vivid expression in the hemisphere hypothesis and in the efforts of various philosophers to put it in a more abstract form.

And there is another layer of meaning in the story: the dynamism of exchange between good and evil, the question of how close together they can become and how far apart they need to be.<sup>5</sup> I will turn to that in the final chapter of Part III.

### ***The generative power of opposites***

There is so much that is unusual, and unusually apt, in this myth of generation. Yet another element is the need for two creative forces that are seen by one of those forces (Flint) as

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<sup>5</sup> Needleman 2003 (204).

opposed, but are brought to work together by the other (He Grasps the Sky With Both Hands). All things arise from opposing, but in some form nonetheless related, drives or forces. Energy is always characterised by the coming together of *apparent* opposites – apparent because this is how we have conceived things left hemisphere fashion: as in the positive and negative poles of an electric circuit, the north and south poles of the magnet, or, in a quite different sense, the merging of male and female gametes in the origin of new life. To the imaginative mind, such a coming together of ‘opposites’ is, as Niels Bohr (above) suggests, a sign that we are at last approaching a deeper level of truth.