

## Natalism as Pre and Perinatal Metaphor

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**Abstract:** None available.

**Full Text:** Headnote ABSTRACT: This paper explores the theory of Natalism which proposes that the symbolic expression of birth and prenatal consciousness can be found in art, mythology, and creative expression. Through clinical and empirical evidence our knowledge of the origins of awareness and memory is being pushed ever earlier. If pre- and perinatal experience affects personality, then we should see its tentacles in creative expression. Art flows from the deepest realms of the unconscious where the early roots of the human psyche are most active. As well, the creative act is often non-verbal which may be closely allied with the pre-verbal consciousness. Birth and prenatal experience which may not be readily accessed or discussed with the later developed language mind may be more aptly expressed with the non-verbal articulation of art. Throughout history natalistic images have often vividly depicted pre- and perinatal experience with no conscious recognition on the part of the creator of the early origin of the work. The similarity and commonality of these images is due to the universality of the environment of the womb and process of birth. Looking at meanings behind natalistic symbols found in art we can add a valuable resource for developing our understanding of pre- and perinatal issues in history, culture and personality. . . . creative activity . . . somehow permits us to come to grips with the demons of our past, to give form to the chaos within us and thereby master our anxiety.<sup>1</sup> Alice Miller-Portraits of a Childhood INTRODUCTION In this paper I am going to look at how birth and in utero consciousness have influenced creative expression in art and myth throughout the ages. I call this symbolic expression of pre and perinatal memory, Natalism. We find the creative expression of pre and perinatal life in painting, sculptures, dance, poetry, literature, music, religions, philosophies; even in social political movements and, unfortunately, wars and social unrest. The theory of Natalism proposes that birth and prenatal experience are registered in the psyche and are later projected into art, ritual and myth-and have been throughout the ages. For the most part, the creation of Natalism seems to be a subconscious process by the artist. The individuals within a society seem to be attracted to Natalism from subconscious needs causing the reoccurrence and popularity of Natalistic themes. Presenting birth and prebirth experiences as a vital part of some artists's work may be a new way to explore how the subconscious has influenced art. We accept that the adult subconscious or the childhood subconscious influences individual artists or even groups of artists. It is clear that many movements in art have, in part, occurred out of the subconscious drives of the artists involved. If, in fact, the pre- and perinatal experience can be stored in the psyche and exert later influences on the individual, then it is inevitable that the unconscious pre and perinatal experience is going to find expression in some works of art. The creation of a work of art has often been compared to giving birth, the artist identifying with the mother by bringing a "child," the work of art, into the world. In Kafka's diaries there is a famous passage in this vein about writing his short story, "The Judgement." Yet, as I envision the creative process, I do not identify with the mother giving birth but with the child struggling to be born.<sup>2</sup> Creative expression is another facet of personality and many of the dynamics involved in understanding the unconscious mind and dream world hold true for understanding art and the creative process. Symbols depict the essence of the artist; they depict the unconscious, the very deep levels of the psyche. I suggest many of the primary roots of the self originate with birth and the in utero experience. Since art is often an expression of the deepest self, we should expect to find metaphor and symbolism depicting the wonder and conflicts of birth and prenatal phenomena in the many forms of creative expression. Some of the most abundant symbolization to be found in Natalism arises from traumatic pre and perinatal experience. The expression of anger from that little baby inside the adult's body may be so intense and thunderous that we

can perhaps gain some insight into why societies whose adults are full of repressed birth pain may have the need to symbolize that pain through rituals of violence and war. This perspective possibly explains the occurrence of ceremonies and paintings of social and political rebirth which are rampant with symbols and images of violence. ... 'groups, whether face-to-face or historical, induce a "fetal trance state" in their members, reawakening specific physical memories from uterine and peri-natal life. 'Man is a political animal', as Aristotle said, because for most civilized people, only life in a group can establish contact with repressed fetal emotions.'<sup>3</sup> While viewing a Natalistic work of art, one may, through proxy, have some reaction and acknowledgement of one's own personal pre or perinatal history. When an artist or style of art expresses the subconscious reality of a large group of people, that artist or style becomes fashionable because it serves a generalized need for the group. In the mytho-religious story of the coming of Quetzacoatl, an important South American winged serpent of wisdom, we read of his trials and tribulations which resonate metaphorically with birth and in utero imagery: The dark night, the wind and the sea cast him on the beach. He remained enchained, tied to his cross, covered with foam, stuck to the earth, clinging to its loving shape like a child to its mother. Naked and without memory. His endurance shone from within him like a star in the wind and darkness. Light within. And outside, the storm and the whirlpool roared. The calm and the first light of a new day found him lying on the beach. He could only remember the course of his origin, the sun coming out, and the cross of the four winds to which he was tied, the cross which carried him, afloat on the sea, through howling storms and up on to this earth, separated from the water, surrounded by wind and night. He was naked, without memory, with only the will to survive. He was crazed with need. His heart was full of anguish and solitude. "Am I still someone?" he was scarcely able to ask himself as pain hurled him against the rocks, and his strength and consciousness left him, the sparkle of his endurance died, and the only thing left was a grey humming, like death, which tasted in his swollen mouth like blood and salt. He remained on the ground, stuck like a flint, covered with white and scaly foam, his stomach pressed to the earth. The new day came from the sea. The new day full of light.<sup>4</sup> Quetzacoatl is a religious myth and yet it is metaphorically consistent with the original birth separation "from the water," "naked," "covered with white foam"-the white fetal vernix and bound physically and psychologically to "the cross of four winds to which he is tied" representing the umbilicus/placenta. In the following quote we hear French poet and obstetrician Fredric Leboyer describe the link between mythical metaphors and the unconscious effects of our births: This is birth. The torture of an innocent. What futility to believe that so great a cataclysm will not leave its mark. Its traces are everywhere-in the skin, in the bones, in the stomach, in the back. In all our human folly. In our madness, our tortures, our prisons. In legends, epics, myths. In the Scriptures.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the terror of birth leaves its mark on all forms of human expression and this is a significant qualification to add to our understanding of culture. The implications of the projection of pre and perinatal consciousness into creative expression are quite significant. R.D. Laing notes in *The Facts of Life: To be born is a momentous event in our life cycle*. In recent years hundreds of thousands of people have been going through experiences as adults which they themselves feel to be related to their actual birth experience. Traces of the experience of being born seem to occur in dreams, myths, fantasies, physical events, or to be acted out in different ways.<sup>6</sup> Knowledge about the origins of consciousness in the womb have been a part of some eastern philosophies and religions for centuries. The eastern world's quest for rebirth may be a disguised metaphor for symbolic return to the maternal womb. Through meditation, eastern sages have been retrieving pre and perinatal memories from ancient times. For example, in Tibetan Buddhism we hear from *The Hundred Thousand Songs of Milaerpa*: "I do not know how to observe the suffering of birth," said Shindormo. "Please instruct me how to meditate upon it." In answer, the Jetsun sang: My faithful patroness, I will Explain the suffering of birth. . . . . In nine months it emerges From the womb in pain Excruciating, as if Pulled out gripped by pliers. When from the womb its head is squeezed, the pain Is like being thrown into a bramble pit. The tiny body on the mother's lap Feels like a sparrow grappled by a hawk. When from the baby's tender body The blood and filth are being cleansed, The pain is like being flayed alive. When the umbilical cord is cut,

It feels as though the spine were severed. When wrapped in the cradle it feels bound By chains, imprisoned in a dungeon.<sup>7</sup> In the west, modern psychology is our most recent equivalent to these ancient eastern approaches of searching for the origins of the self. The previously cited ancient description of the feelings of the babe during birth fairly closely parallel the emotional picture of birth discoveries by some pre and perinatal psychotherapists over the last three decades. Pre and Perinatal Consciousness Gradually, through clinical and empirical evidence gathered mostly through various experiential psychotherapies and hypnotherapy techniques, we are coming to some remarkable conclusions about birth.<sup>8</sup> For example, on the question of reliability of subjects undergoing therapy: . . . obstetricians, who have hypnotized people whose birth they had attended years before, and then compared the hypnotized person's recall of remembered birth details with actual birth records and with their own and mother's reports . . . found significant details under hypnosis which could only be explained as actual memories.<sup>9</sup> Indeed, our knowledge about the beginnings of awareness and early memory is being pushed back further to the womb. By the sixth or seventh month, an unborn baby is capable of making some fairly subtle discriminations in his mother's attitudes and feelings and, more importantly, starts acting on them.<sup>10</sup> We are learning that memories about the genesis of self-knowledge have roots in birth and the womb and we are beginning to acknowledge that these early memories do affect the individual and culture. Oh yes, I do remember a time when my life was sweet and pure, when gentle amniotic waves soothed my delicate body in bliss and oblivion, when words were not conceived of, nor did they even matter I was at one with my creator floating endlessly in her womb, cradled in my paradisaal home. She, the giver of my life, my nest, my love, pure sweet love. I, hers,-she, mine-all mine no words to describe, no, just a oneness, a secure adorable out-of-this-world oneness.<sup>11</sup> After having relived birth and experiences in the womb this woman's poem draws a poignant correlation between the universal need for a oneness with god and her lost unity with her mother. For the babe at birth, the birth canal was a treacherous and terrifying passageway; a challenging labyrinth which radically changes the world of the pre-nate. In birth the: Cataclysmic muscular convulsions turn a peaceful haven into a crushing hell.... travel through the pelvis, is at best an energetic struggle, at worst a brain-destroying, suffocating, twisting, tearing, crushing torture ...<sup>12</sup> The horror of the birth journey is safely buried deep in the psyche. Unfortunately, locked away with the pain of birth are the positive influences and powerful pre-verbal consciousness of the pre-nate. Many elements of the psychological, environmental and physical aspects of birth, or of the mother's womb can be found in mythopoetic expressions. The drum of archaic peoples and the pounding rhythm of our modern factories may be expressions of that same rhythmic 'in utero' beat. Thomas Verny, in speaking about the significance of the mother's heart beat emphasizes that the child: ... knows that the reassuring rhythm of its beat is one of the major constellations in his universe. He falls asleep to it, wakes to it, moves to it, rests to it. Because the human mind, even the human mind in utero, is a symbol-making entity, the fetus gradually attaches a metaphorical meaning to it. Its steady thump-thump comes to symbolize tranquility, security and love to him. In its presence, he usually flourishes.<sup>13</sup> In a therapy session a man is distracted by the constant rhythmic beat of the roofer's hammer on a building not far away. Much like the initiate in the metaphorical belly of the serpent who is swept away by the rhythmic beating of the archaic drum this man is cast adrift into another mode of being: I hear the sound of construction on the street outside-it's a loud and blunt banging-it stops, then starts again. I find myself yearning to hear it, yearning to hear its 'steady beat.' The sound soothes me. My body and mind feel a primitive sense/connection to the booming beat. I am in touch with a primitive feeling of connection to my mom. Just a pure sense of connectedness to my creator, her organs, to the beating of her heart, my life source; without it I would die. It is such a primitive sound, my body moves toward the beating.<sup>14</sup> Finally his cries turn to screams, "give her back to me," over and over again. "Give my mommy back to me." As his pleas subside he lays exhausted: I am expressing my memory as that limp, lifeless and nearly-dead newborn. My yearning and aching is for that last and lost connection to that throbbing force of life, my mother's heartbeat.<sup>15</sup> Whether through psychotherapy, myth or ritual one must psychologically relive or symbolically re-enact the passage through birth to find the paradise of the womb. Unfortunately, in the repetition

of the passage, the tortures of birth are often near at hand, whether it is a genuine reliving or a symbolic manifestation of the journey through the birth canal. There is now enough both subjective and scientific evidence to validate the existence of birth and pre-birth memory. Pre and perinatal experience is symbolized in the outlook and life patterns of the individual. Art is a significant way in which the individual can express and symbolize this internalized experience. Through recent discoveries in pre and perinatal psychology, there are apparent new ways to evaluate the symbols in works of art. In addition, because art symbolizes the inner psyche, we may be able to add to our knowledge of pre and perinatal psychology by looking at art, rituals and myths that may have their roots in experiences from the pre and perinatal period. Myth, art and religion may be the primary means humanity has used to connect with and relate to the pre-verbal consciousness. There is a separation, a segregation of the language cortical consciousness and the pre-verbal consciousness. Perhaps from the time we, as an evolving animal, developed our language mind the pre-language mind has never been fully connected. A clear separation of consciousness is the consequence. Otto Rank and Nador Fodor were two of the first people to take an in depth look at the pre and perinatal experience. Their insights came about quite frequently from their investigation of art and myth or through interpreting dreams. Here in the world of metaphor are found the realms of the pre-language experiences. Rank and Fodor's ability to speculate enhanced their proficiency at using myth and image. In times past it was necessary to use symbol, imagery and metaphor to give expression to the pre and perinatal experience. In his book *The secret Life of the Unborn Child*, Verny tells us: The legacy of this journey-with its bewildering and harrowing contrasts-leaves a profound mark on all of us. Our most enduring cultural and religious symbols reflect that influence: Both the distinctions between Heaven and Hell and the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden can be read as birth parables, and so can many of our most powerful myths. How we are born may even influence how we die.<sup>16</sup> In the last few decades experiential psychotherapies have regressed people (primarily through the body expression which is a non-language experience) to the pre and perinatal realm. Only by letting go of the language mind, the verbal consciousness, do we finally feel the omnipotent sense that artists, myth-makers and people who created rituals used when they allowed their creative expressions to come out of their deepest consciousness. This is the artist's most powerful tool-an intuitive, and often nonverbal sense of the world. The communication in ritual, art and myth is built on that intuitive language. The primary object of most shamanistic experiences as well as myths and other rites is to go back to one's tribal origins, to know the origin of one's cosmology, to know one's origin. I would suggest that those quests are psychological metaphors describing the desire to know the suppressed state of the infant within the adult, the child at birth, the pre-nate in utero, and possibly even the "psychology" of the cell. In baptism, puberty, wedding and funeral ceremonies, as well as in healing rituals, are to be found variations of birth re-enactment. The sensation of being reborn has been described in every literature, it inspires the poet, the writer, the lover, the saint.<sup>17</sup> The omnipresence and historical recurrence of Natalistic symbols and expressions I believe results from the universality of the intrauterine experience. During his time in the womb, the little human being is still permitted to follow in a straight line from his antecedents'... He is nourished, kept warm, and jostled about pretty much as embryonic hunter-gatherers were.<sup>18</sup> The Artist The deepest levels of the artist's psyche are projected into his or her work. The artist continually balances on a delicate precipice between conscious and preconscious material. Creative expression allows for and at times even forces unconscious issues to work their way up to the surface. Alice Miller, a dynamic Freudian psychoanalyst, writer and artist, began to paint late in her career as an enjoyable outlet for her desire for creative expression. Like many artists she was brought through her paintings to psychological truths about her "authentic self." She reveals: My playfulness, however, soon manifested its serious, even bitter side when the pictures that emerged before my eyes began to reveal an unfamiliar world-the world of my early childhood.<sup>19</sup> As she shifted from cognitive left brain to artistic right brain, she also made the shift to the pre-language mind and its early childhood memories. Alice Miller eventually found her art work expressing the "infancy, birth and prenatal origins of her self."<sup>20</sup> She was able to uncover deep truths and pain that was not accessible through

the rational and cognitive mode of traditional psychoanalysis. She relates the "pain of being born" to her creative process: I suspect that while I was painting some of my pictures I was experiencing something of my early distress connected with the struggle to become free.<sup>21</sup> When early material is forced up into the higher mental realms it unfortunately is most often psychological material with a high degree of emotional valence—painful memories that were too extreme to be accepted and integrated at the time they occurred. When we consider how long birth takes, how long the yet unborn child is subjected to fear, uncertainty, and desperation if the birth is a difficult one, then nothing that we undergo in later life can match it in intensity. The unborn do not possess an intellect to help them understand what is happening and thus come to terms with it. They are capable only of feeling.<sup>22</sup> So painful is birth that most people repress the experience. It is this unresolved repression that gives the memory its constant drive for an outlet. The intensity of this valence pushes the experience into our rituals, our group myths, our art and our personalities. The artist, like any other person, acts out, defends against, and seeks resolution to those traumas from the past. Birth symbolism in works of art may actually be serving any one or combination of these functions. Artists may be projecting their birth pain away from themselves through their medium by symbolically saying, "You did this to me!" Because the "you" is projected onto some threatening image in the art work rather than connected with the original "you" of the constricting life-threatening birth canal, the feeling is subconsciously projected onto the symbolic image rather than consciously felt and integrated with the original surrounding events and feeling that accompanied that individual's birth. Through the process of projection, the surface tension from the repressed feeling of birth is being discharged off in an attempt to keep it at bay. Artists may be closer than most to the memories of birth for they work to a great extent in a non-verbal mode, perhaps at a pre-cognitive level of consciousness. Remarking on the artist's heightened sensitivity to non-verbal and body thought processes, Otto Rank says of creating sculpture: How closely this extricating of the human being from the primal form is related by the Egyptian mind itself to the act of birth is shown in their language; "to create a piece of sculpture is, in Egyptian, to bring to life; the sculptor's work is designated by the causative form of the work to live."<sup>23</sup> In effect, the nature of creating art brings artists closer to the pre and perinatal realms of recall and experience, so close that while working they may often be overwhelmed by physical sensation. The struggling artist is faced with more than the notorious financial struggle, for they must contend with the constantly rising deep and intense emotional turmoil. Sometimes, the foundation of the content of that psychological discord has its origins in the subconscious birth memory of the artist. Are artists often non-verbal/pre-verbal personalities who choose a career in art because their overwhelming birth pain has forced them to function in the non-verbal realm for most of their life, consequently giving them both familiarity with and great skills for working with the non-verbal? Or does the non-verbal process of creating art bring the artist continually deeper and deeper into contact with the primitive origins of consciousness? Rank hazards an answer to this riddle with: The artist brings forth his work in ever new, constantly repeated acts of birth, and in it brings forth himself amid the maternal pains of creation.<sup>24</sup> The artist may be the victim of a cyclical phenomenon—because of early trauma he/she is more in touch with non-verbal body consciousness which is closely associated with art, and by being an artist the nature of the work brings the psyche close to repressed pre-verbal trauma. By expressing the metaphors of birth and making symbolic contact with early trauma, the artist may find some degree of integration and resolution to his/her early traumas. In fact, psychological resolution may be one of the fundamental goals of symbolizing pre and perinatal feelings in works of art. If the psyche is always seeking health and integration, which I believe is the case, then Natalism may be one means by which artists and their followers have historically sought to come to terms with the disturbing pre and perinatal origins of our character. Alice Miller confirms this experience when she comments how, after struggling in her paintings with "experiencing" her "early distress," the process allowed her "to become free" and: Sometimes when I had finished, I had the happy feeling of having succeeded, not in terms of accomplishment but in terms of delight.<sup>25</sup> When we see symbolic Natalism we are viewing the artist's unconscious attempt to make sense of early memory that is confronting the higher consciousness of the neo-

cortex. The artist is depicting her/his pre or perinatal state symbolically onto the media they utilize. Metaphoric Displacement through Natalism The creative process of art allows us to express this pre-language consciousness into metaphor and symbolism. As Miller Mair affirms: ". . . 'a serious study of metaphor may plunge us into very deep psychological waters.'"<sup>26</sup> These personal metaphors we use to express our individual perceptions of the world are meaningful expressions of our inner feeling state. When we symbolize the world, whether it be with language, art or ritual, the symbols come out of our felt experience and the nuances of our interpretations of events is based upon progressively earlier life experience. . . . all patterns in life are metaphoric re-enactments of birth.<sup>27</sup> Though the brain may interpret the feelings and create abstractions to understand them, the origin of feeling is stored in the body and can be found through listening to the body. Those who are, in this way, able to remember events, before, during, and after birth, recall with specific accuracy the bodily sensations, the accompanying emotions, and a detailed sense of the environmental pressures or deficiencies, with a vividness which has etched them forever on the recording cells of the organism.<sup>28</sup> A metaphor has the capacity to represent a feeling memory outside the context of language memory. Pre-language body-memory pain can be psychologically defended against through cerebral symbolization and abstract ideation. This can be deciphered in the vague and often subtle evocations of unconscious birth feelings inherent within an individual's personal use of language and ideations. . . . metaphor reaches out for what is unknown but dimly sensed through the medium of some familiar aspect of the known'.<sup>29</sup> Personal symbols and metaphors are based on some specific or accumulated experiences of a past reality. Whatever is verbalized or otherwise expressed (for example, in a drawing or painting) reveals a personal-historical truth. The truth is creatively encoded in metaphoric and feeling symbols in order to protect the individual from direct experience of the repressed emotional pain. What is being unconsciously conveyed through symbols is a personal psychological story of a specific experience of a past trauma. Individuals have their personal metaphors and it may be the case that when groups of people have common shared birth and prenatal experiences, the concentration of these will result in a group desire or demand for common metaphors to symbolize their shared inner experience. Through this phenomenon, philosophies, religions and political and social movements can in part be symbolic subconscious expression of pre and perinatal experiences that are shared by a group of people. One may speculate about the possibility that the development of a culture and its ensuing historical direction may be predicated on particular attitudes the culture has about conception, how pregnancy is cared for and the current birthing practices. In the symbols and metaphors of creative expression we can readily find the origins and authentic self of the person or group. Sometimes an individual's behaviour or a cultural ritual seems strange or even bizarre to an outsider. Yet, no matter how odd a behaviour seems, somewhere in that acting out is a feeling symbol or metaphor that exposes a specific experience or set of related events from the individual's or culture's past. I believe it is primarily the specific feeling hidden within symbolic or metaphoric expressions that holds the key to the unconscious psychological roots of the symbolic communication. Art communicates the unspeakable and its message is unmistakably incorporated as a way of life into a person's or culture's myths. The idea that myth is a simple imaginative exercise, or fantasy, invented for diversion, turns out to be very superficial. Myth is, then, history, since it reveals the interpretation of facts and needs; in myth, the patterns of social existence and the continuity of tradition and customs are justified.<sup>30</sup> I find these symbols and myths beautiful expressions of our humanity. And seeing them as camouflaged pre-natal or natal expressionism is not to belittle or ridicule them, but to give them ever richer meaning. Terrence Dowling states that the base of all mythopoetic expression is the intrauterine experience. The more I explore this area the closer I come to agreeing with him. . . . traumatic experiences which occur in early childhood and which are later repressed often find expression in the creative works of painters and poets and . . . , furthermore, society is to a great degree unaware of this phenomenon, as are the artists themselves.<sup>31</sup> A symbol has multiplicity of meaning and represents more than one idea, feeling or message. In mythic language there are no divisions of time. The past overlaps the present just as the future overlaps the past. Symbols are polymorphic masks which change

according to complex mechanisms of denial and forgetfulness.<sup>32</sup> Mircea Eliade elaborates on this theme in his book, *Art Myth and Symbols*. If one tries to isolate a single meaning in a symbol, the true nature of the symbol is lost and you lose the essence of the symbol's purpose. In an individual's dreams and fantasies we find the dynamics of his personality. In myth, the collective dream of a people, the cultural substratum manifests itself. Myths are universal in essence and content, although the culture of different peoples may express them differently.<sup>33</sup> In mythopoetically confronting the devouring serpent/birth canal one experiences a death of one order and a rebirth into another mode of being. The death-ringing voice of the metaphorical dragon of birth is buried in our deepest dreams as poor Faust discovers only too well: At midnight a fearful storm arose; horrible hisses as of a thousand serpents were heard, and for a little while the agonizing cries of Faust, with a hollow and suffocating sound but soon all was still. In the morning the floor of the room was found stained with blood, the brains were spattered on the walls, and his body was found outside, lying near a dunghill, the head and every member hanging half torn off. (Chambers Encyclopedia, London, 1930)<sup>34</sup> Faust like many initiates in archaic rites through the belly of the serpent experiences a total annihilation of the self. His "agonizing cries" and "suffocating sounds" I am convinced would be similar to those of a person, in primal therapy, reliving a particularly long or difficult birth, or of the wailing adolescent initiate in a Taoist rite of passage who lays for a day with a fresh goat skin painfully shrinking around him in a symbolic re-enactment of primordial birth. Perhaps metaphor in myth, ritual or story does not allow for a full resolution of the birth trauma. Yet, possibly by reliving birth through metaphor or guided imagery there is potential to re-access lifelong prototypic feelings and life patterns and make new decisions about how these "unconscious birth feelings" are reenacted in daily life. By challenging the devouring serpent/birth canal the archaic initiate or modern day psychotherapy client has an opportunity to move beyond the reverberations of the trauma of birth and find a greater serenity with themselves. Natalistic Myths Through metaphoric expressions in art and myth we attempt to move through the "anxiety of birth" and regain the lost vessel of the nurturing womb. Mircea Eliade in *Birth and Rebirth*, describes initiations that return the hero through the passage of the birth canal: ... we find the initiatory pattern of the perilous return to the womb, first, in the myths in which the Hero is swallowed by a sea monster and then emerges victorious by forcing his way out of its belly; second, in the myths and miraculous narratives of shamans, who during their trances are supposed to enter the belly of a giant fish or whale; third, in a number of myths of an initiatory traversal of a vagina dentate, or a perilous descent into a cave or crevasse assimilated to the mouth or the uterus of Mother Earth—a descent that brings the hero to the other world; fourth, and lastly, the same pattern is recognizable in the whole group of myths and symbols that have to do, for example, with a "paradoxical passage" between two millstones in constant motion, between two rocks that come together from instant to instant, or over a bridge narrow as a thread and sharp as a knife blade.<sup>35</sup> Eliade points to a parallel between myth and the powerful experience of the child at birth. Yet, like many scholars who begin to uncover the secrets of Natalism he is thrown into the universal need to deny the trauma of birth when he claims: ... though it is sometimes expressed in obstetric symbols ... The second, initiatory birth does not repeat the first, biological birth.<sup>36</sup> For all his understanding and insights about symbols and myths, Eliade misses the reality of a central need in humans to re-enact their very own biological birth in order to finally lay it to rest. Eliade clearly sees that, through metaphor, a wide range of myths and creative endeavors precisely duplicate embryonic and birth experiences, yet (perhaps because of his own birth trauma), he cannot come to accept the significance of the multitude of Natalistic images he is otherwise compelled to collect. Eliade suggests: The basic idea is that, to attain to a higher mode of existence, gestation and birth must be repeated; but they are repeated ritually, symbolically. In other words, we here have acts oriented toward the values of Spirit, not behaviour from the realm of psycho-physiological activity.<sup>37</sup> But it is my suggestion that the myths of a perilous rebirth are clear and specific expressions from the realm of psycho-physiological activity. Phyllis Greenacre, an American Psychiatrist, in 1953, suggests: Perhaps birth is too close to death in our feelings; perhaps the struggle of birth is at once too terrifying and inspiring for us to regard it readily with scientific dispassion.<sup>38</sup> The latent memory of

birth is too powerful to ignore the suspicion that it is behind the dramatic need to "repeat the first, biological birth." Birth is often horrendously painful, its scars deeply imprinted within the psyche. The fact that people have secret thoughts and feelings that are only inadvertently expressed was discussed by Freud. The difference being drawn here is that they can refer back beyond the capacity for speech or ideation to very early development, to preverbal, physical states and experiences—experiences that many theories do not even consider formative. We are not talking just about leakage or restrained thoughts and emotions, but about the translation and projection into and through language of actual, physical, infantile experiences that are registered in consciousness at a much deeper level.<sup>39</sup> Psychologically and sociologically it is noted that earlier cultures often seek a return to their origins in the paradise/sanctuary of the mother's womb. Artifacts and early architectural forms recall human primal origins. Recent excavations in the Orkney Islands of Scotland have revealed whole Neolithic villages, up to sixty houses, designed in the shape of a Goddess-body. Individual houses made of stone and mud, on Skara Brae, are shaped like uteruses with vaginal entrance ways. Stone temples in Malta are carved and built in the shape of the massive Paleolithic Great Mother, and small clay figurines of the Great Goddess in this same form are found throughout Malta. The West Kennet long barrow, in England, is built in the same identical shape. The large Medamud Temple in Egypt and the Bryn Celli Ddu mound in Wales are the same body: the great-earth-mound belly, open thighs of stone, the entrance-portal open for the passage of birth and death.<sup>40</sup> If the experience of the womb and birth is a part of our memory that we are capable of symbolizing, it would seem plausible that Natalistic myths would embody shared and common elements. The experiences from conception to birth are the most profound experiences in individual human history. The history of man for the nine months preceding his birth would, probably, be far more interesting and contain events of greater moment than all the three score and ten years that follow it. —Samuel Taylor Coleridge<sup>41</sup> From the earliest accounts of human history we can find expressions of Natalism in works of art: Paintings of the mother giving birth, with the expelled child still connected to her via the umbilical cord, are found throughout the CroMagnon caves. Childbirth is a powerful drama and ritual.<sup>42</sup> The deep unconscious feelings we have projected into both human and animal images may resonate with an early pre-verbal consciousness from birth or the womb: Animal souls were believed to live in the dark, echoing caverns. This is where one went to commune with the deepest, most resonant, and awesome powers.<sup>43</sup> The metaphor of the sacred animal may remind us of another time when each unique individual was another kind of being—a pre-nate, deep in the cavernous other world of the divine mother's womb. The original goddesses and gods may have been created to symbolize the mother who gives birth and the religious quest may be an attempt to find her secrets or symbolically return to the birth experience. The cosmic mother declares: "I am the Way and the Life." Which, according to Sjoog and Mor: was the primordial revelation of the Great Mother. ... early people conceived the divine body as "the road travelled by itself and its seeker."<sup>44</sup> Metaphorically, the Great Mother is conceived as the body of life; she is also the way that had to be travelled in order to realize that life. Serpent rituals of the early goddess deliver the novitiate into the belly of the serpent to find the origins of the self and the universe. Nor Hall recalls this phenomena when she says: To return to the womb then would mean to rediscover and animate a lost infancy, a stage of culture held within the consciousness of the Mother.<sup>45</sup> The serpent is often depicted as a spiral or labyrinth, which must be travelled to reach the secrets of the universe. These serpent images are paths to the maternal cavern. It was in the spiral, or labyrinth, that the way had to be danced or walked-in all the rites of the Mother throughout the ages, and the world, the way is always connected with a cave/womb ...<sup>46</sup> The symbolic journey to another world in myth and ritual is a metaphorical return to the mother's womb. It is often associated with birth metaphors such as a near-death experience, a confrontation with powerful cataclysmic earthquakes (the contractions of birth); going down a tunnel (birth canal) into a bright light (the opening at the end of the birth process) and the crucial attachment to a silver cord (the umbilicus). Often, only after metaphorically recreating the birth process, does myth return us to another world or large room, a paradise or sanctuary where all needs are met, life is content and blissful (the womb). There are many



analogies to the womb and birth experience in these myths. The correlation between having everything taken care of and feeling a sense of bliss is obvious. The outstanding motive behind the desire to return into the womb is the attainment of happiness in the only perfect form we have known it.<sup>47</sup> Nandor Fodor gives vivid descriptions of pre and perinatal metaphors he found in the dreams of his clients undergoing analysis: ... creeping through narrow openings; being rooted to the ground or sinking into mud or sand; being crushed or compressed; drowning; being sucked down by whirlpools or dragged under by crabs, sharks, alligators; fear of being devoured by wild animals or monsters; nightmares of suffocation or being buried alive; phobias of mutilation or of falling to one's death.<sup>48</sup> In both dreams and myths there are also fascinating analogies to the birth process in the mythical patterns by which a person arrives at a heaven or fairyland paradise. One often sees one of two patterns following the biological sequence of birth. One either begins with the gentle pre-contractions and then enters the process of birth with its ensuing entrapment, struggle, life/death fight and final release to freedom, or one starts symbolically outside the birth canal and then makes their way back into the womb, in which case the process of birth is portrayed in reverse. Suggested in the many birth myths is the underlying compulsion to resolve trauma. Freud's idea of the need to repeat trauma-to work it out and eliminate it-can be seen not only in the reenactment by individuals of their birth's trauma, but in the universality of the birthing need in society itself.<sup>49</sup> The birth experience is most often a repressed and unresolved memory; therefore, the patterns are not always exact and precise. Most often they involve the general pattern and then, within the overall story, the pattern is repeated in a shortened capsule over and over again. This repeated pattern, or in psychological terms, "repetition compulsion" is consistent with Arthur Janov's premise that repressed birth memories continually reverberate in a struggle to come into consciousness for final resolution, while at the same time being repressed in order to save the psyche from some unacceptable threat.

Universality of Natalism Every time I see another painting or read a myth of transformation depicting Natalism it still amazes me how closely it follows the familiar pattern of birth. The details may change between myths and cultures, but the character of the art work or myth remains the same. Religions and cultural symbols continue to return to key themes as Carl Sagan so boldly proposes: ... because there is something in them that resonates with our own certain knowledge-something deep and wistful; something every person recognizes as central to our being. And that common thread, I propose, is birth.<sup>50</sup> For all people, the experience in the womb and the engulfing descent down the birth canal is a common one, a memory which each one of us has buried inside and which we have a deep need to express, if only symbolically, through a myth. The need for rebirth has apparently existed in man from the beginning of time. The rituals of every tribe, of every religious sect, involve symbols of rebirth in one form or another.<sup>51</sup> Civilizations, too, are unable to escape the imprint of the mother's womb. Through the metaphors of our lives, we are continually transposed on some level to our origins. We are consumed by a need or resolution; according to Eliade: ... the final goal is to "burn up" these memories, to abolish them as it were by reliving them and freeing oneself from them.... for it is only by virtue of this recollection that one can "burn up" one's past, master it, keep it from affecting the present.<sup>52</sup> Otto Rank states further: ... the anxiety of birth forms the basis of every anxiety or fear, so every pleasure has as its final aim the re-establishment of the intrauterine primal pleasure.<sup>53</sup> Rank's view may be a bit simplistic and naive, yet it tells perhaps part of the story of the root of many of our human guests and points towards an idea worthy of investigation. The unconscious universal metaphor of returning to the rhythmic cavern of the mother's womb is seen in the following poem by a twelve-year-old girl from a mining family in New Zealand: Here we are; in the darkness, close to the very heart of Mother Earth, Where her blood flows in seams of shining coal, And our picks beat a rhythm to her heart, Where her warm brown flesh encloses us And her rocky bones trap us.<sup>54</sup> The young girl shares the wisdom of the philosophers as she describes crevices and rocks of the earth in metaphoric images of our mother's primal womb. Throughout her poem she shares with poets of all ages a sense of continuity with the themes of a dancing, flowing rhythm; and a warm enclosure, representing mother earth, the primordial and biological mother. According to Mother Earth theology, as for example in the Greek

myth of Deucalion, stones in the earth are the bones of the Great Mother.<sup>55</sup> Like the mystics of all times this girl's womb metaphors are not far from the trauma of birth. The word "trap" makes a comment about the universal confrontation in the birth canal which is responsible for crushing and then expelling us out of the darkness of the mother. All people from every age must leave the familiar rhythmic sounds and motions of the womb through the same constricting door (except, of course, caesarean sections), and we all must lose the umbilical cord (perhaps our very first playmate). Whatever prejudicial attitudes exist, we each arrive in the outer world neither more nor less a person than the other. Only upon our arrival do culture and economic class matter and begin to create social differences between us. Until we make the passage from the womb, our multitudes of life experiences, no matter when in history we were conceived, are likely to be more similar and universal than they will be again for the rest of our lives. After an intense birth regression through pain and trauma, a woman sinks into a profound memory of that universal "culture" in the womb: I embellished in a memory of sweet order and a loving connection to my mother, a primitive, wondrous, innocent sense. I feel the way I should have felt back then. And the strength I always had before the pain, was beauty, such pure wonder, such pure strength. A pure recall of how I was before the inflictions-of how I should have felt after my birth.<sup>56</sup> This woman's regression through the horror of her birth back to the pleasure of her mother's womb was an experiential and subjective episode. Can we believe these prenatal regressions in psychotherapy? Objectively, we can only comment that we have "observed" her (and many others like her) thrash about and cry like a baby. Coming out of her regression she shares with us what the birth experience was like and how reliving the event returned her to the memory of womb-like sensations. It seems she has allowed something from the deepest realms of her psyche to surface. The psychotherapeutic reliving is a subjective means for discovering the conscious life of the pre-nate at birth and in the womb. Natalism's Value to Pre and Perinatal Psychology I would agree that experiential therapies are powerful methodologies for accessing the reservoir of memory feelings associated with birth in order to understand the early roots of the human psyche. Yet if we begin to decode the pre and perinatal symbols and metaphors in other forms of creative expression we may have a broader window in which to peer into the secret world of the pre-nate. We will never know exactly what is experienced in the womb; we may come closest to it through the intuition of poets and philosophers or through insights of the mystics.<sup>67</sup> In looking at art works to uncover pre and perinatal metaphor we can use techniques of evaluating the physical manifestations of the prenatal environment as a clue to subject matter. We must always look at an image in relation to a number of surrounding images. If we find only one symbol representing birth, that is not enough to draw a conclusion. We can often find a doorway or a circle in a picture, but if the picture paints a comprehensive prenatal landscape then we can speculate further. A Natalistic painting may have a tree looking like a placenta, a spiraled umbilical scroll coming out of the abdomen of a naked angel, embryonic sac drapery covering a flying angel (when else in peoples lives do they fly than in the weightless world of the womb?), a cave with an innocent maiden chained to a terrifying dragon, and images of a transformation between two worlds. If we find this multitude of birth symbols in a single picture we can't help but ask: "Could this picture be depicting natal memory?" Birth and prenatal memory may be behind the symbolism in much of the artistic creations of William Blake, Salvador Dali and Max Ernst, just to name a few. Following are some of the universally archetypal images used to express the influence and importance of early pre and perinatal experiences on both individuals and cultures. These images may be found in paintings, sculptures, myths, stories, movies or dreams. When we find groups of them together, along with other pre and perinatal clues we can look further for Natalistic themes in the work. We must keep in mind effective symbols have multiplicity, simultaneously representing different meanings. Additionally, a symbol is justified in having a separate meaning to various creators or viewers. When we speak of the meaning behind a symbol, we are generalizing in an effort to develop a model of understanding. The breadth of the following list is not meant to be conclusive, nor should my interpretation of each be seen as absolute. Artistic Symbols Representing Birth Angel flight, death, or rebirth Basket: womb, cradle Beach: out of birth canal Bird: flight Birth/death: physical near death, or real emotional death at birth

Blood: from birth, or representing death and pain Bodies with bottom half hidden: leaving the birth canal Boxes: birth canal, or womb Caduceus: umbilical cord Cave: womb, or birth canal Circle: birth canal, womb, or ovum Circle behind head: womb, or birth canal Column: umbilical cord, or primitive streak Coming out of a hole: leaving birth canal Constricting or tying off: contractions Covering up drapery: embryonic sac, or birth canal Cross: placenta Crown: birth canal Crown of thorns: painful birth canal Cruelty: agony of birth Death/rebirth: near-death during birth Desert dry birth canal Door: birth canal Dragon: birth canal, or umbilicus-often fear Drapery: embryonic sac, or umbilical cord Drums: womb rhythm Earth quake: contractions Fighting/wars: feeling of violence in birth Fire: stage two birth pain, first breath of air if cord is cut too early, or metaphor for extreme pain during birth Flight- freedom, or escape Flood- amniotic fluid, or breaking of sac Geometric lines: umbilical cord, or birth canal Geometric patterns: birth canal Grave/Tomb: final return to the womb Guilt: internalization of birth pain, or self blame for mother's pain Halo: birth canal Hell: judgement of pain in birth, or birth pain Imagery of agony: major birth feeling Imagery of fear: major birth feeling Isolation: aloneness of birth pain when not acknowledged or abandonment after birth Jar: womb Judgement: internalization of birth pain, or self blame for mother's pain Knife: early cutting of cord, or general feeling of violence Labyrinths: birth canal, feeling of confusion in birth, or feeling it will never end Lack of feet: coming out of the birth canal Light: opening in birth canal Passage from one world to another: leaving the womb Passage ways: birth canal Puzzles: birth canal Repetitive framing: birth canal Rhythmic patterns: sounds in womb, or contractions of birth Ropes: umbilical cord Sanctuary: womb Scales: judgement of pain in birth Shadow narrowing effect- birth canal Skeletons: morbidity of birth, or second or third birth matrix Snakes: umbilical cord, birth canal, womb or mother Sun: birth canal, womb, or ovum Symmetrical arcs 0: symbol for vagina Ties: umbilical cord Trees: placenta Tunnels: birth canal Uterus shape: often very realistic Veils: embryonic sac (as found in/on weddings, Catholic confirmation rites, funerals, female church-goers, etc.) Vessel: womb Vine: placenta Volcano: contractions, or breaking of sac Water: intrauterine environment, or near drowning in birth Wavy lines: undulations and contractions of delivery White skin paint vernix Wings: weightlessness of womb, dropping out of birth canal, or freedom of flight in birth When looking at art and myth we can find many of the above images and metaphors in most cultures throughout history. Natalism images vividly and precisely depict the biological process of birth, yet there seems to be no conscious recognition on the part of the creator that they are in fact depicting birth. I think what we are seeing here is a clearly distinct separation between the expression of birth and prenatal experience and the conscious knowledge that pre and perinatal memory or influences do exist. When this process is looked at in the context of body memory, cellular consciousness and the development of the verbal language mind there are some extraordinary conclusions that may be drawn. If Natalistic images accurately portray the pre and perinatal experience; if Natalistic images are metaphors for body and/or cellular consciousness; and if Natalistic images have been present throughout history, (though their pre and perinatal origins may have been unknown to the creator and the group in which they were created,) then there may have been an undeveloped connection between pre and perinatal cellular consciousness and the language mind, for as long as we have had an abstract language mind. This being true, through experiential psychotherapies we are possibly at the starting point of a major transition and development in the human mind. Through listening to and accepting body and cellular consciousness we may be beginning to construct a conscious bridge between the mind of the body or even cell and the mind of the brain. Such a conscious unity of the pre and perinatal mind of the body and the mind of the brain has never consciously existed except in those rare individuals or for brief historical periods of a few isolated cultures. I am certain there has always been subconscious symbolic and metaphorical connections between the consciousness of the brain and the consciousness of the body and cell. Our consciousness that has its roots in the womb offers us a sense of well being and nurture that can give us a contentment with life. I believe that this lost root is the essential quest of religions, myths and rituals. Through rites of passage, religious or mystical ceremonies, and universal myths we attempt symbolically to pass back through the birth canal and make the spiritual sense of the womb a part of the outer world as we feel it ought to

be. SUMMARY In looking at art and myth we can find many images and metaphors from cultures through the ages which seemingly depict the process of birth. Most often there seems to be no conscious recognition on the part of the creators that they are in fact depicting birth. There seems to be a separation between the expression of birth or prenatal experience and cognitive awareness that pre and perinatal memory or influences exist. By studying the Natalistic content (if there is any) of a popular artist or a particular style, we may be able to arrive at a general sense of the group's birth practices, womb life and attitudes towards pregnancy. If Natalistic images have accurately portrayed the pre and perinatal experience throughout history then through art and myth we may have a window into the historical dimensions of those experiences and their influence on individual and social events. References REFERENCE NOTES 1. Alice Miller, *Pictures of a Childhood: Sixty-Six Watercolors And An Essay* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1986), p. 3. 2. *Ibid.*, p. 15. 3. DeMause in Frank Lake. *Tight Corners in Pastoral Counselling* (London: Darton, Longman and Todd, 1987), p. 43. 4. Jose Lopez Portillo, *Quetzalcoat: In Myth, Archeology and Art* (New York: Continuum, 1982), pp. 71-2. 5. Frederick Leboyer, *Birth Without Violence* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p. 18. 6. R.D. Laing, *The Facts of Life: An Essay in Feelings, Fact and Fantasy* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1976), p. 66. 7. Helen Diner in David Meltzer, ed., *Birth: An Anthology of Ancient Texts, Songs, Prayers, and Stories* (San Francisco: North Point Press, 1981), pp. 91-2. 8. Chamberlain, *Consciousness at Birth: A Review of the Empirical Evidence* (San Diego: Chamberlain Communications, 1983). 9. Lloyd deMause, *Foundations of Psychohistory*, (New York: Creative Roots, 1982), p. 258. 10. Thomas Verny, *The Secret Life of the Unborn Child* (New York: Summit Books, 1981), p. 45. 11. Jude Roedding, Unpublished Manuscript (Waterloo: Independent Studies Journal Document, 1987). 12. Lake, p. 18. 13. Verny, p. 118. 14. Author's Personal Files. 15. Roedding. 16. Verny, p. 122. 17. Leslie Feher, *The Psychology of Birth: The Foundation of Human Personality* (London: Souvenir Press, 1980), p. 15. 18. Jean Liedloff, *The Continuum Concept* (New York: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1985), p. 29. 19. Miller, p. 4. 20. *Ibid.*, p. 17. 21. *Ibid.*, p. 16. 22. *Ibid.*, p. 15. 23. Otto Rank, *The Trauma of Birth* (New York: Harper & Row, 1973), pp. 148-49. 24. *Ibid.*, p. 156. 25. Miller, p. 16. 26. Mair in Lake, p. 1. 27. Feher, p. 68. 28. Grantly Dick-Read, *Childbirth Without Fear: The Original Approach To Natural Childbirth* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972), p. 12. 29. Mair in Lake, p. 1. 30. Portillo, p. 175. 31. Miller, p. 3. 32. Portillo, p. 174. 33. *Ibid.*, pp. 174-5. 34. Jacqueline Simpson, *European Mythology* (Middlesex, England: Hamlyn, 1987), p. 92. 35. Mircea Eliade, *Birth and Rebirth: The Religious Meanings of Initiation in Human Culture* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1958), p. 52. 36. *Ibid.*, p. xiv. 37. Mircea Eliade, *Myth and Reality* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 81. 38. Phyllis Greenacre, *Trauma, Growth, and Personality* (New York: International Universities Press, 1980), pp. 14-15. 39. Arthur Janov, *Imprints: The Lifelong Effects of the Birth Experience* (New York: Coward-McCann, 1983), p. 176. 40. Monica Sjo and Barbara Mor, *The Great Cosmic Mother* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1987), p. 106. 41. deMause, p. 243. 42. Sjo and Mor, p. 47. 43. *Ibid.*, p. 73. 44. *Ibid.*, p. 73. 45. Nor Hall, *The Moon and the Virgin* (New York: Harper & Row, 1980), p. 92. 46. Sjo and Mor, p. 73. 47. Nandor Fodor, *The Search for the Beloved: A Clinical Investigation of the Trauma of Birth and Pre-Natal Conditioning* (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1949), p. 219. 48. *Ibid.*, p. 5. 49. Feher, p. 18. 50. Carl Sagan, *Broca's Brain: Reflections on the Romance of Science* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1980), p. 363. 51. Feher, p. 15. 52. Eliade, *Myth and Reality*, p. 89. 53. Rank, p. 17. 54. Hall, pp. 90-1. 55. Karl W. Luckert, *Olmec Religion* (Norman, Oklahoma: University of Oklahoma Press, 1976), p. 65. 56. Roedding. 57. Fodor, p. 126. Author Affiliation Michael C. Irving, M.A. is a sculptor and psychotherapist. Correspondence should be addressed to him at 274 Rhodes Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, M4L 3A3. This paper is excerpted, from a Masters Degree thesis combining art and pre- and perinatal psychology, which was done at Vermont College of Norwich University, under the mentorship of Thomas Verny, M.D.

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