

# Anthology and / as myth in modern criticism

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## ABSTRACT:

Literary use of myth no longer enjoys the prestige accorded it by many writers of the Modernist generation, and their uses of a now discredited anthropology are part of the reason for this. But the modernist example remains important for several reasons, including its major, and still lingering, impact on subsequent criticism. It is necessary to appreciate the combined literary, philosophical, and psychological motives for the Modernist use of myth into which contemporary anthropological conceptions were assimilated. For anthropology was a corroboration of existing beliefs of poets and novelists as much as a cause of their recourse to myth. Above all, the Greek word *Mythopoeia*, or myth-making, points to the close relation of myth and poetry within the activity of creation at large. To create a poem is analogous to creating a cultural world.

**KEYWORD:** Myth, Modernism, Creation of poetry, Anthropology.

## INTRODUCTION:

If the two novelists are most evidently in the business of world creation, Yeats and Eliot, two poets strongly associated with myth, are similarly opposites in their relation to it. Yeats is Nietzschean in his formation of his own life and poetic persona into an artistically constituted myth. Unlike Nietzsche's practical men who miss its full Nietzschean significance. Modernist literary myth-making is most essentially an awareness of the primordial creative activity of human being as imaged in the creation of poetic and fictional worlds, and including therefore the world of modernity.

## 'MYTH' AND 'REASON':

The Anglophone poets and novelists who privileged myth, such as Eliot, Joyce, Lawrence, Pound, Graves, and Yeats, did so in complex, varied, and even opposed ways, yet they collectively, if unwittingly, fulfilled the philosophical ambitions invested in myth by German Romantic and Idealist thinkers. Friedrich Schlegel argued in his *Dialogue on Poetry* (1800) the need for a 'new mythology' as the necessary basis for a modern poetry to rival that of the classical world. F.W.J. Schelling in his *System of Transcendental Idealism*

(1800), and even more so in his late writings, argued that, rather than requiring mythic material, literature itself is mythopoeia. It creates myth as a life form, and in so doing subsume the traditional functions of philosophy. It accomplishes what philosophy seeks to do but cannot. This is the insight most centrally developed in modernist mythopoeia. At the same time, twentieth-century anthropology provide models of world-views on which writers could draw to invoke a mythopoeia sensibility that did not require a mythic content – the assumption which had restricted schlegel’s notion of a ‘new mythology’.

There is a radical choice here. If myth is understood simply as an archaic and prescience from, then modern mythopoeia is at best a hopeful oxymoron, a sentimental, self-contradictory primitivism. On this model, modernity is effectively defined by its opposition to myth. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, in their *post-Fascist Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1948), saw Enlightenment in this traditional way as the overcoming of myth by reason, while also nothing how myth none the less continues to arise, danger-ously in their view, from within the internal dynamic of Enlightenment itself. Modernity has its own barbarian within. But if, on the contrary, man is thought of as positively and necessarily living by myth, then modernity will differ only in its way of living within, and affirming, this condition. From this point of view, narrow definitions of reason are thrown into question, and an intense commitment to reason may itself come to seem mythological, if not superstitious. A late twentieth – century edited volume, *From myth to Reason?* (1999), sums up the traditional of questioning the customary opposition of myth and reason from Plato onwards.

Early twentieth – century anthropology reflected this perennial conflict of attitudes towards myth, largely because of a newly radical suspicion of Enlightenment reason. James Frazer’s widely read, and continually expanding, *The Golden Bough* (1892 – 1922) as a product of the Victorian age. It explained myth as a reflection of seasonal rituals, including the spring renewal of gods such as Osiris. Taking as its starting – point the significance of an episode in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, it is a work of compendious scholarship, overtly literary in style, discreetly atheistical in its implication for the christian story. Taking as its starting-point the significance of an episode in Virgil’s *Aeneid*, it is a work of compendious scholarship, overtly literary in style, discreetly atheistical in its implication for the Christian story, and above all ironically superior to the ages of superstition in which myth flourished. But, as john vickery has shown in *The Literary Impact of the Golden Bough* (1973), the modernist generation responded more warmly to the mythic world of seasonal ritual which Frazer showed to be still residually present in European rural life, at least before the 1914-18 war. Frazer had an impact especially on a group of Cambridge scholars, and his literariness made him readily assimilable to speculation about the nature of the literary as such, as in Jane Harrison’s *Ancient Artand Ritual*(1911). All this reflected a newly positive appreciation of the ‘primitive’, and a corresponding shift in anthropological evaluation. Lucien Levy-Bruhl’s *how native think* (1992) presented a view of archaic man as enjoying a pre-

rational state of sympathetic continuity with the world. For writers concerned with the multiple alienations apparently intrinsic to modernity, this provided a compelling image of personal, communal, and natural wholeness. In Yeat's note to his poem 'the valley of the black pig', it is evident how Frazer helped him, around the turn of the century, to see the Celt in a new way. The Celt's poetic and emotional qualities had long provided the exceptionality 'other' to European rationalism, as in Matthew Arnold's 'On the study of Celtic literature' (1861). But through Frazer, Yeats, in his essay on 'The Celticelement in literature', now saw the Celt rather as the survival of archaic man generally, and thus as constituting a universally significant clue to human wholeness.

Whether in literature or anthropology, then, myth received varying evaluations. Its positive value was as a model of psychological wholeness in relation to the self and the world, rather than as scientific truth. To that extent, the ambivalence of modern Mythopoeia recalls Friedrich Schiller's essay 'On naïve and sentimental poetry' (1796), terms which might be translated into modern terminology as 'unselfconscious' and 'self-conscious'. In this conception, Homer had the holism and impersonality of pre-literate collective culture, while modernity had the inescapable self-reflection of individuality, in principle, these modes of sensibility are incompatible and incomparable. One cannot be preferred to the other, as they are incommensurable. In practice, however, the impersonality and wholeness of the 'naïve' was nostalgically valorized, and Schiller saw the genius of Goethe as uniquely achieving it from within modern self-consciousness. Of course, it is only from within this condition that the naïve can be recognized, let alone appreciated, as such. For the truly naïve cannot know the category of the naïve, which is to that extent a retrospective creation of the modern condition. Hence, all modern achievement of naivety, such as Schiller attributed to Goethe, will be strictly relative, occurring within the mode of modern self-reflection. The same applies to modernist myth-making.

#### **VARIETIES OF MODERNIST MYTHOPOEIA:**

The Modernist generation developed versions of literary mythopoeia reflecting this spectrum of possibilities. At one extreme, it may keep its world creation subliminal and implicit; at the other extreme, it may overtly thematize the reflective consciousness on which it rests. D. H. Lawrence represents most clearly the first possibility. His post-Romantic conception of the world's interdependence with human subjectivity had ready parallel in the archaic mode of being described in much contemporary anthropology whereby 'primitive' man had a relation of psychological continuity with his world. But Lawrence's analytic awareness of this in creating the world of his characters is not usually attributed to the character's themselves; not is it consciously required of the reader. The reader must understand the wholeness, or otherwise, of the characters, and that sheer awareness of the wonder of being which Lawrence, in *Reflections on the Death of a Porcupine* (1925) called

the 'fourth dimension'. the German philosopher Martin Heidegger likewise thought that modern man had lost the sense of being, and he similarly emphasized that myth is present not in the objects seen, but in the way of seeing: for myth is 'the only appropriate kind of relation to being in its appearance'. the responsive reader of Lawrence gains from understanding that he has a complex, coherent world conception paralleled by major modern philosophers and anthropologists, but this is the condition rather than the point of the work, and could even distract from its dramatic and psychological focus. Too much analytic self-consciousness would kill the mythic intuition.

Joyce's *Ulysses*, by contrast, is a programmatically modernist work providing a consciously aesthetic equivalent to the archaic unity of myth invoked in its Homeric title. Hardly naive in any sense, it is synthetic in both sense. The book unifies an encyclopedic variety, not just of narrative subject-matter, but also of modes of organizing the world as invoked in the successive techniques of its episodes. By the same token, it wears its artificiality on its sleeve. It does not affect to *be* myth, but uses a mythic sign to indicate the meaning of the artistic whole. One of the several ways in which Friedrich Nietzsche anticipated Modernism was in his affirmation of the aesthetic, not as an aestheticist remove, but as a category fundamental to human life. Art is the primordial activity of man in creating the human world. Joyce kept, at least overtly, an ironic distance from the fashionable German who had been taken up in reductive and politically regressive ways, but he frankly honored the neglected Italian, Giambattista Vico, who had argued in the third edition of *The New Science* (1744) that poetry is the primordial form from which culture derives, and, rather than seeing this primordality as irrelevant to a later world, Joyce saw it as the continuing unconscious of the culture. He realized creatively Nietzsche's insight that beneath the positivist conception of science the human world is permanently sustained as a work of art.

#### CONCLUSION:

Yet it was Eliot of *The Waste Land* who was one of the most powerful creators of myth in his generation. As his personal vision of modernity in that poem became canonical, academic discussion of the poem repeatedly explicated its structure and imagery as a commentary on the modern spiritual condition, without questioning its highly partial perception. The real myth lay in the cultural judgment underlying the literary use of the Fisher King motif. This opens a larger ambiguity in the authority of poetry and myth in the period.

#### REFERENCDE:

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